

## **The Distinctive Characteristics of Christian Reconciliation**

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To set the scene for what is to follow, it is important to begin with what it is that Christians understand by reconciliation. This is important for two reasons. First of all, as was evident in the close of the last chapter, reconciliation has come to have a host of meanings. When one sees reconciliation as a goal to be achieved, there will be differing opinions as to what conditions need to be met in order to achieve it. Consequently, a Christian approach will have to be situated among a number of others.

Secondly, there are a variety of strands of thinking about reconciliation and especially about forgiveness within Judaism and Christianity. For the sake of being able to understand these, especially as they interact with contemporary challenges of reconciliation, a kind of two step approach will be needed. The first will be to propose some elements of Christian reconciliation as a heuristic to help open up the field. Then, after exploring how they put light on contemporary issues, we can circle back to present a fuller picture of the biblical resources for understanding reconciliation. This latter step is necessary because the actual use of the word "reconciliation" does not occur at all in the Hebrew Scriptures, and only fourteen times in the Christian Scriptures. Needless to say, however, the idea is present in both bodies of Scripture. By first setting out some of the areas that enter into exploring reconciliation, we are then in a better position to retrieve the full range of biblical resources we need to fill out the picture.

This paper will take the first step, namely, to denote some elements that are distinctive in the Christian approach. It begins by noting the two principal forms of reconciliation of which the Christian Scriptures speak (namely, vertical and horizontal reconciliation), and then looks at the five principal characteristics of that vision of reconciliation.

### **The Fundamental Message of Reconciliation**

Christian reconciliation is not rooted in the first instance in the reconciliation between human beings, an approach that might be found in other religious traditions. From a Christian perspective, what makes any kind of reconciliation possible is the fact that God is reconciling the world to God's very self. This is done through the mediation of Jesus Christ. The need for reconciliation and the resources to achieve it, therefore, cannot be reduced to the situation itself that calls out for reconciliation. For true reconciliation to happen, every breach or transgression that needs to be healed must be taken back to the fundamental breach between human beings and God, for that breach shows up the full extent of the damage that any subsequent breach may entail, as well as the resources needed to overcome the damage and heal the breach. What God has done for the world in Jesus Christ, therefore, is the pivotal moment to which each act of healing must return, and from which it draws its potential for achievement. The doctrine of the Incarnation inaugurates that reconciling process. The suffering and death of Jesus goes into the very wound of each transgression, and the resurrection both transforms the wound and confirms God's reconciling work.

Consequently, Christian theology makes a distinction between vertical reconciliation and horizontal reconciliation. Vertical reconciliation is the reconciliation God works so as to restore humankind to communion with God. Horizontal reconciliation draws upon vertical reconciliation in order to bring about healing in human relations, either between individuals or between groups of human beings.

### **Vertical Reconciliation**

The Pauline writings in the Christian Scriptures are the primary source for the Christian doctrine of reconciliation. Indeed, all but one of the occurrences of the word “reconciliation” in any of its forms is to be found in the Pauline corpus. The prime Pauline text here for vertical reconciliation is Romans 5:1–11:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have received access to this grace in which we now stand; and we boast in the hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were still enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved through his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we are now received reconciliation.

Thus, it is God’s initiative, through the death of his Son for us while we were still sinners, that has made possible our reconciliation. It is God’s initiative, mediated to us through Jesus Christ, that has brought us to be able to be in communion with God once more.

It is that communion with God that makes us human beings ultimately able to restore communion within our own alienated beings and communion with one another. It is God’s action that has made healing the breach possible between God and our very being. All of the transgressions and breaches we experience among ourselves and in our societies owe their basic capacity for injury and damage from that fundamental breach in our relation to God. And it is God’s action through Christ that provides the remedy. By the very fact that Christ’s saving and reconciling action reaches beyond concrete acts of aggression to the very origin of transgression, to that extent we can come to understand how surprising and utterly transformative the grace of reconciliation can be, reaching beyond our greatest expectations.

It is this reconciliation that the Church celebrates ritually in the sacraments of baptism, Eucharist, and reconciliation. There God’s reconciling action is re-enacted for our sakes. When the Church tradition and most Church documents (such as John Paul II’s Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio et poenitentia*) speak of reconciliation, it is this vertical reconciliation they have in mind.

