

# From Discord To Concord

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## SUMMARY

In this article the author examines vertical and horizontal dimensions of the doctrine of reconciliation. Starting with current self-understanding of Western culture of her need (or better lack of need) to be reconciled with God, he goes on to prove the great relevance of this doctrine. Maintaining the primacy of the vertical dimension, he

points out that reconciliation is not only mutual but also dual in the sense that it is a reconciliation between man and God and a reconciliation between man and man. Thus the divine gift of reconciliation becomes the human responsibility to be reconciled both with God and with other people. The article concludes with several practical examples of reconciliation in post-war and post-communist European contexts.

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## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

In diesem Artikel untersucht der Autor vertikale und horizontale Dimensionen der Lehre von der Versöhnung. Startpunkt ist das gegenwärtige Selbstverständnis der westlichen Kultur in Bezug auf ihre gefühlte Notwendigkeit (oder besser die gefühlte Abwesenheit der Notwendigkeit) der Versöhnung mit Gott. Von da aus schreitet der Autor zum Erweis der großen Relevanz dieser Lehre. Obwohl er das Primat der vertikalen Dimension beibehält, stellt er

heraus, dass Versöhnung nicht nur gegenseitig ist sondern auch eine doppelte Ebene hat: Versöhnung zwischen Mensch und Gott und Versöhnung zwischen Mensch und Mensch. Damit wird das göttliche Geschenk der Versöhnung zur menschlichen Verantwortung, sowohl mit Gott als auch mit anderen Menschen versöhnt zu sein. Der Artikel schließt mit mehreren praktischen Beispielen für Versöhnung in europäischen Kontexten der Nachkriegszeit und der Zeit nach dem Kommunismus.

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## RÉSUMÉ

Dans cet article, l'auteur traite de la doctrine de la réconciliation avec sa dimension verticale et sa dimension horizontale. Ayant exposé de quelle façon la culture occidentale actuelle considère son besoin de réconciliation avec Dieu (ou plutôt l'absence de ce besoin), il s'efforce de montrer la pertinence de cette doctrine. Tout en maintenant que la dimension verticale est première, il souli-

gne que la réconciliation n'est pas seulement mutuelle, mais qu'elle comporte aussi deux aspects, la réconciliation entre l'homme et Dieu et la réconciliation entre humains. Ainsi, le don divin de la réconciliation devient la responsabilité humaine d'entrer en réconciliation avec Dieu et avec d'autres hommes. L'auteur donne ensuite quelques exemples de réconciliation dans le contexte européen post-communiste d'après guerre.

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The FEET conference hosted by the International Baptist Theological Seminary in Prague compelled me – among other things – to base my contribution on the works of Arthur B. Crabtree,<sup>1</sup> former professor of IBTS and Jan Milíč Lochman,<sup>2</sup> former professor of KEBF in Prague, both of whom made an excellent contribution to our theme.

Reconciliation is a mutual affair. God is reconciled to people as he lays aside his wrath and turns

to them in grace, and people are reconciled to God as they lay aside their waywardness and turn to God in obedience. Then this process is to be translated from the vertical perspective of the broken and restored relationship between God and people into the horizontal perspective of relationship among people. This transformation of relationship takes place by the initiative of the offended party and by the appropriate response of the offender. Now a



change of relationship implies three things: an old relationship, a new relationship, and the transformation of the one into the other which in this case is called reconciliation.

## 1. The Old Relationship

The old relationship is conditioned by sin. And here comes our major difficulty. Apologists, evangelists, counsellors and sociologists are all confirming that ours is a sinless society. The hardest thing today is not to prove the existence of God, the deity of Jesus Christ and other major Christian doctrines, but the sinfulness of people. Meic Pearse in his penetrating evaluation of western culture speaks of 'corporate guilt' but 'personal sinlessness'.<sup>23</sup> 'Human rights are not the correlative of obligations, as its defenders might claim, but the converse; instead of being a mirror-image way of expressing duties, it is – in its cumulative effects, even if not explicitly – a denial of them.'<sup>24</sup> Thus saying 'I have a right to...' is just a cover up for 'I want to...' But with no sense of obligations people have lost their sense of personal sin. 'Human beings have been ducking responsibility since Eden; it is only our own generation that has had the ingenuity to reject it as a category. We have no need of a Saviour; in our own minds, at least, we are already perfect.'<sup>25</sup> Responsibility was handed over to corporate institutions – first of all the government – and private life has assumed the unencumbered right to individual autonomy. David Wells is right in his warning that 'if we abandon our moral obligations and indulge our "right" to do and say whatever we want, we will have to live in a society that is trivialized, emptied out, and increasingly more dangerous and inhospitable.'<sup>26</sup> And he goes on to point out that 'this is the first time that a civilization has existed that, to a significant extent, does not believe in objective right and wrong. We are travelling blind, stripped of our moral compass.'<sup>27</sup> To be sure, we continue to sin also in the 21st century. What has disappeared is not sin itself but our cultural capacity to understand it.

