

Lynn Green (Muslims & Christians)

Charles Strohmer Talks with Lynn Green about an Evangelical-led Christian Reconciliation Walk among Muslims

Nine-hundred years ago, in what must be history's most stunning reversal of what it means to follow Jesus, Christianity held high the cross of Christ to justify the Crusades, which continued off and on in five major campaigns for more than two centuries. Although Christians today have disowned the Crusades as a dark chapter of their history, not a few Muslims and Jews harbor ill-will toward Christianity because of those campaigns.

For three years in the Middle East, however, and very much behind the scenes, a dramatic but quiet Evangelical-led initiative changed the hearts and minds of many Muslims and Jews as a diverse group of Christians apologized face-to-face to Muslim and Jews for the Crusades. The formal apology stated that the Crusaders "betrayed the name of Christ by conducting themselves in a manner contrary to his wishes and character." By lifting the cross "they corrupted its true meaning of reconciliation, forgiveness, and selfless love." The messengers "deeply regret the atrocities committed in the name of Christ by our predecessors." the Crusaders "betrayed the name of Christ by conducting themselves in a manner contrary to his wishes and character."

The Reconciliation Walk was an independent initiative led by Lynn Green, an American who has been living in England for 25 years. About 3,000 walkers participated over the 3-year period, with people coming and going in small groups, from many different denominations and nations. It began in the spring of 1996, as teams of walkers entered Cologne, Germany, where the Crusades were launched in March-April 1096, led by Peter the Hermit. The 2,000-mile three-year walk across Europe and through the Balkans, Turkey, and Syria ended in Jerusalem on July 15, 1999, the nine-hundredth anniversary of a Crusade massacre of Jews and Arabs.

This fascinating interview from Openings #3 (Apr-Jun, 1999) is a composite of conversations I had with Lynn Green while catching up with him in London and afterward near the end of the Walk by phone and Email. The stories are remarkable and moving. Although it was considered controversial in some Christian circles, the Walk stood out for its compassionate message. It moved Muslims and, nearer home, taught the messengers of Christ's compassion. (Edited, here, for the Web.)

CS: The implications of the Reconciliation Walk are not something one takes lightly. You have feel called to do this.

LG: A Christian leader had said to me, "Wouldn't it be good if there could be a prayer walk down the routes of the Crusades." But I resisted the idea completely for about six months, and then became absolutely captivated by it. So I spent several years researching the Crusades and developing the idea that became the Reconciliation Walk, which began a team of 125 Christians at Eastertime, 1996.

CS: It must have been like starting an expedition that would explore a new universe.

LG: Everyone was nervous when we started out. I wondered if we were setting out on a project that would result in rejection and persecution, or if our message would be understood. On that first day we stopped at a Turkish mosque on the ring road around Cologne. It was our first opportunity to meet an imam with his men and boys and present the message. That first meeting began a spirit that has continued to this day. "Your message," the imam said, "thrills me and fills me with hope. This idea must have come from an epiphany. This has to be a visit from God. What you're doing gives us a model for what we should be doing, because we too have done things wrong in history." When I heard that I thought, What an extraordinary thing! This is so different from that response that I thought we'd get. The imam sent copies of the statement to hundreds of mosques throughout the Continent. We started learning from that very first day.

CS: Why are the people responding redemptively to the message?

LG: We don't have it all figured out. Keep in mind that as I download here some of what we've learned, it's not well developed yet. So part of what I'm saying is provisional and people may want to ask questions about it. We all need to be thinking it through, together. Personally, it's challenged some of my theology and especially my missiology. But I'm convinced that God gives grace to the humble and is opposed to the proud. I have noticed that for Muslims, Jews, and Orthodox Christians (these are our three audiences, as it were), that as we go to them in humility, saying we deeply regret what has been done in the name of Jesus Christ, it releases a grace. And it does seem "from the feedback we get from all of them" that they don't see Christians in a humble posture

very often. So as we go in humility, they feel free to open their hearts to us immediately and we see things that are ordinarily hidden to the Christian amongst Muslims. For instance, not only do people open their hearts to us but we learn from them (we have so much to learn from them). We have begun to get a feel for what it is like to be a people who are feared and often the object of disdain from the West, a people who feel that they are constantly on the receiving end of Western power and authority. Whether that is military action, economic or cultural superiority, or even missionary superiority. Don't misunderstand, I believe that our message is relevant to them, but I've learned that oftentimes the lives we live are not worth displaying to them.

