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# CHRIST AS RECONCILER IN PAULINE THEOLOGY AND IN CONTEMPORARY RWANDA

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*Broken relationships! How common and yet how appalling to find among Christians. Eugene Bayinsana discusses one of the most tragic examples of broken relationships in Africa, the genocide of hundreds of thousands of Christians in Rwanda by other Christians. How can this be? Yet many of our churches are splintered and divided with the same basic disease. Reconciliation with one another is mandated by God who has made reconciliation possible between man and God. Bayinsana examines the biblical teaching of reconciliation. God is the Reconciler par excellence. But when men and women are reconciled to God, this must be reflected in reconciliation with their fellow human beings. Practical suggestions are made for the tragic case of Rwanda which have many applications for all societies which experience broken relationships due to racism, tribalism and injustice.*

## INTRODUCTION

Reconciliation is a term that speaks to men today apart from the Christian Gospel because experiences of being unreconciled are particularly widespread or at least particularly widely noticed. But what do we mean by this term? Reconciliation properly denotes a change from enmity to friendship. With regard to the relationship between God and man, the use of this and related terms in the New Testament shows that reconciliation is primarily what God accomplishes as He exercises his grace towards sinful man through the death of Christ (2 Cor 5:19) where both the verb, "to reconcile," and the noun, "reconciliation," are used.<sup>1</sup> Theologically, reconciliation can be defined as "the activity whereby the disorders of existence are healed, its imbalances redressed, its alienation bridged over."<sup>2</sup> As such it stands at the centre of Christian faith. It

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<sup>1</sup> W.E. Vine, Merril F. Unger and William White, *An Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* (New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985) 5131.

<sup>2</sup> Allen O. Miller, *Reconciliation in Today's World* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1969) 53.

is closely related to redemption, justification, peace and forgiveness. To reconcile is to reunite, to bring back with harmony. Reconciliation implies, therefore, that division, separation and rupture have taken place. Two realities, two persons, two peoples are at odds and do not relate as they should. Therefore discord, disunity, disharmony prevails. Oneness has been ruptured.

Reconciliation, in a secular sense, denotes a change in relations between individuals, groups, or nations and pertains to relations in the social or political sphere. It means a change from anger, hostility, or alienation to love, friendship or intimacy. Feelings may accompany that change, but they are not essential (Matt. 5:23; Cf. I Cor. 7:11).

### **GOD THE RECONCILER**

In Pauline theology, reconciliation is described both horizontally (Gentiles and Jews are brought near as Christians) and vertically (both Gentile and Jewish Christians have been reconciled to God through Christ, who is our peace). When Paul applies this image to the Christ-event, he speaks always of God or Christ reconciling human beings, enemies or sinners to himself. The initiative is with God, who through Christ brings it about that human sinners are brought from a status of enmity to friendship (2 Cor. 5:18-19). "If, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. Not only so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received our reconciliation" (Rom. 5:10-11). In Christ, God was reconciling the world to Himself (2 Cor. 5:19; Rom 11:15). For Paul, the subject of reconciling activity is always God who through Christ reconciles us to Himself (2 Cor. 5:18). Humanity stands in need of reconciliation with God. Paul describes the human condition prior to reconciliation as weak, ungodly, and sinful (Rom. 5:6-8; Eph. 2:12). But it was precisely when we were enemies that God reconciled us to himself (Rom. 5:10). God effected this reconciliation through the death of his Son upon the cross (Rom. 5:10; 2 Cor. 5:19 and Col. 1:22). The immediate effect of reconciliation is peace with God (Rom. 5:1, Eph. 2:14) so that Christians can view themselves as a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17).

The restoration of a vertical relationship is always accompanied by a restoration of horizontal relationships. When people are reconciled to God they are also reconciled to one another. It seems that you cannot have one without the other. When sinners are reconciled to God, it is simply impossible that they should not be reconciled to God's other children. The consequence of reconciliation is a change so radical that it must be called a new creation. The scope of reconciliation, however, goes beyond God and individuals. The world is also affected by Christ's redemptive work (2 Cor. 5:19; Cf. 11:15).