### **Horizontal Reconciliation**

Our principal concern here, however, is horizontal reconciliation, that is, repairing the damage that has been done between and among human beings. Here the dynamics may not be appear at first to be as wide-ranging or even cosmic as those portrayed in the Letter to the Romans, but closer examination will reveal that they often have to reach as far. That is because we are often faced with the almost unimaginable scale of damage that certain acts have done: how does one think of reconciliation even being possible after genocide? Are there transgressions that range so wide and run so deep that they cannot be forgiven?

St. Paul is again our starting point for looking at horizontal reconciliation. In this instance, the Scriptural passage from which to begin is 2 Corinthians 5:17–20:

So if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All of this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

Here we see first of all the elements of vertical reconciliation. The initiative and power for reconciliation comes from God through Christ, where God engages in reconciliation despite our transgressions. What is significant here is that God has now entrusted to us this message and ministry of reconciliation. We act as ambassadors of Christ, carrying out and forward this ministry of Christ's behalf. Placed in this light, reconciliation becomes not only a possibility, but a mandate for us. The ministry of reconciliation is for us not an option, but a necessity.

### **The Distinctive Elements of Christian Reconciliation**

To understand more fully what this means for the process of horizontal reconciliation, let me formulate the teaching present in this passage from Corinthians in five points.

#### *1. It is God who initiates and brings about reconciliation*

From what has already been said by way of introduction about both vertical and horizontal reconciliation from a Christian perspective, this statement—that it is God who initiates and brings out reconciliation—is not surprising. Christians recognize the divine origin and the divine fulfillment of reconciliation. The statement contains within itself, however, a number of other points that need to be made more explicit.

First of all, by naming God as the one who initiates and fulfills reconciliation, we are implying that the sheer extent of what needs to be comprehended and to be overcome in the work of reconciliation ultimately surpasses human capacity. Even what would seem to be a relatively small breach between human beings—such as telling a lie—carries with it often untold implications. A single act can undermine a relationship, can so bruise trust that things can never be the same. As the transgressions become more serious, the range and depth of damage grows even greater—so much so that one can assert that only God has the capacious vision needed to be able to comprehend the full extent of the damage. When this is taken to even greater forms of human aggression such as war, it becomes even more the case.

By acknowledging that even small transgressions can have far-reaching implications, this Christian approach to reconciliation asserts that all transgressions, however small, are grave and must be treated with utmost seriousness. This is opposite to the attitude of trying to promote “reconciliation” by denying or minimalizing the damage that wrongdoing inflicts. It is a profound commitment to take all elements of the reconciliation process—the wrongdoer, the deed, and the victim—utterly seriously. Consequently, cheap forgiveness, quick offers of impunity, and what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace” are not options.

Second, by acknowledging that God is the author of reconciliation and the one who brings it about, we are underscoring Paul's insight that we participate in the ministry of reconciliation as ambassadors on behalf of Christ. In other words, we are not the sources of reconciliation; God is. We participate in God's reconciling work.

This has a number of implications. To begin with, it is a great relief that we cannot be solely responsible for reconciliation. On the practical side of things, most attempts at reconciliation fail. This is especially the case when dealing with social reconciliation that goes beyond the reconciliation of individuals. If one is not prepared to enter a work where the usual result is failure, then one should not consider the work of reconciliation.

Reconciliation efforts fail for a host of reasons: the nature and extent of the damage has not been grasped, the parties are not ready to move to another place, external factors are working against it—any and all of these reasons can come into play. If one is to continue in this work, there must be a source outside oneself that provides sustenance and support. For the Christian, that source is God, and the hope that God engenders in us.

Likewise, because it is God who is doing the work, we need to find our proper place within that larger picture. An ongoing and constant communion with God becomes essential for finding that place. Prayer—and especially, contemplative prayer—is one of the most important ways for establishing that communion. By entering into prayer one keeps the work of reconciliation in perspective—it is God's work, not our own. Contemplative prayer makes us more receptive to the gentle movements of God in the reconciliation process.