CS: Western Christians are overly-dependent on propositional teaching for everything they do, despite the fact that this approach has its limits. It sounds as if going in the humility of a Christlike spirit has produced something that mere teaching may never be able to do, for both Muslims and Christians.

LG: That's right. Let me tell you about a recent mind-boggling experience. In the autumn of 1998, my wife and I lead a group from several nations, 43 people, from Istanbul into Sanliurfa (many think this was Ur of the Chaldees, birthplace of Abram) and then into Damascus, ending in Beirut. We also went into the south of Lebanon, into an area that we in the West understand as "radical" territory. (A few weeks after we had left, the Israelis put several missiles into the area.) This is Shiite country and the country of the Hezbollah and the Amal (a Shiite militia). We were hosted by a family who were introduced to us as "king makers" of the Shiite world. The Ayatollah Khomeini married into that family and the man who spoke to us had just spent two hours with the president of Iran, Khatami (he too is related to this family). The patriarch of the family spoke to us and gave us about two hours of his time.

Now, what would you expect a patriarch of the Shiite world to say to a group of Christians? After we read the statement of apology, he said, "In Christian doctrine, Jesus came and sacrificed himself for all humanity. The cross has become the symbol therefore of self-denial and sacrifice. So when someone holds tightly to the cross, he is holding tightly to what this cross represents. There's a great deal of difference to what this cross represents and what it was used for in the Crusades. God sent his only son and sacrificed him for the whole of humanity. In the Crusades the cross was used for the way one human being terrorized another. Christianity means one word: love. Nowadays do we have love? Why did the Crusaders make us hate the one person who preached that love? As a Muslim following Muslim doctrine I am not considered a Muslim unless I believe in Jesus Christ. When I am taught to love Jesus Christ and everything he stands for, how can this stay in my heart when his followers do not live as they should? I feel that often I am more Christian than they are."

Then the patriarch spoke to us more directly, saying, "You're trying to live with the spirit of Jesus Christ, who in Arabic is called the Spirit of God. As believers, regardless of our faith, we cannot be believers unless we live in the spirit of believers in God. It is the responsibility of everyone to nurture the spirit of God within him, and to work unselfishly for the good of society as a whole." The patriarch told us many other things, including that reading the New Testament and meditating on its verses is part of his faith. This is the kind of experience that turns your world upside down.

CS: Your story reminds me of the seminary professor who told his class, "If your theology doesn't fit the facts, change your theology." . . . Is there a prevailing theme along the Walk?

LG: One recurring theme is how our message consistently removes stumbling blocks. We're not out there as missionaries. Just to remove a stumbling block, that's all. Undo a little damage with the help of the Holy Spirit. We go with a message: we come in the name of Jesus Christ to apologize and humble ourselves over the way in which our forefathers and we ourselves have misrepresented him. Please forgive us. For me, probably the most powerful illustration of how this removes stumbling blocks happened at a reception in Istanbul. This is the city (Constantinople) where in the fourth century Christianity became Christendom. It's where the church moved from the outsider to the insider position, from being the offscouring of the earth to banqueting with the emperor. It's where the bishops went from outlaws with a reduced life expectancy to the wearing purple and being protected by the imperial guard. It's where in the fourth and fifth centuries the church built the absolutely spectacular St. Sophia's, a stunning projection of the power of Christendom. Now seven huge mosques encircle it, as if the Muslim world said, "You want power, we'll show you power!"

CS: A parable for our time.