On this background we need to provide a general, non-technical but comprehensive definition of sin. We may adopt Cornelius Plantinga's definition which points to the context of our subject of reconciliation. 'Sin, then, is any agential evil for which some person (or group of persons) is to blame. In short, sin is culpable *shalom*-breaking.'<sup>28</sup> In theological terms sin means missing the mark by turning from God's grace and glory, turning from his ways

to one's own. It means pride rather than humility, disobedience rather than obedience, autonomy rather than theonomy, freedom *from* God instead of freedom *for* God.

This turning away from God cannot remain without its consequences. It alienates us from God. As it alienates us from him, it alienates him from us, 'but it also alienates us from our fellow men, turning families into feuds, friends into foes, concord into conflict, amity into enmity. And in this alienation from God and from one another, we find ourselves alienated from ourselves.'<sup>29</sup> Nietzsche, Sartre and Camus knew this alienation only too well. For Heidegger it is a *Sein zum Tode* but for the apostle Paul it was a living death.<sup>10</sup> And he also knew its cause – sin.<sup>11</sup> According to J. Atkinson: 'The human situation is like that of a man trapped in a bog: unless somebody comes along to give power and leverage from a base firmer than his, he will go under.'<sup>12</sup> The ultimate outcome of this old relationship for us is being 'punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power.'<sup>13</sup> The old relationship may be explained partly as pollution, partly as the breaking of the law and slavery to evil.<sup>14</sup>

Without a clear understanding of ultimate seriousness of this old relationship the gospel is not an ultimately good news and the need of reconciliation is not necessary. This old relationship of man and God (vertical), and man and man (horizontal) is changed by the saving action of God through Christ and the Spirit.

## 2. The New Relationship

Man in conversion (*metanoia*) is turned toward God instead of away from God. He now looks toward God instead of away from him, moves toward God instead of away from him. His life becomes theocentric rather than egocentric. This brings a new freedom (*eleutheria*) which is a freedom *for* God rather than freedom *from* God. It is freedom from the guilt and power of sin, from wrath and condemnation of God, from bondage to the devil, from dread and fear and despair, from emptiness and meaninglessness, from death and hell. It is freedom for God's grace and glory, his pardon and power, his presence and service. It is the liberty of the children of God. This is nothing less than adoption (*huiiothesia*) and regeneration (*palingenesia*) as children of God. Once more we belong to the family of God, which is the king-



dom of God (*basileia tou theou*). The kingdom of God is the righteousness of God (*dikaiosune theou*). The relationship of God and man is set right again as we trust God as Father and serve him as King. This right relationship is the work of God and the gift of God.<sup>15</sup> The biblical concept of justification (*dikaiosune theou*) should be understood in forensic sense.<sup>16</sup> A. E. McGrath points out: 'The concept of justification and the doctrine of justification must be carefully distinguished... The church has chosen to subsume its discussion of the reconciliation of man to God under the aegis of justification, thereby giving the concept an emphasis quite absent from the New Testament.'<sup>17</sup> The doctrinal development has taken up a more dynamic sense. Thus even for the Reformed theologian O. Weber, is justification God's *Zuspruch* of forgiveness as well as God's strong *Anspruch* on our whole life.<sup>18</sup>

To be brought into a right relationship with God is to be reconciled with God (*katallage*). A formerly hostile, strained and discordant relationship becomes now friendly, relaxed and harmonious. God and man are now at one. There is, however, no equality between them. This reconciliation is mutual in the sense that God is reconciled to man and man is reconciled to God. God lays aside his wrath and turns to man in grace, and man lays aside his waywardness of unfaith and turns to God in the obedience of faith.