God is faithful to his eternal plan even when man, under the impulse of the evil one, and carried away by his own pride, abuses the freedom intended to enable him to love and generously seek what is good, and refuses to obey his Lord and Father. God is faithful even when man, instead of responding with love to God's love, opposes him and treats him like a rival, separating himself and relying on his own power, with the resulting break of relationship with the one who created him. In spite of man's transgressions, God remains faithful in love. It is certainly true that the story of the Garden of Eden makes us think about the consequences of rejecting the Father, which becomes evident in man's inner disorder and in the breakdown of harmony between themselves. Refusal of God's fatherly love and of his loving gifts is always at the root of humanity's divisions. But we know that God, rich in mercy (Eph. 2:4) like the father in the parable, does not close his heart to any of his children. He waits for them, looks for them, goes to meet them at the place where the refusal of communion imprisons them in isolation and division. He calls them to gather about his table in the joy of the feast of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Reconciliation calls for conversion. For only conversion reverses the radical rupture that sin creates. Conversion means that my whole person changes. Yet I am so often at war with myself. This deep-rooted conflict was described with rare insight by St. Paul in his letter to the Christians of Rome.

My own actions bewildered me. What I do is not what I want to do; I do the every thing I hate.... It is not the good my will prefers but the evil my will disapproves that I find myself doing. In my inmost self I delight in God's law; but I see in my lower self another law at war with the law of my conscience, enslaving me to the law of sin which my lower self contains (Rom. 7:15-23).

The problem is that I cannot change myself. I can turn from God all by myself; but I cannot turn back to Him all by myself. St. Paul said: "All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to Himself.... that is, God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. For our sake He made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:18-21).

Without going into anymore detail, however, it is clear that for Paul humankind is estranged from God. God initiated the work of reconciliation through Jesus in the fullness of time and made us agents of that reconciliation. It is particularly important that Paul should stress this in a book like 2 Corinthians, which reflects a situation where reconciliation was the last thing on certain church members' minds. Paul in this passage is making several very

important points: God has initiated reconciliation; reconciliation is through Jesus Christ; we are agents of that reconciliation.

## RECONCILIATION BETWEEN MAN AND MAN

Thus far I have argued that reconciliation assumes that a rupture in relationship has taken place. I have argued that ultimately rupture has its origin in sin and is overcome by God's grace through Christ. Now I shall insist that reconciliation, the restoration of oneness among God's children, is impossible unless God's love lays hold of us, unless we open ourselves to God in love and lay hold of man in love.

"The two great commandments of the law" are really one. I cannot love God if I hate my neighbour, and I will not love my neighbour as I should unless I love God with all my mind and heart, with all my soul and strength. Disunity was not God's original design for us. In fact, in the historic account of the first three chapters of Genesis, the story of Adam and Eve reveals God's plan for human unity. In the first place, a remarkable oneness prevailed, an intimate harmony between man and God. When God made the first man, He gave him not simply a garden of delights, the birds of the air and a woman from his flesh. "More precious than all, God gave man God."<sup>3</sup> From the first instant Adam came from the hand of God, from the moment Eve was fashioned from the flesh of Adam, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit lived within them. There was a striking unity, a fascinating harmony, within man himself, within Adam and Eve. In God's plan a unique oneness would link man with man. No war, only peace. Not hatred but love. God fashioned Adam and Eve in his own image. He gifted them with the power to know and the freedom to love.

But this design was defaced. This primitive unity did not endure. The disruptive element, the chaotic factor is sin. As Genesis presents it, sin divided man when Adam disobeyed God. Adam ruptured the bond that linked man and God. Sin destroyed man's harmony within himself (Gn. 3:7-10). The Scripture tells us that Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him (Gn. 4:8).

To restore the unity that had been sundered by sin, the Son of God became man to recapture in some measure the divine dream of human harmony to put man at peace with God and with himself, with his fellow men, and with all creation. Christ came to reconcile us. Through his birth and death Christ destroyed the foundation of disunity. In Bethlehem and on Calvary Christ began the task of reconciliation. He linked man and God (Jn. 1:12). Christ made it possible for man to live at peace with himself (Rom. 7:24-25). He made it

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<sup>3</sup> Walter J. Burghardt, *Towards Reconciliation* (Washington, DC: USCC, 1974) 3.

possible for man to live at peace with his fellow men (Jn. 13:34). To realise this love, he gathered us into one body, his own body, with Himself as Head (Gal. 3:28). In Jesus' teaching, when the sinner accepts this offer of reconciliation from God, then the sinner must of necessity be reconciled with his/her brothers and sisters.