LG: Yes. The powerless church wed itself to [political] power and became powerless spiritually. In that city, the gospel got turned upside down, and in the end, the church, playing the power game, got destroyed by the power game. At the time of our visit, the

mayor of Istanbul was a member of the Refa Party (a fundamentalist Muslim party, now outlawed) and the mosques were the nervous system of the city. We (a group of 25) were taken to an impressive office next to a huge mosque, where we given cups of tea while we waited to be received by the deputy mufti, a powerful man in this city of 13 million. The mufti himself hadn't been available to receive us because he was across town hosting a conference, believe it or not, on how Muslims could counter the effects of Christian missionary activities in Central Asia and Turkey. So we were pretty nervous about his arrival. Not only because of the presentation, but they had their own television station and he was coming in with television cameras. We didn't know what to expect. But in walks this sort of jolly looking, round-faced man. He sat down behind a big ornate desk, welcomed us, and then turned it over to me. The cameras came around and we were soon into the formal presentation. I had explained who we were (it was all done through a translator) and then started to read our apology: "Nine hundred years ago our forefathers came in the name of Jesus Christ in battle . . . ?"

As I read this the mufti became uneasy. You could see it in his body language. He then stood up, really breaking protocol, and said, "Excuse me. I feel awkward behind my desk. Your message is so warm and personal. I'd like to come and stand beside you." He came and stood beside me, and I finished the apology. Then he grabbed me by both hands and pulled me up close to him and said, "Now we can be friends." A stumbling block that had stood for centuries had been removed. The Muslims know, by their own standards, that the Crusades were wrong.

CS: Between the lines, I'm hearing that we Christians are ignorant of some deeply significant qualities about Muslims.

LG: Very much so. Another staggering thing to me is that I keep meeting godly Muslims and Jews. Muslims? People have asked. I've met them everywhere, from that very first imam. I remember when we met Mrs. Rabab. She runs a fantastic orphanage, 300 girls. It's run so well, beautifully designed and built, immaculately clean, wonderful food, happy children and staff. And you think, my theology says this shouldn't be this way. This should be a legalistic and hard sort of place, the children's spirits being crushed. But it's not that way. I think I now feel a little of what Peter must have felt in Acts 10, when the Holy Spirit fell on Cornelius' house. At first, everybody said, "It's not supposed to happen this way." Finally Peter said, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right" (Acts 10:34-35). I remember looking at Mrs. Rabab and thinking: if ever there was a woman who fit this description, this is the woman. How many of these Muslims are there? We keep meeting them.

CS: How do you reconcile this to your evangelical theology? Or can't you?

LG: I keep in mind the distinction between the universal work of the Spirit and the particularity of Christ. The Spirit of Jesus gives light to every person who comes into the world (John 1:9). Romans 1 would be another way of saying it. Because we live in a world that God has created, the nature and character of God is sufficiently revealed so that we can know something of who God is. The Bible also shows us times when the people of God's covenant, old or new, were surprised by bumping into God-fearing people who were not people of the covenant. We find this on the Walk among people of other faiths. After all, God is the God of all flesh. He's at work everywhere. This doesn't mean they don't need to hear the Good News, but it does help us to think outside our exclusivist and polarized terms, in which we've concluded that God the Holy Spirit is not at work anywhere other than in our own experience. I really believe that as we go out in humility and seek to be godly people filled with the Spirit, then the particularity of Christ, the flavor, the fragrance of Christ in us, will be magnetic to godly people. We are hearing powerful figures in the Muslim world say, "Can we come and see you? Can we spend time with you? You must come back. You're welcome. You're a member of our family."

CS: Again, a challenge arises: the sometimes hypocritical relationship we have between what we teach and how we really live.

LG: We've seen the fruit of this clearly everywhere on the Walk. Virtually no one takes exception to people who seek to follow the example of Jesus. The church for the first three centuries focused not so much on the finer points of doctrine but on following the commandments of Jesus. Living like that, they represented Jesus to a pagan world and the church grew at an incredible rate. It seems clear that if we don't seek to live like him people don't want to hear from us because they perceive the hypocrisy.

CS: You're frequently among both Arabs and Jews. Can the Walk teach us anything about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

LG: The Reconciliation Walk has challenged many of our longstanding prejudices and values, and through it we have been able to see and feel with something of God's heart regarding the reality and pain of both the Jews and the Arabs. There is a Jewish perspective of a people without a homeland who have suffered immensely and who have now carved out for themselves a homeland.