Contemplative prayer differs from prayers of praise and intercession in that contemplative prayer does not use words. It is, rather, listening and waiting for God to speak. That posture of listening and waiting creates a sensibility within us that the other forms of prayer cannot produce in our relation to God. To sit still, to listen, and to await turns us first to our restless selves. It provokes a self-knowledge of all those things that hinder us in our communion with God. This purification and development of transparency prepares us to hear God as something more than the echo of our own desires and selves. Because the moment of reconciliation often comes as a surprise, we must be in a posture to receive the unexpected and the surprising. That capacity to receive expands our horizons, allowing them to be more like those of God's, even though we will never attain that capacity fully.

For this reason, it can be said that for the Christian reconciliation is more a spirituality than a strategy. Strategies are necessary and important; we are ever looking for more effective practices for promoting reconciliation. The development of the field of understanding conflict, alluded to the previous chapter, is an example of developing every more usable and successful practices. But it is also being ever more realized, as John Paul Lederach has pointed out, that reconciliation is the work of the imagination. It is within the space that the grace of God opens up for us that new possibilities appear to us. Being present to God in prayer helps us move into that space.

To say that reconciliation is as much a spirituality as a strategy is not to downplay the disciplines that have contributed to promoting peace. It is only to put them into a larger framework. As we shall see later, the turns that open up new horizons for reconciliation and healing the wounds of the past often come as surprises. To live in communion with God is to be as prepared as one can be to discern and to welcome those surprising turns.

## *2. In reconciliation, God begins with the victim*

There is a kind of commonsense understanding of what the process of reconciliation should look like. It goes something like this: after an offense is committed, the wrongdoer comes to an awareness of the nature of the offense. The wrongdoer then expresses remorse, and goes to the victim, offering an apology and seeking forgiveness. The victim, after hearing the wrongdoer and judging the wrongdoer to be genuinely remorseful, extends forgiveness to the wrongdoer, and then reconciliation between wrongdoer and victim takes place.

This view of reconciliation makes eminently good sense and, ideally, it should happen in this fashion. But the problem is that situations that cry out for reconciliation are rarely that orderly. To begin, often wrongdoers do not show remorse and seek apology. They may sincerely believe they have done nothing wrong, or make that claim out of fear of punishment, humiliation or ostracism. Thus, the wrongdoer does not repent or refuses to do so.

Sometimes the victim cannot trust the apology of the wrongdoer, and so cannot extend forgiveness. At other times, especially in the case of childhood trauma (domestic violence, sexual abuse, or living with an alcoholic parent), the victim is only able to face the situation in adulthood. In that case, the wrongdoer may no longer be present to apologize. The wrongdoer may have gone away or may be dead.

In all of these instances, the victim is left without recourse, since the wrongdoer will either not enter into the reconciliation process or is not present to do so. Where does this leave the victim? Is the victim to be held hostage to the wrongdoing of the past because there is no one to express remorse or to apologize? Is healing of the victim foreclosed?

The Christian response to this is that the victim is not left without recourse. Because God is the author of reconciliation (Christians believe that if a wrongdoer is moved to repentance, this too has come from God), God can and does begin reconciliation with the wounded heart of the victim. Healing can begin even if the wrongdoer is adamant in refusal or absent from the scene. Evidence of this action by God is abundant. It can be found, for example, in the testimonies of victims or their survivors during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings in South Africa. Survivors would come forward (about seventy percent of them were women) to give testimony about the death of their loved ones under the repression of apartheid, and the suffering they themselves had undergone since. When asked by the Commission what they wanted the new government of South Africa to do for them, a surprising number of them gave witness to the fact that they had already forgiven the perpetrators.

How did such a thing happen? Those testifying were typically poor and often with very little formal education. They had not undergone therapy to deal with their trauma and grief. It was often their religious faith that had sustained them in their suffering and led them to forgiveness. In other words, God acted in their lives to heal them.