## RECONCILIATION IN CONTEMPORARY RWANDA

The question now is, for whom was Paul's reconciliation intended? The distinctive contribution of Paul is that it was for Gentiles as well as Jews.<sup>4</sup> In the first Epistle of John there is a very significant paragraph: "This is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another and not be like Cain, who was of the Evil one and murdered his brother." Cain and Abel are mankind; and their story is ours.

By any standards Rwanda was a country that was massively Christian. The official statistics, even though they have to be taken with a critical eye, prove that Rwanda in a sociological view was largely Christianised. According to the last census done in 1978, 66 per cent of the population said they were Christians, 58 percent being Catholics, 15.2 per cent Protestants, 6.3 per cent Adventists. So in general, Rwanda has more than 70 per cent Christian.

During the genocide, Christians in Rwanda killed one another in huge numbers. In the case of Rwanda, the year 1994 will be forever remembered as the year of genocide, when a million people were massacred. The wounds are deep. What makes a Christian nation perpetrate a genocide? Why was faith so fragile in Rwanda when it came to the test? Why did the message of the Gospel not reach the people who were baptised? "Within a few weeks and months the church in Rwanda appeared to have been annihilated and a century of evangelization seemingly nullified."<sup>5</sup> For Rwandese, the experience of the genocide is deeply traumatic. Judgements about how well or how badly individuals behaved under such stress, about how well and how hardly the churches in general reacted, must be left to the Almighty God. The church leaders refused to condemn the massacres and headed a church which has never officially challenged the growing injustices of the government.

Most of the Christians would agree with the surviving church that attempts to destroy the church responded to two basic and related situations.

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Hurley, *Reconciliation in Religion and Society* (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, 1974) 38.

<sup>5</sup> Aylward Shorter, *Christianity and the African Imagination* (Nairobi, Kenya: St. Pauline Publications, 1996) 38.

One factor was the extremely close ties of important church leaders to the Habyarimana regime. For instance, "the President had installed a direct telephone line between his office and the office of Archbishop Vincent Nsengiyunva."<sup>6</sup> The church went hand-in hand with the politics of the president. The church and the covenant had become too close, so close that the leaders could not criticise the corruption or give up their status and their gifts. This compromised their prophetic voice and undermined completely their moral authority.

Other factors are the deliberate intention of those organising the genocide to destroy any voice of critique or dissent and the churches finally had ethnic tensions of their own. Most of the leaders were Hutu, and it was difficult for Tutsi clergy to reach more senior positions.

Many attacks on the church compounds and religious workers were a result of the overall plan to eliminate Tutsi and moderate Hutu. Within all the churches of Rwanda, ethnic tensions often surfaced at the time of elections or nominations to senior ecclesiastical positions. Splits were glossed over but never healed. People were elected, not for their spiritual, administrative or leadership qualities, but along ethnic lines.<sup>7</sup>

It may indeed be the case that church leaders at times could reasonably have shown more courage. To be a credible voice of protest, the church leaders would have had to disengage themselves from close links to the ruling party and regime, which most of them were unable to do even after the genocide began. All this indicates that reconciliation in Rwanda will not be easy.

Reconciliation for Paul is not to be thought of as a cosmic miracle which merely changes the state of the universe outside of man. Paul has ensured that the moral transformation and the reconciliation of all things shall not be overlooked. He has shown that reconciliation is primarily concerned with the restoration of relationships. Therefore, one must insist that speculative interest is not enough to resolve a moral problem. Reconciliation in Rwanda will have to go step-by-step. It could take years. People must realise that they did wrong. They must repent and make amends to the relatives of those they killed. They must admit that they did wrong. They must change their way of living. Paul's point in I Corinthians 1:20 is clear. Reconciliation is not secured easily nor is it accomplished as a physical miracle which changes the state of the cosmos outside of man. "It does not work like, to use a Gnostic image, a magnet put up

