



Roadmap to Reconciliation

Moving Communities into Unity,
Wholeness and Justice

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What Is Reconciliation?

[Reconciliation] is God's language for a broken world.

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What exactly is racial reconciliation? If you asked ten different people, it's likely you'd get ten different answers! At a gathering I attended of national multiethnic leaders¹—pastors, professors, diversity practitioners and leaders of multicultural ministries and denominations—the answer to this question proved quite confusing.

For some, reconciliation meant bringing together a multiethnic group of people who are from similar socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. For others, it meant the pursuit of racial and ethnic diversity but did not include the participation of women in leadership. Still others operated from a model of social empowerment, and for them reconciliation meant that Christians are called to address the discrimination and racism faced by black and Hispanic people in our society.

During the two-day gathering of this elite group, some of whom had written books on the topic of diversity, leaders shared their most poignant beliefs regarding racial reconciliation and best practices for building it. What was most interesting to me, however, was

the lack of agreement among the leaders gathered about the term *reconciliation*. There was no single definition or understanding of what reconciliation actually entails.

Do you see the problem? While many of us care about reconciliation and feel called to pursue it as part of our discipleship, there is no clear understanding of what it means to do so! Even among the leading diversity voices of the day there are vastly different beliefs about what it means to pursue reconciliation. Sure, most of us believe that reconciliation means the ending of hostility in order to bring people together, but we still differ, sometimes wildly, in how we believe God calls us to address and engage it.

DEFINING THE TERM

For a while I sought to come up with a new term altogether. I felt that *reconciliation* had perhaps been overused and too often misunderstood. It seems like many people have developed a bias or preconceived notion about what they believe the term means. For example, some people believe *racial reconciliation* is an oxymoron because there has never been a time in American history where racial harmony has existed. One cannot reconcile those who have never enjoyed a conciliatory relationship in the first place. I agree with that, and I fully understand why this term has been disavowed by many, especially when looking at it from a historical and sociological perspective.

Others have a very negative reaction to the word *reconciliation* for a different reason. They feel fear, guilt or shame when they hear the word because of experiences they've had in the past. Meanwhile, some hold the term in a very positive light. For them it denotes a Christian concept, a biblical call for multiethnicity and cultural integration. They eagerly support the process and want people to be challenged to deal with their racism and prejudicial attitudes. However, their notion of the term rarely extends to confronting and changing unjust systems and structures. Moreover, there are those

who shy away from the term because it carries the connotation of a "liberal agenda" or the complaints of a vocal minority with no real basis in fact. Whatever the reason, it's challenging to change our thinking and accept a new set of meanings, and I wondered if we might be better off with a new term altogether.

I considered the term *intercultural competence*, but while I could appreciate some of the added clarity it offered, the word *competence* implies that a person can become proficient and the task can be completed. I believe that reconciliation is an ongoing journey, and *intercultural competence* puts an overemphasis on "doing" rather than "being." So I moved on to *cultural credibility* and then later to *intercultural integrity*, hoping to home in on the dynamic interchange between people who are ethnically and culturally different. However, it still lacked something fundamental to my understanding of the term *reconciliation*.

Among those who seek to follow Christ, it is generally understood that in order for reconciliation to occur, there must be repentance, justice and forgiveness. A wrong must be acknowledged and the cause for the lack of unity identified. There is no sustained peace without justice and no sustained relationship without forgiveness. These are crucial in this conversation, yes, but I do not believe that justice and forgiveness alone are enough to produce reconciliation. As with the phrases *intercultural competence* and *intercultural integrity*, something central is still lacking because the church is called to go beyond even this. We are called to go beyond simply making peace or getting enemies to stop fighting—beyond repentance, justice and forgiveness. The Bible invites us further.

Reconciliation is about how to relate even after forgiveness and justice have occurred. It's about how to delve even deeper into relationship with one another. An absence of hostility is possible without a spiritual dimension, but reconciliation is not. Reconciliation is possible only if we approach it primarily as a spiritual process that requires a posture of hope in the reconciling work of

Christ and a commitment from the church to both be and proclaim this type of reconciled community.

REDEFINING THE TERM

With this more complete appreciation and understanding of reconciliation I have come full circle. Since reconciliation is a biblical concept that is rooted in and modeled by the reconciling work of Jesus, I have chosen to reclaim the term instead of replacing it. I want to redeem it and recover its holistic, mysterious and profoundly biblical meaning. It invites us into the bigger story of God's redemptive work in the world. For the purpose of this book and all following conversation, I therefore offer this new definition of the term *reconciliation*:

Reconciliation is an ongoing spiritual process involving forgiveness, repentance and justice that restores broken relationships and systems to reflect God's original intention for all creation to flourish.

This definition acknowledges the historical wounds that must be healed and transcends an individualistic view to include the need for systemic injustice to be addressed as well. However, it is also rooted in a biblical understanding of God, which is why we must take a close look at the theological principles that undergird it.