How would we characterize this action of God? One can see it as God restoring the humanity of the victim. The traumatic impact of wrongdoing upon the victim wrests away a part of the victim's own humanity. In the wrongdoing, the victim is not treated as a person who bears the incomparable dignity of the image and likeness of God. Rather, the victim is treated as an object or as less than human. Think of the use of rape of women as a way of waging war. The women are not treated as human beings with dignity and with rights, but as objects that are to be dishonored. Perhaps the ultimate wresting of humanity can be found in acts of torture.

At its worst, wrongdoing against persons fractures trust—that most fundamental social relation that makes us human. To break the bonds of trust is to deny the basic interdependence that allows for the unfolding of our personhood. Psychologists such as Erik Erikson long ago pointed out that, without the fundament of trust, the rest of human development is put at risk.<sup>(1)</sup>

God restores our humanity by loving us. By saying and showing that we are worthy of being loved, the damaged capacity to trust can be mended and healed. As it says in the First Letter of John, "it is not that we have loved God, but that God has loved us first." (4:10) God is the God of the Covenant, the God who made of Israel in the desert a people out of a ragtag band of fleeing slaves. God renews the Covenant again and again in the stories of the Bible. God extends trust to us, so that we might in turn trust in God as well as in and among ourselves.

It should not surprise us that God initiates the reconciliation process in the victim. This is the case from both a practical and a theological perspective. Practically, the victim suffers the most damage in an act of wrongdoing. The victim has much to overcome: the tangled emotions of anger, fear, grief, desire for revenge, and loss of hope. The offer of apology by itself does not prompt the victim to forgive. A whole process of coming to terms

with the past, with what it has done to the victim, and how the victim can find a way forward has to take place. One of the key things that people who work for reconciliation must learn is how to assess the readiness of the victim to take the next step along the path to reconciliation and forgiveness. Hence the victim is likely to need more time for healing than the wrongdoer does for repentance.

Theologically, the God proclaimed by the great prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures and by Jesus is a God who looks out especially for the poor, the widowed, the orphan, the prisoner, and the stranger. It is this God who also initiates the healing necessary for reconciliation to take place. Because of these ways of God attested to in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, Christians believe that God begins with the victim.

Indeed, much of the new work on reconciliation since the 1990s has been in this vein: looking at reconciliation from the perspective of the victim. Religious traditions—and Christianity among them—have most often focused their attention on the wrongdoer. What those traditions have developed remains valid. But what to do for and with victims has been a serious lacuna in the reflection on reconciliation. The awareness that there is often only a generalized other to define as wrongdoer does not always allow for the healing of individuals. It is thus important that the victim receive more attention.

Does this mean that the wrongdoer disappears from view? By no means. Wrongdoing must be confronted, and the efforts to attain justice is an important part of reconciliation for both parties. One can punish wrongdoers, but one cannot coerce them into remorse and repentance. Punishment identifies the wrongdoer with the act of wrongdoing. It is important that this happen, especially for the sake of creating a more just society. But the wrongdoer has to be seen also as more than the act; otherwise, we are practicing a parallel dehumanization of the wrongdoer to that which was done to the victim.

More recently, attention is being given to the healing of the wrongdoer who is brought to repentance. Patterns of reparation, expiation, atonement and other ritual activities have long been known and play significant roles in Jewish and Christian traditions.<sup>(2)</sup> In individualist and secularized societies these ritual understandings have come under growing critique. They will be returned to at a later moment. They all have to do with the conundrum of how one undoes profound wrong.

In the midst of the perpetration of violations of human rights, how can people who have been engaged in such wrongdoing be brought beyond punishment to the restoration of their humanity? A phrase sometimes heard on the lips of such people who have tortured, killed and committed other atrocities is: "I want to rejoin the human family." In this plaintive cry, one hears the suffering of exclusion from the bonds of human community. The ways of repentance that lead to healing are as mysterious as those ways that lead victims to peace. A growing edge of reconciliation work is to understand these processes so as to accompany wrongdoers back into the human family.<sup>(3)</sup>

### *3. In reconciliation, God makes of both victim and wrongdoer a "new creation" (1 Cor 5:17)*

What is the immediate experience of reconciliation actually like? In a commonsense understanding, the healing moment that marks reconciliation would be a return to the condition in which one was prior to the wrongdoing. The negative experience would be expunged and one could continue to live one's life unimpeded by that memory.

