

On the Horizontal Dimension of Biblical Reconciliation

Reflections on the AU School of Theology Mission Statement

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How appropriate that we reflect on biblical reconciliation during Holy Week 2010. My assignment is to reflect on the horizontal dimension inherent in biblical reconciliation. Both Greg Robertson and I agree that one can only speak separately about the vertical and horizontal dimensions only by confessing first that they, in fact, cannot be separated. For illustrative purposes only do we attempt this today. So I will focus primarily on horizontal relationships with others, while always dependent on the truth that they emerge out of God's prior actions through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, for the benefit of all God's good but fallen creation.

The focus on relationships with others begins even in Genesis, with the stories of the creation and the fall. Genesis highlights the intrinsically relational character inherent in the creation accounts. In Genesis 1:26-2:3, the Lord God intends to create man and woman in God's image and likeness, male and female he created them. Whatever else it might mean to be created in the image and likeness of God, one significant feature of image and likeness is relationship—a mutuality of relationship.

After God created everything, God called it “very good.” That is, everything functioned as God intended it to function. At the creation, there is an ordered or harmonic peace in the midst of diversities. The relationship includes, besides mutual relations between male and female, a stewardship relationship with the rest of creation—a stewardship derived from and anchored in God's ongoing relationship to all of God's creation.

In the second creation account [Genesis 2:4b-25], the Lord God formed/shaped man [*Adam*] out of the dust of the ground [*Adamah*], breathed into his nostrils God's own breath and man became a living soul. This man named all the animals brought to him. Yet, he had no helper or help-meet like himself. So God, according to the text, forms from the rib of man a helper suitable to him, which the man [*ish*] called “woman” [*ishah*]. The Hebrew terms themselves testify to the narrative, since the term for woman is formed off the root for man.

Genesis 3 continues the story by providing an account of the fall of man (sic). The sense of ordered or harmonic peace inherent between God and humans, between humans and the rest of creation is disrupted through disobedience. The Fall reminds us of the consequences of this primal sin. Specifically, God judges sin and sin's ruptures of fundamental relationships: (1) between God and humans; (2) between humans and one another; (3) between humans and the rest of creation; and (4) within humans themselves.

Further, God's grace expands to meet the expansion of human alienation and brokenness—distortions pervasive in human and nonhuman relationships. The prophets of Israel, for example, embrace in part the theme of *shalom*, God's comprehensive peace and wholeness in all dimensions of life. *Shalom*, a central theme or subtext in the Old Testament story, is not simply the absence of war, violence and conflict, but the very presence of God's righteousness and justice in the midst of human relationships.

It is my sense that the story of God with us cannot be narrated truthfully or completely without the depth of relationship God embodies and desires for all God's creation. Thus, in the person of Jesus Christ, God offers him as One who ushers in the kingdom of God—a new social reality where God's will and life is being done and lived out not only in heaven but on earth. This Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ becomes central in the New Testament. The Gospels, Epistles, the historical, and apocalyptic books all testify to God's desire for us to be related rightly to God and to others—our neighbors. The Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-

20 is grounded in the Great Commandment in Matthew 22:37-40, which Jesus articulates by quoting two passages in the first or the Old Testament.

Greg Robertson spoke well to the nature of the Gospel's message of God's reconciling action in Jesus Christ. Ephesians 4:3 reminds us that we are to "maintain" or "make every effort" to maintain the unity of the Spirit [i.e., the unity that the Spirit creates among believers] in the bond of peace.

More specifically, three Greek verbs [*apokatallasso*, *diallasso*, and *katallasso*] and one noun [*katallage*] establish firm bases in support of reconciliation in the New Testament, especially in Paul's letters. There are significant nuances to which these terms point, but for sake of brevity, let me summarize their main trajectories: (1) God created us to be one—both with God and with each other, and with all of creation (Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:11-22; 4:4-6); (2) God through Jesus tears down the walls that divide us (Eph. 2:11-22; John 4:1-4); (3) God reconciles us to be reconcilers in the world (2 Cor. 5:17-21; John 17:20-24).

So our Mission Statement intends to link us with the overarching mission of God in a hurting world. At the School of Theology, our reason for being grows out of God's loving action through Jesus Christ, encompassing creation, redemption, and re-creation. So we seek to proclaim this truth as Good News for the whole world. Yet, as Ephesians 4:3 and other texts remind us, we are to make every effort to maintain the unity that the Holy Spirit effects in our lives and in God's world. Therefore, the vision of biblical reconciliation (Revelation 7:9-17) compels us to practice or perform what we preach. Ways of thinking and witnessing (acting) (i.e. skills and strategies) are birth from the message of reconciliation.

Among other things, then, in a reconciled community, human needs must and will be addressed (Isaiah 61:1-11; Luke 4:19-20; James 2:1-13). In addition we intend in this community to foster a climate of spiritual robustness to read God's Word, to hear God's Word, to discuss God's Word – all for the purpose of obeying God's Word of peace and reconciliation. This must be a place then where repentance and forgiveness are practiced. As a result of devoting attention to biblical reconciliation, we also intend to facilitate spiritual discernment about faithful practices and to employ critical skills to unmask/uncover false and idolatrous notions about what constitutes true justice, righteousness, peace, and human flourishing in all dimensions of human life. Still further the promotion of reconciliation requires us to acknowledge that the Church and world need graduates who, in the face of changing times and paradigms, will think pastorally and creatively about life, identifying and addressing areas of human division, brokenness, and pain.

Finally, as stewards of God's creation, biblical reconciliation reminds us of our love and care for the rest of God's creation. So the images of biblical reconciliation are suggestive and rich, and their implications are varied and wide. Our teaching/learning community here at the SOT embraces the full dimension of biblical reconciliation in promoting the kind of relationships in the church and world for which God approves.