THEOLOGY MATTERS

Did you know that apartheid in South Africa was based in large part on theological doctrines that were formed at Stellenbosch University in the 1930s and 1940s? Isn't that chilling? Many of the intellectuals at the university took part in the theoretical formulation of Afrikaner nationalism, and the distorted Christian theology that disseminated from Stellenbosch Seminary informed and fueled many Afrikaners' belief that they were God's chosen people. They saw themselves as biologically superior to other races and therefore

called to create a new segregated society that would allow them to civilize other people while not tainting themselves with the "darkness and barbarism" of those inferior groups.

These doctrines gave the white South Africans religious justification for *horrific* crimes against their countrymen and women. More than 3.5 million black, Indian and biracial people were removed from their homes in what was one of the largest mass removals in modern history. Nonwhite political representation was obliterated. Black South Africans were denied citizenship and relegated to the slums called "bantustans." The government segregated education, medical care, beaches and other public services, providing black, Indian and other "colored" people with significantly inferior services. The result was a segregated society where people were dehumanized based on beliefs that were supported by bad theology.

That's why it's crucial that our theology be sound. *Our theology matters!* Those who worked to construct a theological case for apartheid understood that a system of thought cloaked in biblical language would give persuasive force to their segregated system. Our theology informs our anthropology, which in turn informs our sociology. That is to say, what we believe about God will tell us what we believe about people; and what we believe about people will tell us what kinds of communities and societies we believe we should strive to create.

THE CULTURAL MANDATE

So let's press in to our theology of reconciliation. It starts in Genesis 1:28 with what is known as "the cultural mandate," or the command to fill the earth. Here we see that variation was one of God's creational motives from the outset. The creation account reveals God's desire for the earth to be filled with a great diversity of races and peoples.

The first human beings were directed to fill the earth and bring it under the reign of God. To achieve this, people would need to procreate and multiply in number, and this would make it necessary

for them to move out and migrate throughout the earth. As this migration took place, these nomads would begin to encounter different types of environmental conditions, and as they adapted to their surroundings, different cultural lifestyles would start to emerge. For example, a group encountering a particular soil condition would need to grow and eat crops that were specific to that particular region's soil and climate. This would require them to develop different farming, hunting and cooking methods.

Migration would also mean that as a group of people encountered weather conditions that were new to them, they would need to adapt, wearing clothes and building houses suitable for their particular environment. So the result of God's command to fill the earth would be *difference*. Different stories. Different words. Different myths, songs, styles of communication, food, clothing . . .

The development of different cultures didn't take God by surprise! This is what the triune God intended from the beginning. Cultural difference and diversity was always a part of God's original plan for human beings. When God commanded the first human beings to "fill the earth," it was a decree to create cultures, because no one culture, people or language can adequately reflect the splendor of God.

THE TOWER OF BABEL

Multiplication and migration are proceeding well until we get to the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11. While this narrative admittedly does not offer enough depth to support a full theology of language and culture, it does provide us with a window into an encounter between the Godhead and humanity in which the nature of each is further revealed. It also provides us a place to do theological inquiry in response to the story of the text. Take a look:

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words.
And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain

in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the LORD said, "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech." So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth. (Genesis 11:1-9)

At first glance, this story may seem to suggest that God is insecure or intimidated by human progress. Or it might be looked upon as a functional story that explains how humankind gained diverse languages. Still others might see the resulting diversity as a punitive curse from God. All of these interpretations, however, would be a superficial understanding of the text, particularly when we read it with the cultural mandate from Genesis 1 in mind.

The kinship group that we encounter in Genesis 11 was refusing to migrate any further. They refused to fill the earth with the *imago Dei*. They chose instead to disregard the diversifying process and hold fast to their homogeneity. They wanted to make a name for themselves, and to think that the Godhead was threatened by this is not consistent with a full understanding of God's character and the original intent for a diverse humanity. To view culture and ethnicity

as simply consequences of sin obscures the larger purpose of God and distorts the role of diversity in human relationships. God's response to the people's refusal to migrate in Genesis 11 was to confuse their language and scatter them in order to bring about the divine will and original purpose for humanity, which is to fill the earth with the glory of God.

TODAY'S TOWERS

The inclination to build a tower was a metaphorical attempt to institute a new source of power carved out of human mastery and imagination. The tower was sort of a totem, a visual symbol that could reify the formation of a new civilization—an oblique icon of human superiority. This new civilization would exemplify human proficiency and efficacy and would rival the world order that God intended. The threat to the Godhead was both systemic and symbolic, and it continues to this day.

Where do we see this playing out today? Our world is diverse now, to be sure, but don't we still cling to those who look like us? Do we not still lean in the direction of sameness and homogeneity?

Look at our churches, where groups of people who look *just* like each other come together every week.

Look at the way we demand that others speak *our* language and eat *our* food.

Look at the way we huddle together with those who share our religious, social and political viewpoints.