As desirable as such an experience might be, it does not correspond to the reality in which victims find themselves. To be sure, we all hope to escape negative experiences from the past, either through forgetting or through the cleansing of memories. But such an experience cannot so easily be wiped from our slates: the

experience has changed us profoundly. The struggle with these memories is recounted in John 21, where Simon and the other disciples decide to leave Jerusalem and return to Galilee. They leave the site where their greatest hopes had been dashed, and hope that by returning to their previous lives they can get moving toward a less troublesome future. Upon returning to Galilee, they decide to go fishing, to return to the routines of their everyday lives that had been so changed by their encounter with Jesus. But to their dismay, these experienced fishermen found themselves unable to catch anything. (21:1-3)

Traumatic events that change our lives cannot be summarily dismissed. They become part of our story and part of our memory. To deny this is to say either that the event was not as earth-shaking as it seemed or that the victim is not important enough for us to attend to this negative experience.

What happens in the healing that takes place in reconciliation is that we are taken to a new place, a place that we had not expected or measured out for ourselves. The moment of reconciliation comes, therefore, as a surprise, providing us something we could not have imagined.

Why is this? Certainly one reason is that our picture of the wrong that has been done to us—and its consequences—does not cover the range and depth of the damage that has been done. We saw this already under the first distinctive characteristic above. Thus, our calculations of what it will take to overcome the wrongdoing do not reach far enough to encompass all that has to be taken into consideration. When the moment of reconciliation does arrive, its contours are marked by this more comprehensive view of what needs to be healed.

A second feature of the healing moment sometimes involves a vocation or calling to help victims in similar circumstances or do constructive work that parallels the wrongdoing. When this happens (it does not always appear), the victim is not only healed from what has happened in the past, but is given a way forward that takes into account both the wrongdoing of the past and experience of healing. Thus these experiences are situated in the victim's identity in such a way that they are not forgotten or erased, but now become a motivating force for helping others. They have lost their toxicity and become sources for new life.

This experience of surprise could be called from a Christian perspective an experience of God's grace—God's reaching into our broken lives to heal us and to bring us to a new place. This is the "new creation" of which Paul speaks in I Cor 5:17.

Another thing that this reflection on the moment of healing in reconciliation calls us to is the importance of memory, faithfulness, and the future. Memory is constitutive of who we are as human beings. It is memory that has the chief role in shaping our identities. Reconciliation cannot be about the erasure of memory. What it is, rather, is removing the toxic character of traumatic memories that threatens to continue to poison our present and our future. Moreover, reconciliation means a resituation of memories, that is, giving them a new context or placing them in a larger story of our lives. This resituation is most in evidence in the act of forgiveness. When we forgive someone for what they have done, we are able to separate the person from the deed. Who the person is cannot be equated with what has been done. To see the wrongdoer not merely as maleficent, but as a broken or fearful human being allows us to connect with the wrongdoer in a compassion that transcends the evil deed. Resituating memory is a way of preserving memory without being held hostage to it.

A significant part of trust is fidelity or faithfulness. People are often loathe to forgive because to do so seems unfaithful to those who have died. Forgiving seems to dishonor those who have suffered and those who have died. While we cannot forgive on behalf of the dead, we can forgive or remember in such a way that can rehabilitate the wrongdoer. This is an attempt to reconnect at a deeper level not only with the humanity of the

wrongdoer, but also in fidelity to the dead. It is a resituating of memory once again. This is especially important with regard to the dead, since memory is one of the few tenuous links we have with the dead.

Finally, if the future is to be other than a repetition of the past, then the future must be framed by something different than toxic memory. The future cannot be innocent of the past, but it cannot be hostage to it either. Here, that God acts to reconcile allows us to think of the future as part of the continuing creation of God, a creation that does not erase its past but instead places the past in ever new perspective.

#### *4. Christians pattern their suffering on the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ*

The struggle for reconciliation involves suffering, that experience of psychological and sometimes physical pain, feelings of abandonment and loss, and of any ability to bring about an end to suffering's torment through one's own will. This suffering frequently has a spiritual component as well, as previous images of God, self and the world are shattered. Devout believers have reported that under the experience of torture, they had believed that God would always be with them. But at torture's worse moments, they report: "God was not there." They do not say "I could not experience God's presence"; they assert, rather, that God was absent. Some of these find their way back to God, albeit a different concept of God than what they had previously. Others do not.

