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RECONCILIATION AS A NEW PARADIGM OF MISSION

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The Emergence of Reconciliation in the Discussion of Mission

There have been references to, and echoes of, the theme of reconciliation in the theological discussion of mission throughout the previous century, but it is only in the last decade and a half that it has emerged as an important way of talking about Christian mission. David Bosch's 1992 magisterial work, *Transforming Mission*, makes no mention of it. Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder's recent book, *Constants in Context* published in 2004, on the other hand, has multiple references to reconciliation. What has happened?

The experience of trying to come to terms with a violent past, the need to end hostility, and the slow work of reconstructing broken societies have pushed reconciliation into the limelight, especially bringing it to the attention of those concerned with the work of the Church. The fact that many recent conferences on mission have been taking up this theme, and that it figures in the title and preparatory documents of the Conference, indicates how far we have come.

In this presentation, I would like to explore how reconciliation might be seen as a paradigm or model of mission. I begin by looking at how the idea of reconciliation might be seen as revealing to us the heart of the Gospel. Then I will look at the understanding of reconciliation today, both as a *process* for engaging in mission, and as the *goal* of mission.

RECONCILIATION: THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

Although the word "reconciliation" does not occur as such in the Hebrew Scriptures, and only fourteen times in the New Testament, the Bible is full of stories of reconciliation, from the stories of Esau and Jacob, and Joseph and his brothers, to Jesus' parables, especially that of the Prodigal Son. These stories show the struggle that goes on in trying to achieve reconciliation. Many of them end before reconciliation is actually reached — something that mirrors much of our own experience.

It is the Apostle Paul especially who sets out the Christian understanding of reconciliation. For Paul, God is the author of reconciliation: about this he has no doubt. We but participate in what God is bringing about in our world. One can discern three processes of reconciliation in which God is engaged. The first is God's reconciling a sinful humanity to God's own self. This is set forth especially in Paul's Letter to the Romans (5:1-11), where Paul describes the peace we now have with God, who has poured out love in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. We have been reconciled to God through the death of his Son, Jesus Christ. It is through Christ that we have now received reconciliation. This act of God's, reconciling us, rescuing us from our sins, is sometimes called *vertical reconciliation*. As such, it is the basis for all other forms of Christian reconciliation. It is also central to Paul's own experience of Christ, having been converted from his persecution of the Church to being made, "out of due time", an apostle of Jesus Christ.

The second kind of reconciliation of which Paul speaks is brought about between individual human beings and groups in society. The paramount example of this reconciliation is between Jews and Gentiles. Here the description of how this reconciliation is effected through the blood of Christ is presented in Ephesians 2:12-20: the Gentiles, without hope or promise, are made alive together in Christ, who has broken down the wall of hostility that divided them, and made them fellow citizens in the household of God. This second kind of reconciliation is sometimes called *horizontal reconciliation*.

The third kind of reconciliation situates God's work through Christ in the context of the whole of Creation. In the hymns beginning the Letters to the Ephesians and Colossians, God is seen as reconciling all things and all persons — whether in heaven or on earth — in Christ (Eph 1:10), making peace to reign throughout all Creation through the blood of Christ's Cross (Col 1:20). This kind of reconciliation is sometimes called *cosmic reconciliation*, and represents the fullness of God's plan for Creation, to be realized at the end of time.

Paul sees the Church participating in the reconciling work of God through a ministry of reconciliation, captured

succinctly in Paul’s presentation of this in II Corinthians 5:17-20:

“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All of this is from God, who 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” (cf. NRSV).

It is the vertical reconciliation that makes the horizontal and cosmic dimensions possible. It is within this framework of vertical, horizontal, and cosmic reconciliation that we are to see Christian mission. That mission is rooted in the *missio dei*, the going forth of the Holy Trinity in the acts of creation, incarnation, redemption, and consummation. Through the Son, God has brought reconciliation to the world, overcoming sin, disobedience and the alienation we have wrought. Christ reunites us with God through his saving death, which God confirms in the Resurrection and the revelation of transfigured life. The Holy Spirit empowers the Church to participate in this ministry of the Son and the Spirit in reconciling the world. The Church itself is in need of constant reconciliation, but becomes the vehicle for God’s saving grace to a broken and disheartened world.