Look at the organizational systems and structures we build that explicitly or implicitly reward those who are like us and exclude, discriminate or disadvantage those who are not.

These are contemporary examples of how we, like those at the Tower of Babel, use our human ingenuity, intellect, creativity and technology to establish structures for ourselves and rebel against God's plan to bless all people. God resists our empire-building tendency toward homogeneity and causes us to realize our human

limitations. This forces us to recognize our interdependence with others and our need for reconciliation. It challenges us to reengage with the divine, cultural mandate so that all the families of the earth can be blessed. We *need* our differences in order to reflect the glory of God, which is our mission and human calling. This was God's original intent in the beginning, and it is still God's will for the human family today.

FROM BABEL TO PENTECOST

Some scholars, such as Anthony C. Thiselton, believe that the story of Babel is continued in the New Testament book of Acts.² Following the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the disciples stayed put in Jerusalem, hiding out. I don't blame them! They stayed right where they were, no doubt in fear that they would meet the same awful fate that befell their leader. So instead of engaging others and mobilizing themselves to spread the good news as Jesus commanded, they sat tight. They waited and they prayed, and they picked new leaders. However, staying put was not a viable long-term strategy or option. They needed to galvanize themselves and move forward, because as long as they stayed in Jerusalem with their own ethnic group, they could rely on their human skills and abilities. In order to fulfill the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations, they would need to move beyond the shelter of their own people, and this would require a power much greater than their personal abilities. They would need to receive the Holy Spirit.

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost signaled the dramatic entry of a new age in human history. Although not the fullness of the kingdom, it was a sign of the kingdom, and it was the empowering of humanity to surrender to the design of God. It was the reception of the Holy Spirit that first offered the church hope of a social and spiritual community composed of people from "every tribe and nation" and unified by the centrality of Christ.

Babel and Pentecost, therefore, provide different examples of a human response to God's command. At Pentecost once again, God came down in response to human behavior and there was confusion. However, this time instead of having a scattering effect, the diverse languages served to bring people together. Through Christ and the Spirit, the walls of separation were brought down. One new humanity has begun.

MOVING THE MANDATE FORWARD

The lesson learned by the disciples at Pentecost applies to us as well. *We cannot* accomplish God's mission in our own ability or strength. If we are to move out beyond the safe and familiar surroundings of our own ethnic groups in order that the church might better reflect the image of God by including people from every tribe and nation, we will need the Spirit of God to empower us.

I pray for the power and the blessing of the Holy Spirit to be upon *you* as you seek to be a part of a community of reconciled people. And I pray for the Holy Spirit to be upon the church as we strive together to live out the meaning of reconciliation and fulfill the mandate to completely fill the earth with the awe-inspiring image of God.

▶ GETTING PRACTICAL

Look up and read aloud the following passages. Choose three of these key passages that provide insight that can help us develop a biblical perspective on diversity.

Genesis 1:27

Numbers 15:15

Isaiah 11:6-9

Matthew 28:18-20

Acts 10:15-16

Acts 10:34-35

Revelation 5:9

Revelation 7:9

Using the biblical passages above, in a sentence or two write your own definition of reconciliation from a biblical point of view.

- Share it with one other person. What would you like to add or change?
- Call out key elements of your definition for all to hear, and then draft a common definition as a group.

Read the following excerpt from the Belhar Confession, which a sister church in South Africa adopted in 1986.³ Circle anything you see that is relevant for your group in particular.

We believe in one holy, universal Christian church, the communion of saints called from the entire human family.

We believe

- that Christ's work of reconciliation is made manifest in the Church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another;
- that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the Church of Jesus Christ;
- that through the working of God's Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain; that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the Church and must be resisted;
- that this unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways: in that we love one another; that we experience, practice and pursue community with

one another; that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another; that we share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and one mind; have one God and Father, are filled with one Spirit, are baptized with one baptism, eat of one bread and drink of one cup, confess one Name, are obedient to one Lord, work for one cause, and share one hope; together come to know the height and the breadth and the depth of the love of Christ; together are built up to the stature of Christ, to the new humanity; together know and bear one another's burdens, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ that we need one another and upbuild one another, admonishing and comforting one another; that we suffer with one another for the sake of righteousness; pray together; together serve God in this world; and together fight against all which may threaten or hinder this unity;

- that this unity can be established only in freedom and not under constraint; that the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the various languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God;
- that true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of this church;

Therefore, we reject any doctrine

- which absolutizes either natural diversity or the sinful separation of people in such a way that this absolutization hinders or breaks the visible and active unity of the church, or even leads to the establishment of a separate church formation;
- which professes that this spiritual unity is truly being maintained in the bond of peace while believers of the same

confession are in effect alienated from one another for the sake of diversity and in despair of reconciliation;

- which denies that a refusal earnestly to pursue this visible unity as a priceless gift is sin;
- which explicitly or implicitly maintains that descent or any other human or social factor should be a consideration in determining membership of the church.

How might you bring this confession into the life of your church or group?