The conundrum of suffering is taken up by every religious tradition, and has to be addressed as well by those who have no religious tradition. A variety of responses to suffering are given, although none of them is deemed adequate enough to relieve the suffering in itself.

Suffering in and of itself is not ennobling. Left to its own deserts, it is destructive of human beings. It is only when suffering can be connected to some larger purpose beyond itself, or aggregated to a person or concept or cause that has not lost autonomy, can the sufferer escape diminution or annihilation as a person. Thus to say, "I do not understand my suffering; it must be connected to some greater design or purpose from God"; or, "I place my suffering in solidarity with all those who have suffered in a similar way" can we hope to escape suffering's deconstruction of our humanity by reasserting some larger meaning that is greater than suffering itself.

Along with these connective responses to suffering, protest against suffering and resistance to its incursions into the interstices of our souls reaffirms our agency as human beings. In so doing we reconfirm that there are powers and values greater than what suffering can undo.

In all of this, we are seeking ways to retain and retrieve our humanity. Because suffering is often long-term in post-trauma situations, and because the release from suffering is often uncertain, it becomes important to find ways of sustaining our humanity in the midst of ongoing suffering. Recalling the principle mentioned previously, namely, the reconciliation is both a process and a goal, it is important to find ways of sustaining humanity in the process of reconciliation as well as hoping for achieving release from suffering as a goal.

Christianity, as have other traditions, offers a number of responses to suffering. One frequently invoked is that suffering has some purpose in God's larger plan for us—be it purification, be it testing, be it stimulus to come to a new level of being human. Such assertions are risky. They may be guided by an oversimple and even erroneous image of God as One who desires punishment or demands retribution. They may also lure us into acquiescing to the wrongdoer rather than resisting and struggling to change the situation. One has to weigh carefully when and how to offer such advice because of all the deadends that can crop up, deadends that diminish our humanity rather than sustain it.



Another way of responding to suffering from the resources of the Christian tradition is to place our sufferings within the pattern or framework of the suffering of Christ. Here the Letter to the Philippians is a guide: "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead." (3:10-11) In this passage, Paul wishes to pattern his own suffering onto that of the suffering of Christ. Christians believe that the suffering and death of Jesus was undeserved; for that reason it parallels the wrongful suffering that so many victims experience. Such suffering threatens to swallow the victim, to pull the victim into a maelstrom of destruction, to make the victim disappear into a black hole. Because Christians believe that Jesus did undergo suffering and a terrible death, and that God did not let him remain in death, but raised him from the dead, identifying their own suffering with the suffering of the innocent Jesus becomes a way to survive the depredations that suffering brings upon us.

In aggregating one's suffering to that of Jesus we do not bypass or sidestep suffering but find a way through it, accompanied by the suffering Jesus. He experienced the full range of wrongful suffering: betrayal, abandonment, false accusation, ridicule, shame, and acute physical pain. Such suffering cannot be seen as requiring only endurance since we will know the "happy ending" of the resurrection. The resurrection is an unprecedented event. It takes Jesus and then also his disciples to a new place. It cannot be extrapolated from the suffering that Jesus endured.<sup>(4)</sup> The disciples are confused, misread and do not recognize the risen Jesus, and are amazed. To live with this surprise, to follow it into a new place, a new creation is what living the resurrection is all about.

Suffering does not offer any answers. It is only after suffering that we are sometimes able to make sense of it by placing the experience in a larger framework. But sometimes even that fails to satisfy. The task of those who work for reconciliation must be concerned with how to accompany those who suffer, how to help them find the means to sustain their threatened humanity. The requisites of reconciliation as a process are of tantamount importance here.

The need for a spirituality to guide and sustain reconciliation efforts asserts itself nowhere more urgently than here. As we shall see later, a theology of wounds—both the wounds of the victims and of those who accompany them—offers an important possibility.