One might summarize this biblical understanding of reconciliation under five brief headings:

1. God is the author of all genuine reconciliation. We but participate in God’s reconciling work. We are, in Paul’s words, “ambassadors in the name of Christ” (II Cor 5:20).
2. God’s first concern in the reconciliation process is the healing of the victims. This grows out of two experiences: the God of the great prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures and the God of Jesus Christ cares especially about the poor and the oppressed. Second, so often the wrongdoers do not repent, and the healing of the victim cannot be held hostage by unrepentant wrongdoers.
3. In reconciliation, God makes of both victim and wrongdoer a “new Creation” (II Cor 5:17). This means two things. First of all, in profound wrongdoing it is impossible to go back to where we were before the wrongdoing took place; to do such would be to trivialize the gravity of what has been done. We can only go forward to a new place. Second, God wants both the healing of the victim and the repentance of the

wrongdoer. Neither should be annihilated; both should be brought to a new place, a new Creation.

4. Christians find a way out of their suffering by placing it in the suffering, death and Resurrection of Christ. It is this patterning of our suffering in that of Christ that helps us escape its destructive power. It also engenders hope in us.

5. Reconciliation will only be complete when all things are brought together in Christ (Eph 1:10). Until that time we experience only partial reconciliation, but live in hope.

THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION AS PROCESS

How does the Church participate in this reconciliation? What concrete forms does it take? Because of the wider interest in reconciliation in the world today — it is far from being only a Christian concern — the language of reconciliation is often unclear. At times it has been manipulated and distorted to serve other ends. As Christians we need to be as clear as we can about what we mean by reconciliation and how we go about the ministry of reconciliation.

Let me begin by saying that reconciliation is both a *process* and a *goal*. It is both an ongoing work in which we participate and a final point at which we hope to arrive. Let us first look at it as a process. I will focus here on the horizontal or social dimension of Reconciliation. The Church participates in the vertical dimension through its sacraments and in the cosmic dimension as well, both in its liturgy and its concern for all of Creation. These too constitute part of reconciliation as a model of mission. But because the thinking on the horizontal dimension is more recent and new to many, I will devote more time to it here.

Participation in the horizontal dimension of reconciliation is about participating in God’s healing of societies that have been wounded deeply and broken by oppression, injustice, discrimination, war, and wanton destruction. This healing begins with *truth-telling*, the breaking of the codes of silence that hide wrongdoing against the poor and vulnerable members of society. Truth-telling also means overcoming and correcting the lies and distortions that bring unearned shame on the innocent and isolate people from one another so as to exercise hegemony over society. Truth-telling has to be a constant effort to tell the whole truth, both for victims and about wrongdoers. Truth-telling as a practice in this sense must encompass four things: It must be a truth that resonates with my experience of events, it must be in language I can understand, it must

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conform to my understanding of truthfulness, and it must come from someone I can trust.

For a Christian, truth-telling is more than relating facts in a credible manner. It involves also

God, who is the author of all truth. Truth in its Hebrew sense ('*emet*) is part of the nature of God: it is reliable, it is enduring, it is steadfast, and it is faithful. It is truth-telling at this deep, theological level that is the basis for healing a broken society. What that means on a practical level is that the Church must endeavour to create safe, hospitable spaces where truth can be spoken and heard, where the silence can be broken, where pernicious lies can be laid bare and overcome.

With truth comes the pursuit of *justice*. To seek justice with no effort to establish the truth runs the risk of engaging in vengeance instead of true justice. The struggle for justice (and it is a struggle, wrongdoing does not give up easily) is many faceted. It involves *punitive justice*, that punishes wrongdoers in a lawful way to show that a renewed society acknowledges the wrongdoing that has been done and will not tolerate it in the future. Second, it involves *restorative justice* which restores the dignity and the rights of the victim. Third, it requires *distributive justice*, since the unjust wresting of a person's goods makes healing and the creation of a just society nearly impossible. Finally, it requires *structural justice*, that is, the restructuring of the institutions and processes of society so that just action becomes part of the rebuilt society. Reallocating resources, equity in human rights, guaranteed access to health, shelter, food, education and employment are all part of creating a just society.

A third aspect of reconciliation as a process is the *rebuilding of relationships*. Without relations of equity and trust, a society quickly slides back into violence. Work on these relationships has to happen at many levels. For victims, it involves the *healing of memories* so that one does not remain beholden or hostage to the past. It is an overcoming of the toxin that memories of violence, oppression, and marginalization contain. It means *repentance* and *conversion* on the part of those who have done wrong, acknowledging the wrongdoing and taking steps to approach the victim in order to apologize and make reparation. It means making the difficult journey toward *forgiveness*. Here the process of rebuilding relationships is often short-circuited. Amnesty is given or impunity is bestowed on the wrongdoers even before the victims are allowed to speak. A shroud of forgetfulness and oblivion is

drawn over the past. Forgiveness is not about forgetting the wrong done, but about coming to remember it in a different way — a way that removes the toxin from the experience of the victim and creates the space for repentance and apology by the wrongdoer. Forgiveness means remembering the past, but remembering it in a way that makes a different kind of future possible for both victim and the wrongdoer.