And there is an Arab perspective of a people dwelling in that land for centuries and who have been forced out of their homes. So we need to see with two eyes, as God does. As much as we've tried to avoid the politics, we are finding that we cannot. There's a lot behind this, of course, and we are not advocating any one political position. But we are encouraging people to find the heart of God in this by seeing the Middle East with two eyes. We are hearing from both Muslims and Christian Arabs that the indiscriminate support of Western churches for some of the military and political actions of Western nations in the Middle East is the single-most destructive thing that they face. And we're hearing that unless Western Christians can somehow distinguish themselves from the foreign policies of their nations, the church in the Middle East may no longer exist in another generation. The Arab church will be squeezed out, because as they are identified with the West; they are held responsible for what everybody calls "the modern crusades."

CS: But many Western Christians would reject any sympathy for Palestinian claims.

LG: Yes. We have a lot to answer for in many of our Western policies toward both Muslims and Jews. America has, unashamedly, constructed its foreign policy on the self-interest of the nation. At some point America is heading for serious trouble unless it humbles itself and acknowledges that its self-interests, including, especially, its economic interests, are not an adequate standard for formulating foreign policy.

CS: What kind of media coverage have you had for the Walk?

LG: We haven't had much in the West, but in Turkey and Lebanon it has been a different story. During the autumn of 1998 we had a lot of positive press coverage in Lebanon, which went right through the Arab world. We were on the front page of newspapers, regularly. As a result, the story got into the UPI and the AP and a couple of UK newspapers. What's interesting is that the only cynicism we've had has come from the West. One of the stories called us idiotic, naive, and ignorant. Well, we're not ignorant and idiotic. But we could be seen as naive. And I hope we stay naive. There's something wonderful about the childlikeness of participants in the kingdom of God. And we don't seek out high profile contacts. We just walk among ordinary people. But the message strikes them with such force "they're so amazed about the message" that they say you must come speak to my imam and then we must go see the mayor. And so we meet them. But then we leave the high-profile receptions and go back among the ordinary people.

CS: With so many different Christians on the Walk, who are you as a group representing?

LG: Broadly speaking, we're representing people who seek to obey Jesus. On the Walk we recognize that the injustices that we are apologizing for were European in origin, so it helps that the majority of people on the Walk are of European origin. Then in the eyes of the audience we are an appropriate vehicle for the apology.

CS: Why should Protestant Christians identify with and be repenting of wars begun by Roman Catholics?

LG: First of all, we're not repenting. I acknowledge the theological and historical debates about confessing the sins of long-deceased ancestors, but considering the effects of the Reconciliation Walk such debate becomes secondary. Reconciliation between people, any people, is a noble and laudable aim. We're not repenting on behalf of our ancestors. In fact, those who strongly disagree about what is often called "identificational repentance" can fully participate in the Walk. The fact that there was only a Roman Catholic church in the West at that time (the Orthodox split with Rome was only just beginning) is largely irrelevant for what we're doing. What the church of that era represented to Muslims and Jews was Western Christianity. That's what we represent. Our audience understands that is what we represent.

CS: Obviously they're hearing something that many Western Christians are not able to.

LG: Whether we have the right to apologize never comes up with the Muslims, the Jews, or Eastern Christians. In the eyes and ears of that audience, Christians are Christians and it's good to have them come back to say they're sorry. So the Reconciliation Walk is helping us to recognize that there are live issues among Muslims and Jews, and even some Orthodox Christians. So we are taking a message that says you are right, we were wrong. The Crusades were wrong. What happened in the name of Christ was contrary to the teachings of Christ and we acknowledge that, and we're sorry that it happened. We regret it.

CS: This has redemptive possibilities for the future.

LG: That's right. On the Walk, after we get beyond the apology and talk to people awhile, the Muslims ask questions like, "What are

you going to do about the ongoing crusades?? And the Jews ask, ?What are you going to do about the anti-Semitism in the Christian population?? To these important questions we reply, ?We understand what you're saying. We hope you will see what we're doing as a small step in the right direction. Encourage us as we take these first small steps and perhaps that will help us with the more difficult steps in the future.?

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