##### *5. Reconciliation will be complete only when God has reconciled the whole world in Christ*

We have already had occasion to reflect on reconciliation as a process and reconciliation as a goal. The real-world experience of reconciliation when it does happen is that it always seems incomplete. Sometimes that incompleteness is achingly so. In the rebuilding of societies after situations of conflict there are always those who have gone unpunished, there are those still mired in suffering, there are the dead whom we cannot bring back. Justice is never entirely served.

Does that mean that we should abandon efforts to attain reconciliation and build peace? I think not. Indeed to give up these efforts means surrender to the forces of wrongdoing, allowing them to define the world and ourselves.

Paul was keenly aware of this. He posits that the beginnings that have been made in story of Jesus will need to be brought to fruition. He sees it in the experience of the general resurrection, wherein those who have died in faith will be raised as was Christ, so that "God may be all in all." (I Cor 15:28) It is likewise foreseen in the ancient hymns that open the Letters to the Ephesians and Colossians:

He has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. (Eph 1:9-10)

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (Col 1:19–20)

Full reconciliation will occur, therefore, at the end of time. While this may be disheartening as we view the present moment, a little reflection points to its rightness: if the world as God's creation is meant to be a meaningful place, then everything is connected to everything else. Thus only when all things—everywhere at every time—are reconciled, can any one act of reconciliation achieve its fulfillment.

This can indeed be disappointing in the present moment. What becomes important is the capacity to sustain hope. From a Christian perspective, hope is not the same as optimism. Optimism is something that grows out of our own capacity to change things. It is a power that comes from us. People who come from wealthy countries and who have access to a lot of resources are often very optimistic.

Optimism is a good thing. Without some outlook of bettering things in the future, we would be paralyzed and unable to act. But optimism also has its limits, most evident in situations where people have experienced tragedy and have had to struggle for their survival again and again. In all of this optimism is not erased, but its limits are experienced acutely.

Hope, on the other hand, comes from God. It is God and God's promises that are drawing us into the future. The assurance of things getting better does not arise first and foremost out of ourselves, but is based upon our trust in God. It is that capacity to trust a faithful God that makes us most in God's image and likeness—that is, that shows forth the full possibility of our humanity. The profound meditation on the meaning of that trust, that faith, is given in Chapter 11 of the Letter to the Hebrews. There the author reflects on the great figures of Israel—Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus—who bring that faith to its fullness. The author of Hebrews holds up these great figures to remind the beleaguered community that is the addressee of the Letter that faith sustains hope, and hope brings us farther than we can imagine.

## **Conclusion**

These insights about the finality of reconciliation bring us full circle. The fact that all acts of reconciliation must be brought together mirrors the fact that each act of wrongdoing harkens back to the initial and fundamental alienation of humankind from God. Just as this realization of fundamental alienation makes us take every act of wrongdoing seriously, so too that final hope keeps us from giving up the quest for full reconciliation. That final hope does not derive from our own capacities, but calls us to a deeper source, one that comprehends all things. Seen in this perspective, reconciliation is not simply one act among many. It is about the remaking of the whole world and all who dwell in it.

As we look back upon these five characteristics of reconciliation as understood by Christians, we can see how this understanding of reconciliation rings the changes on a whole set of themes that touch our humanity. No offense is only what it appears to be; both its origins and its consequences reach further than we might imagine. This opaque and complex character of wrongdoing and offense reaches ultimately beyond our capacity to encompass it. The roots of wrongdoing feed upon past offenses, a history that reaches back to a fundamental alienation of creatures from the source of their life. Only that unbounded source can repair the damage that has been done. That source (whom we believe is God) is marked in its unboundedness by a graciousness and mercy that looks first to those most harmed by wrongdoing: the victims. The healing of the victim is the prelude to the redeeming of the wrongdoer—not only because wrongdoers often do not come to repentance, but also because the victim must be prepared to assess and act upon the remorse and apology of the wrongdoer if it occurs. The healing that occurs cannot be summed up merely by the rebuilding what has been undone in the offense;

healing takes the parties to a new place. Along that way, however, the means have to be found to sustain those who suffer, lest they be engulfed and undone by the offense. When reconciliation occurs, it still seems incomplete since so much still needs to be resolved. But just as offense has unimagined and unforeseen ramifications, so full reconciliation will entail the reconciliation of all things.