Reconciliation is not only mutual but also dual in the sense that it is a reconciliation between man and God *and* a reconciliation between man and man. The same thing (reconciliation) has two dimensions – vertical and horizontal. It cannot be one without being the other. This means that we can be reconciled to God only as we are reconciled to our fellow men. That is why Jesus teaches us to pray: 'Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.'<sup>19</sup> We are to forgive one another just as God forgave us,<sup>20</sup>

But God forgives us as we forgive one another.<sup>21</sup> We are reconciled to one another as we are reconciled to God, but we are reconciled to God only as we are reconciled to one another.

When we are reconciled with God we belong to him as Father and as King. We are no longer our own, we are the Lord's as we trust God as children and serve him as subjects. And that is sanctification (*hagiasmos*). Let us only remember that God is either lord of all or not at all. 'We are his, if we are his at all, in every realm and relationship of life; his in solitude and society, his in work and worship, his in duty and leisure, his in the church,

his in the home, his in business, his in society, his in culture.'<sup>22</sup> H. Bonar puts this truth in beautiful rhyme:

So shall no part of day or night  
From sacredness be free;  
But *all my life*, in every step,  
Be fellowship with Thee.

### 3. The Transformation of the Relationship

We shall consider now how is our relationship changed from the old to the new. It is by the initiative of God in grace and the response of man in faith. The divine grace is always both pardoning and transforming. S. Motyer concludes his study of *Righteousness by Faith in the New Testament* saying that 'as men are grasped by it [God's righteousness], "justified" and made acceptable to God, so they are stamped with the image of their righteous Saviour, and summoned to live in imitation of him as his people. "Righteousness" thus becomes a matter of human character and behaviour.'<sup>23</sup> The divine initiative is the act of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. 'The work of the Father is that of commission: commissioning the Son and Spirit to go forth to seek and to save that which was lost. The work of the Son and Spirit is that of mission: going forth at the bidding of the Father to seek and to save that which was lost – and restore it to God.'<sup>24</sup>

The work of Christ in restoring us to God is his whole redeeming work. Evangelicals sometimes make the mistake of locating it solely in the cross.<sup>25</sup> The cross is indeed the focal point of this restoration of man to God, 'for Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.'<sup>26</sup> But the cross is only part of the work of Christ for our restoration to God.

The whole embraces his incarnation, in which he became man for us men and for our salvation; his baptism, in which he identified himself with the sinners he came to save; his temptation in which he resisted all attempts to save them apart from this identification; his ministry, in which he both pardoned sins and transformed the sinners; his death, in which he bore the penalty of sin for us (on our behalf and in our stead); his resurrection, in which he rose to justify us (Rom. 4. 25); his ascension and exaltation, in which he reigns over his own and continued intercession for us and his return, in which he will finally vindicate us and dwell with us for ever in the



joy and glory of the kingdom. His work is one integral whole, past, present and future... It is only true to say that he who has saved us is still saving us, and will continue to save us – as long as we let ourselves be saved.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, the work of the Spirit in restoring us to God is his whole work: the work of the Spirit in baptism and ministry of the Lord, the work of the Spirit in mediating Christ to us through the outward witness of the church in her ministry of word and sacraments, and through the inward witness of the Spirit, testifying with our spirit that we are God's children.

Crabtree's emphasis on God's pardoning and transforming grace is important also for us if we are to keep the proper balance. 'If the Augustinian-Catholic tradition has erred in partially obscuring the pardoning aspect of grace, the Lutheran-Protestant tradition has equally erred in partially obscuring the transforming aspect of grace... God rectifies the relationship of the sinner to himself both by pardoning the sin and by transforming the sinner.'<sup>28</sup>

How do we receive this grace? Through faith, obviously. But only through a living faith that believes the gospel, trusts in Christ and obeys his will. For the faith that believes but does not trust and obey is a faith of demons.<sup>29</sup> A faith that believes and trusts but fails to obey is the faith of prattlers.<sup>30</sup> We receive the divine grace of reconciliation exclusively by a faith expressing itself through love.<sup>31</sup> This faith alone justifies us in the sight of God and transforms our whole relationship to God and to our neighbour. Thus Crabtree rightly warns us 'against the careless use of the phrase "justification by faith alone."<sup>32</sup> Yes, we are justified by faith alone but that faith is never alone. This is the only faith that brings us into a right relationship with God, with others and with ourselves. Therefore our prayer remains: Lord increase our faith that works through love!