RECONCILIATION AS GOAL

Truth-telling, struggling for justice, working toward forgiveness: these are the three central dimensions of the social process of reconciliation. In all the situations I know, they are never undertaken on a level playing field; the consequences of oppression, violence, and war are not predisposed to honesty, justice, and even the good intentions of all parties. Nor are the processes, for the most part, orderly. And they never seem to be complete. In fact, we usually experience them as truncated, prematurely foreclosed, hijacked by the powerful. What are we to do? This brings me to the other understanding of reconciliation; namely, reconciliation as goal. Talk of reconciliation skips too easily from the end of overt violence to an imagined peace. It circumvents the messy and protracted process of truth-telling, seeking justice, working toward forgiveness. We expect peace to blossom and flourish after long periods of war. We expect democracy to rise up, phoenix-like, from the ashes of dictatorship and authoritarian rule. But such is not the case. We can find ourselves acquiescing to half-measures, half-truths, compromised solutions.

It is important not to confuse reconciliation as *process* with reconciliation as *goal*. In order to follow the process, we must fix our eyes on the goal. For Christians, it is God who is working reconciliation; we are but agents in the process, participating in what God is doing. God is our strength; God is our hope. It is God who is bringing this about. Here we experience the difference between optimism and hope. Optimism is what grows out of the confidence in our own resources and capacities. It comes out of us. The enormity of wrong and sin that we face in protracted war and oppression far exceeds what we are able to accomplish. Hope, on the other hand, comes from God. It is God leading us forward, like he did Abraham and Sarah. We live in faith, the assurance of things hoped for (cf. Heb 11:1). With our eyes fixed on God and God's promises, we can maintain the strength of heart, of mind, and of will to continue our participation in what God is doing for the world.

THE CHURCH: A COMMUNITY OF MEMORY AND OF HOPE

So where does this place the Church? Its participation in the *missio dei*, understood here as God's reconciling the

world to Himself, is marked especially by three things. First, the ministry of reconciliation makes the Church a community of memory and, second, a community of hope. Its mission, in word and deed, of the message of reconciliation makes possible what is perhaps for many the most intense experience of God possible in our troubled, broken world.

The Church is first of all a community of memory. It does not engage in the forgetfulness urged by the powerful upon the vulnerable and poor — to forget their suffering, to erase from their memories what has been done to them, to act as though the wrongdoing never happened. The Church as a community of memory creates those safe havens where memories can be spoken of out loud, and begin the difficult and long process of overcoming the rightful anger that, if left unacknowledged, can poison any possibilities for the future. In safe spaces, the trust that has been sundered, the dignity that has been denied and wrested away, has the chance of being reborn. A community of memory is concerned too about truthful memory, not the distorting lies that serve the interests of the wrongdoer at the cost of the wronged. A community of memory keeps the focus of memory as it pursues justice in all its dimensions — punitive, restorative, distributive, structural. Not to pursue and struggle for justice makes the truth-telling sound false and the safe spaces created barren. A community of memory is concerned too with the future of memory, that is, the prospects of forgiveness and what lies beyond. The difficult ministry of memory, if it may be called that, is possible because it is grounded in the memory of the passion, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ: the One who was without sin and was made to bear our sin, so that we might become the justice of God (cf. II Cor 5:21).

Living in the memory of what Christ has gone through — suffering and death, yet not forgotten and indeed raised up by God — is the source of our hope. Hope allows us to keep the vision of a reconciled world alive, not in some facile utopian fashion, but grounded in the memory of what God has done in Jesus Christ. Paul captures this well in another passage in the Second Letter to the Corinthians:

“But we hold this treasure in clay vessels, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies” (cf. II Cor 4:7-10).

Reconciliation belongs to God; not to us. Despite all we go through, we do not lose heart, since we carry the death of Jesus in our bodies, so that through us his life might be made visible. This is the vocation of the Church, its calling to the ministry of reconciliation, its proclamation of the death and Resurrection of Christ in the Church’s own body. So, God’s reconciling work can be made known to a broken world as he “entrusted to us the ministry of reconciliation” (II Cor 5:18) through our preaching. Mission, as our Orthodox brothers and sisters have so helpfully reminded us, is the liturgy after the liturgy. Our action is not just political action or action for justice (although it is also all of these). It is participation in something much larger than ourselves: the work of the Triune God in bringing about the healing of the world.

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