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<sup>6</sup> Hugh McCullum, *The Angels Have Left Us. The Rwanda Tragedy and the Churches* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994) 79.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p.77.

in heaven and drawing those who are brought into its magnetic field irresistibly after it. The effect of Christ's death is the effect of a deed of love bringing its fruit in a human life which is touched by it."<sup>8</sup>

People in Rwanda have to begin to understand the depth of their trauma if reconciliation is to happen. Reconciliation, in order to be complete, necessarily requires liberation from sin, which is to be rejected in its deepest roots. Thus a close internal link unites conversion and reconciliation. It is impossible to split these two realities or to speak of the one and say nothing of the other. This is to recognise and to proclaim that there can be no union among people without an internal change in each individual. Personal conversion is the necessary path to harmony between individuals. In Matthew 5:24 we are told that when we are going to the temple to pray, if we have anything against our neighbour, then we must leave our gift before the altar and first be reconciled to our neighbour and only then return to offer our gift.

Consequently, another question concerns what reconciliation involves. Is Paul suggesting that the differences between Jews and Gentiles or Hutu and Tutsi (in the case of the Rwandese) are abolished in the one new humanity which is the Church? Does the author in fact envisage the church as a third entity which replaces both Jews or Gentiles, so that people are no longer Jews or Gentiles, Hutu or Tutsi, but simply Christians? "Markus Barth and William Rader have argued that the new people is not constituted by the Gentiles and Jews but by their common worship of the Father."<sup>9</sup> The new people is not an individual man or woman, but instead the bride of Christ. The new creation therefore consists of Hutu and Tutsi worshipping together in Christ. Both remain Hutu and Tutsi but are reconciled to God and one another through Christ. Here I am really postulating that the reconciliation involves each group.

Reconciliation, however, has profound practical consequences. For Paul the community of the church is a community of people reconciled to one another. This can be seen, for example, in the images that Paul uses for the church community. It is pictured as a body, where each member has its own role to play (I Cor. 12:12); as a family and also as a building (Eph. 2:9f). Paul was convinced that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, that we are agents of that reconciliation and that we live in reconciled communities where people of all races, classes, tribes and countries must live in harmony. Therefore, in the case of Rwandese, the first thing needed is a new look at the Gospel in order to attain self understanding and self-identity in a church based

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Banks, *Reconciliation and Hope* (London: The Paternoster Press, 1994) 116.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Michael Hurley, *op cit*, p. 39.



on the Gospel of the cross. There are prophetic voices in Rwanda articulating this need, and Christian communities are waiting for the church to wake up and get effectively involved in their daily struggle against sin in a more meaningful way.

A social analysis, or an appropriate reading of the signs of the times, is not an intellectual pastime or luxury. Just as Jesus perceived the goodness of people, and challenged the structures of oppression in his day, so must we do likewise. The Christian communities must be involved in promoting education for peace and reconciliation. What is needed is that we create a new mentality for peace and reconciliation. The churches must become forums for discussion by the Christians of the people's realities and what Gospel responses are proper. As part of this education for peace and reconciliation, definite ways of handling difficult situations on the local level must be offered.

It is true that the possibility of being genuinely open to reconciliation on the vertical level is prepared for and facilitated by human choices and attitudes that actively seek reconciliation on the horizontal level. As you wish that men would do to you, do so to them (Lk. 6:31). On the other hand, loving others and showing practical concern for all in need is the outcome of a relationship with God. This is reinforced in the parable of the good Samaritan, where Jesus defines our neighbour as anyone who is in need, rather than simply one who is a compatriot.

Throughout Paul's theology, there is a strong emphasis on reconciliation, God's reconciliation of the world to himself, with the subsequent reconciliation of people to one another. The horizontal aspect of reconciliation flows out of the vertical, the human from the divine. Reconciliation really matters because it touches human lives and changes human hearts. Churches must work with patience and courage in the process of rebuilding trust and mutual acceptance, of moving from despair to hope, from misinformation to admitting the truth, from revenge and hatred toward forgiveness and reconciliation. Jesus' mission in life was to bring about that reconciliation through his ministry and to help it operate in practice through works of pastoral concern.

