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[“BIBLICAL RECONCILIATION AS ‘GOD’S ONE-ITEM AGENDA’: BROAD REFLECTIONS ON THE DOCTRINE AND PRACTICE”]

A Response by Dr. Gilbert Lozano, Associate Professor of Biblical Studies, June 25, 2012

“Biblical Reconciliation as ‘God’s One-Item Agenda’: Broad Reflections on the Doctrine and Practice”

Dr. Curtiss Paul DeYoung

Response by Gilbert Lozano, Ph.D.

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Echoing Dr. Samuel Hines, Dr. DeYoung suggests that the overarching theme of the Bible is reconciliation. It is a great challenge to subsume the biblical witness into just one word. To be sure, many have tried. A few decades ago the biblical theology movement failed largely because scholars could not agree on two grounds: (1) Method, namely, how the biblical documents should be explored in order to draw one, encompassing theme. If the documents are studied historically and are then viewed in all their theological diversity and complexity, then, it becomes very difficult if not impossible to speak of a single common theme. (2) The Bible is seen as the product of a long process of theological thinking done by many individuals with particular theological tendencies and inclinations over several centuries. Attempts to harmonize the divergent voices do violence to the text.

A more troubling aspect of this paper, however, is a certain historical naiveté. While it could be argued that bad theology potentially leads to bad practice, as a matter of fact the church does not have a track good record of acting upon its own best theology. In effect, for the most part, Christian praxis has followed the patterns imposed by the larger culture. The Church is a follower and not a trend setter. In just about every historical period the Church has lent its support to serve and advance the interests of nations and empires—so much so, that in the last two thousand years Christians have often found each other on opposite firing lines, with God simply being used to sanction each other’s violence.

For that reason, what is needed is not more words (*theo-logy*) but more practice (*praxis*). It would be desirable if Christians were to act on what they *already* know. DeYoung actually realizes

that this is the real crux of the matter when he says, “The difficulty was found primarily in the area of human relationships rather than in an inadequate theology. Paul regularly reminded congregations in his letters that the power of the socially constructed divisions in their society had already been eliminated through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ...” (p. 7). The problem is that in every generation Christian people keep falling into this trap, namely, they see themselves more as members of their individual communities—clubs, political parties, cities or nations—rather than as members of a universal institution that transcends all known boundaries. If we were to act upon the realization that our primary allegiance is to Christ and the church universal, then, that understanding would be truly revolutionary, and it would profoundly alter social and political landscapes.

DeYoung also privileges some texts by Paul, such as Gal 3:28, “There is no longer Jew or Greek ... for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” This text, however, comes from the same pen that wrote: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.” (Rom 13:1) In fact, the latter text has the pedigree of having been used more than other text by those who favor authority and force. The trouble with this, of course, is that governments often have policies that go against reconciliation, as when they call people to go to war, and mobilize the resources in order to implement it. In modern nation-states individuals see themselves primarily as members of those national entities to the detriment of any other identity. As Robert Barron has suggested, allegiance to the nation-state has often meant that Christians have taken the lives of their fellow human beings, often other Christians:

Stanley Hauerwas ... has on his office door a sign that reads: 'A modest proposal for peace, Christians stop killing other Christians.' ... Between 1914 and 1945, millions of British, American, French, Russian, German, and Italian Christians went at one another murderously. One presumes that the overwhelming majority of these warriors had heard Christ's command to love even your enemies and that they had been formed according to the doctrine of the mystical body of Christ. Yet, when the moment of truth arrived, they

chose to place national loyalty above spiritual conviction, attacking other members of the body of Christ for political ends.¹

For this reason, for Christians a bolder and more radical approach is to follow or to privilege the teachings of Christ. Unfortunately, however, this is not the case. Yet, our allegiance to Christ trumps every other allegiance, including the allegiance to the nation-state. A first major step would be acting out as children of God by following the beatitudes. But before developing this a bit more, I want to visit briefly the ethic supported by the Decalogue found in Exodus, and which provides the theological basis for well-functioning societies.

The first tablet, dealing with commandments 1-4, deals with the individual's relationship with God. The second tablet, commandments 5-10, deals with proper human relationships. What this indicates is that there is an intricate connection between proper human relationships that derives from a proper relationship with God. This is quite a salutary way of understanding the proper functioning of human communities. On the one hand, the first and foremost relationship is that between God and persons. That, in turn, is followed by proper relationships with others, where the rights and individualities of others are respected and not trampled upon.

Moreover, a set of instructions for the community of followers of Jesus is found in Matt 5:3-12. It contains only nine instructions. It is clear that Matthew sees Jesus as uttering the laws for his community. Here we find some radical instructions, but there is nothing within the text suggesting that they are not to be taken literally: "Blessed are the meek ... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness ... Blessed are the merciful ... Blessed are the pure in heart ... Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." It seems that the Beatitudes set forth a broad agenda that is not easily subsumed into any one word. On the one hand, the Beatitudes recognize the reality of the world in which Jesus' disciples will be persecuted, reviled and accused unjustly. At the same time, the Beatitudes point out the attitudes expected of the followers of Jesus,

¹ Robert Barron, *The Strangest Way: Walking the Christian Path* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 153.

namely, a right attitude of spirit (“poor in spirit”), meekness, mercy, singularity of heart, and an inclination towards peacemaking. To be sure, these are the features of a discipleship marked by a radicalism which upsets the order of the world.

Finally, I found helpful DeYoung’s turn toward spiritual disciplines as necessary in order to train people for reconciliation. It should not come as a surprise that practicing reconciliation or being a peacemaker is hard work. The resources necessary to respond to a world rid with violence are massive. Practicing reconciliation requires acquiring skills and attitudes that will form a tempered character consonant with deeply-held spiritual traits rooted in one’s relationship with God.