#### 4. Commission and mission of reconciliation

We have already said that the work of God the Father in reconciliation was that of commission – sending his Son and Spirit to search and save that which has been lost. The work of the Son and Spirit was that of mission. The same pattern applies to us: 'God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, gave us the ministry of reconcilia-

tion.'<sup>33</sup> J. M. Lochman is one of few dogmatists paying attention to the ethical dimension of the doctrine of reconciliation.<sup>34</sup> He takes reconciliation as a priority from Jesus' admonition: 'Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.'<sup>35</sup> Even at the most solemn moment the necessity for reconciliation takes priority. In this context Jesus says that to fulfill the sixth commandment is not enough to avoid anger and cursing. 'The radical will of God is satisfied only by "reconciliation". The "murderer", therefore, is not just one who commits murder nor even one who is angry, but also the one who neglects and despises opportunities of reconciliation and who, by that very failure, is already under suspicion of murder and accused of murder.'<sup>36</sup> Because reconciliation is as creative as murder is destructive, the Christian ethic is an ethic of reconciliation.

Reconciliation receives his binding features from the Christ event, therefore it cannot be extended at will and there is no place for appeasement, spurious peace which avoids conflicts and conceals real tensions. Biblical ministry of reconciliation is alert to the demonic strategies of the principalities and powers and refuses to capitulate to them. 'A genuine Christian ministry of reconciliation will be characterized by a hopeful and inventive realism.'<sup>37</sup>

While the ministry of reconciliation is personal, it is also concerned with conditions and systems. New Testament epistles demonstrate that reconciliation between individuals and groups is important. Reconciliation bestowed in Christ has direct implications in personal relationships and if the life of the Church. *Carmen Christi*<sup>38</sup> is sent into the context of tensions within the Christian community at Philippi.

The light of reconciliation shines in on the human – only too human – life of the congregations and is meant to operate there with transforming, renewing and, in fact, reconciling power... In the long run the Church of Christ can never be content to establish itself as a permanently structured and self-enclosed entity based on the divisions of race, nationality, culture and sex. It is the Body of Christ, an organic unity composed of many members.<sup>39</sup>

We as evangelicals should especially heed Lochman's call for 'ecumenical order of reconciliation'



and consider what does this mean for our divided Christendom, our warring denominations, our hate-filled Christians, our segregated churches?

However, our ministry of reconciliation cannot be confined to the inner life of the Church. That mission is for the world – including the world of politics and economics. Thankfully, the Church does not lack positive examples in her past (Mennonites, Quakers, Brethren Church). The Barmen Declaration (1934) from the Nazi Germany and *Aktion Sühnezeichen* from the post-war Germany as well as the Fellowship of Reconciliation of Northern Ireland are just a few examples from the more recent history.

To close my paper let me offer an insight into our post-Communist experience from Czech and Slovak Republics. The non-violent way of removing the totalitarian regime (1989) was widely appreciated and thus named as 'Velvet Revolution.' However, relating the process to the above outlined doctrine of reconciliation and reflecting on the results of the past 17 years, we should have learned to apply consequently 4 major dynamics of the process of reconciliation outlined by D. Shriver:<sup>40</sup> First is abandonment of revenge by the victims (churches and dissidents) and abandonment of innocence by the perpetrators (Communists). Second is the provision of context of public hope for reconciliation as the basis for the uncovering of public truth about an evil past. Such context was there but the uncovering of evil past is extremely slow. Third is the finding of a new empathy between former enemies. Those who caricatured each other as somehow subhuman are brought together as fellow human beings rather than political and economic forces. Fourth is the move from apology to reparation. Material reparations cannot unmake wrongs, but they can be symbolic of restored relationships and new intent. The recent establishment of Nation's Memory Institute with some of the above mentioned goals is a step in right direction but rather late in coming.

G. Aulen in his *Christus Victor* has demonstrated powerfully that the gospel of reconciliation is not separated from the world of the principalities and powers but actually related to it. For us today, this means that even at the level of power politics and apocalyptic threats to the human race, Christians must do their thinking in the light of the atonement. The message of reconciliation can and must be transposed into political and economic terms.<sup>41</sup> The message of reconciliation must not only be spoken, but also what is said must have the effect

of releasing the debtor or the transgressor from the debt. Christian peacemakers are called to seek reconciliation in situations of conflict without softening their opposition to the injustices that exist. We are motivated by our Christian faith and biblical vision, but this does not mean that we cannot work with those from different faiths or none at all. As all humanity is created in the image of God we can expect to share common points of ethical concern with those from different faith-communities. Moreover, in the Christian understanding of God as Trinity, the call to reconciliation is authorized by Father, carried out by the Son and empowered by the Spirit. As we respond to the same commission we may expect that our action and relationships will be empowered by the Holy Spirit, too. This not only provides motivation for reconciliation but also provides the basis for constructive action in the world created, redeemed and being moved to its final glory by the triune God.