The primary agent in this whole process is God, the author and the fulfillment of what has been created. God acts through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. In all this, we are not passive bystanders or mere viewers of this drama. In Paul's words, this ministry of reconciliation is entrusted to us. We act on behalf of God.

In so doing, we attain our destiny as human beings, in that in working for reconciliation our creation in the image and likeness of God is most in evidence. Thus working for reconciliation is not one option among many. It lies at the very heart of what it means to be Christian and what it means to be human.

### **A Final Consideration: Working Together**

A careful reader of what has been said here about the distinctive characteristics of the Christian understanding of reconciliation will notice that much of what has been said can be cast in other terms, not necessarily Christian nor even part of any religious tradition. Christianity's own view already owes a heavy debt to the insights of Jewish faith. One can construe the understandings of justice, of human agency, the need to call upon resources outside oneself from a psychological perspective or another kind of worldview.

In point of fact, especially in cases of social reconciliation, Christians will find themselves working with others who do not share their perspectives on reconciliation—or at least do not assign theological means to its various aspects. Frequently, Christians are in a minority amid those working for reconciliation. Is the Christian perspective then but an arrogation of a more generalized understanding to a more particularized way of thinking?

To be sure, many of the elements just summarized above find a home in other traditions of faith and in perspectives that do not rest upon religious faith. What Christians bring to the work of reconciliation is not something wholly different and utterly unique, although one can point to some distinctive elements. What Christians do bring is a comprehensive, articulated view of how, to their minds, this all fits together. Many of the elements within this view will find ready resonance with other construals of the process and goals of reconciliation; other elements will not.

Experience in the actual work of reconciliation points to two responses to this query. In the reconciliation of individuals, the worldview of the victim sets the stage for the possibility of reconciliation. Reconciliation is the remaking of world that has been torn asunder by wrongdoing. That world must be rebuilt with some measure of coherence and consistency. One of the important insights in the work of reconciliation of individuals is how the cultures from which victims come support and circumscribe their understanding of what happens to them in healing. Those who work for reconciliation, in accompanying victims, need to honor the resources for rebuilding and integration that are part of the victims' worlds.

In situations of social reconciliation, common elements arising in the different perspectives are the chief building blocks of reconstructing a society after conflict. Here is where cooperation can really happen. Differences will occur: are all offenses forgivable? When has justice been truly served? How do we balance memory and forgetting? My own experience suggests that earnest partners in the work of reconciliation will welcome whatever insights each of the parties is able to bring, providing that it is not insisted that one insight must prevail in all instances. The work of rebuilding is too complex to acquiesce to such simplistic solutions.

Moreover, there is an attractiveness to be able to articulate a coherent view of just what reconciliation is and how it is to be achieved. As long as parties working for reconciliation are not hostile to one another (e.g., thinking that all religion—or this religion—can engender nothing but violence and oppression), insights that can contribute to the betterment of the situation will be welcomed. There is too much complexity and too much work to be done to resort to particularist and absolute claims on the part of one party.

Most parties involved will recognize too the need not to restrict the resources for building and sustaining reconciliation efforts. The high burnout rate among workers for reconciliation attest to this importance of this. Whether it be called worldview, spirituality, commitment to justice or to altruism, the need for sustaining resources is omnipresent. That was the reason for trying to articulate a Christian perspective, and to highlight some of the inner connections in the Christian understanding of reconciliation that have been presented in this chapter.

### Endnotes

1. Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1950).
2. For a useful review of these, see A.H. van Veluw, *De straf die ons vrede aanbrengt. Over God, kruis, straf and de slachtoffers van deze wereld in de christelijke verzoeningsleer* (Zoetermeer: Het Boekencentrum, 2002).
3. An important testimony to this has been Pumla Gododo–Madikizela, *A Human Being Died That Night* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), an account of the author's meeting with Eugene De Kock in Pretoria's prison. De Kock was one of the most notorious operatives in the repression of the apartheid regime.
4. I have explored these aspects of the resurrection in *The Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998).