## **JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION**

Reconciliation is the key word of Paul's Gospel. If, however, reconciliation is an interpretative key to Paul's theology and the chief theme or centre of his missionary and pastoral thought and practice, then to do it justice, one would have to consider all of Paul's theology. There is no contradiction in the relationship between justice and reconciliation in the context of a consideration of justice. In the case of Rwanda, the question which arises is how people can live with one another after what they did to one another? How

can one live with those who refuse even to recognise as wrong the crime that they have perpetrated? How can one live with those who continue to will the original wrong and refuse to accept forgiveness for what they still rejoice in? Finally, how can one live with those who cannot believe in forgiveness or who cannot accept it as they recognise the seriousness of what they have done? Therefore, must one not demand appropriate punishment for the so-called criminals? And if so, is this kind of demand compatible with Christian forgiveness and reconciliation? People in contemporary Rwanda insist on justice as necessary, but is it a sufficient condition for the growth of community?

Surely it is wrong to ignore the injustice committed against one group. One knows only too well in the context of Rwanda how talk about reconciliation sounds hollow unless basic issues of justice are addressed. It may not always be possible to waive this step. Some crimes may have to be punished, even in the context of a sincere willingness to forgive.

At least three reasons indicate that such punishments are necessary. First, a society needs to express formally through punishment of malefactors its recognition of crimes committed and its abhorrence of them. Second, only in punishing certain heinous crimes and restraining criminal elements is the wholeness of community restored. Third, punishment may be crucial to deterring other would-be criminals and so to maintaining proper order. In the case of Rwanda, where guilt has been so widespread, where two communities live so closely with one another, and where over several generations crimes have been committed by one group against the other, it will take fine political and moral judgement to balance the right to try and punish killers against the restraint that may enable the communities to live together again. In this case justice is being limited for the sake of other values such as order, peace, reconciliation.

## CONCLUSION

Reconciliation is difficult. In Rwanda, some people cannot forgive and have turned away from the structured church to a faith that is no longer connected to the past. Others try to preach forgiveness and, even more difficult, to practice it. "I will try to ask God how to forgive" says a priest at the Roman Catholic Cathedral of St. Michel in Kigali.<sup>10</sup> Now there has to be a new start, a new way to proclaim the Gospel. There is much to be done in the church. People have told me they will not enter churches in which people were killed. This makes me sad because many people have been killed in churches. The church as church, as well as individual Christians, need to be radically different

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<sup>10</sup> Hugh McCullum, *The Angels Have Left Us. The Rwanda Tragedy and the Churches* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994) 70.

from the church which was paralysed because it was tied too closely to political powers to be prophetic. Ultimately, it is the people of God and especially their leaders inside Rwanda who must be healed and reconciled. The Bible does not know Hutu or Tutsi, neither should we. That is why we have to work to forgive as we have to work to see truth, win freedom, respect justice, establish peace, and grow in love. This is what the Scriptures refer to when they place the cross of Christ at the centre of God's gift of forgiveness.

If reconciliation involves the transformation of a relationship of enmity into friendship, then two crucial elements must cohere to effect a full reconciliation. First there must be clear recognition of offence, sin and injustice. In this context it is right to name injustice, protest against it, and call for its removal. Secondly, there must be an unconditional offer of forgiveness. Unconditional because it is central in Jesus' life. This is gratuitous and is clearly a matter of love. This is the kind of forgiveness God extends to us. We are asked to extend it to one another (Matt. 18:21-22). It is a wonderful gift, an expression of love which can remake the past that has gone wrong and create an even stronger relationship for the future. We must also note that forgiveness, repentance, penitence, mercy, and compassion are steps on the way to reconciliation and to peace. "Reconciliation too grows stronger where forgiveness is not only given but made known."<sup>11</sup> The challenge at this beginning of the third millennium for Rwandese is to by-pass the ethnic conflict and to redress the imbalance created by the past.

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<sup>11</sup> James O'Connell, "The Essence of Forgiveness," *Month CCLV* (September/October 1995) 354-358.