## Notes

- 1 A. B. Crabtree, *The Restored Relationship; A Study in Justification and Reconciliation*, London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1963.
- 2 J. M. Lochman, *Reconciliation and Liberation; Challenging a One-Dimensional View of Salvation*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980.
- 3 M. Pearse, *Why the Rest Hates the West?* London: SPCK, 2003, p. 76-78.
- 4 Pearse, *Why the Rest Hates the West?* p. 75.
- 5 Pearse, *Why the Rest Hates the West?* p. 78.
- 6 D. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue; Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision*, Leicester: IVP, 1998, p. 9.
- 7 Wells, *Losing Our Virtue*, p. 17.
- 8 C. Plantinga, Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be; A Breviary of Sin*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996, p. 14.
- 9 Crabtree, *The Restored Relationship*, p. 190.
- 10 Romans 7:10-11.
- 11 Romans 6:23.
- 12 J. Atkinson, 'Justification by Faith: A Truth for Our Times,' In: J. I. Packer & others, *Here We Stand; Justification by Faith*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1986, p. 63.
- 13 2 Thessalonians 1:9.
- 14 See C. E. Gunton, *Actuality of Atonement, A Study of Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988, p. 139. Blocher rightly emphasizes that we need to affirm the organic unity of the variety of biblical representations and shows several ways of doing it. See H. Blocher, 'The Sacrifice of Jesus Christ: The Current Theological Situation,' In: *European Journal of Theology*, 8.1(1999), esp. p. 29-32.



- 15 *The New English Bible* translates 'dikaiousune theou' in Rom. 1:17 as 'God's way of righting wrong' or *The New Living Translation* as 'how God makes us right in his sight.'
- 16 See an excellent argument in D. A. Carson, 'Reflections on Salvation and Justification,' In: *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 40.4(1997), p. 581-608. M. A. Seifrid also provided a very fine comprehensive elaboration in *Christ, our Righteousness; Paul's Theology of Justification*, Leicester: Apollos, 2000.
- 17 A. E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei; A history of the Christian doctrine of Justification* 2 vols. Cambridge: CUP, 1997, p. 1.2.
- 18 O. Weber, *Grundlagen der Dogmatic*, vol. II, Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1962, p. 355-356 commenting on *Declaration of Barmen*, thesis II.
- 19 Matthew 6:12.
- 20 Ephesians 4:32.
- 21 Matthew 6:14-15.
- 22 Crabtree, *The Restored Relationship*, p. 192-193.
- 23 S. Motyer, 'Righteousness by Faith in the New Testament,' in Packer, *Here We Stand*, p. 53-54.
- 24 Crabtree, *The Restored Relationship*, p. 193.
- 25 A few examples are: J. McIntyre, *The Shape of Soteriology*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995, p. 26-52. L. Morris, *The Atonement; Its Meaning and Significance*, Leicester: IVP, 1983. J. Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1961.
- 26 1 Peter 3:18.
- 27 Crabtree, *The Restored Relationship*, p. 194.
- 28 Crabtree, *The Restored Relationship*, p. 194.
- 29 James 2:19.
- 30 Matthew 7:21-23.
- 31 Galatians 5:6.
- 32 Crabtree, *The Restored Relationship*, p. 195.
- 33 2 Corinthians 5:18.
- 34 Lochman, *Reconciliation*, p. 105-112. See also J. Moltmann, 'Versöhnung in Freiheit,' In: *Umkehr zur Zukunft*, and A. E. McGrath, *Studies in Doctrine*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997, p. 437-446.
- 35 Matthew 6:23-24.
- 36 Lochman, *Reconciliation*, p. 106.
- 37 Lochman, *Reconciliation*, p. 108.
- 38 Philippians 2:5-11.
- 39 Lochman, *Reconciliation*, p. 109.
- 40 D. W. Shriver, 'What Is Forgiveness in a Secular Political Form?' In: R. Helmick and R. Peterson (eds.), *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Religion, Public Policy and Conflict*, Radnor: Templeton Foundation Press, 2001, p. 156-165.
- 41 Lochman, *Reconciliation*, passim.

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