

17th June 2018

2 Corinthians 5.11-6.2

Paul says he has the ministry of reconciliation. What is reconciliation? Why does Paul believe he has it and why should we also be ambassadors for Christ in the ministry of reconciliation?

This week has seen a number of potentially reconciling events.

President Trump was accused at the G7 summit of ‘playing a dangerous game’, as the US government fired the opening shots in a potential transatlantic trade war with some of its closest allies (Europe, Canada and Mexico). ‘ⁱ To many this may seem like the actions of a double-crossing pirate, but in the midst of all this sabre-rattling President Trump was reaching out a hand in peace to Kim Jong-un, North Korea’s Supreme Leader. This is the first time a serving US president has met a North Korean leader, an event made all the more remarkable considering the insults the two world leaders were firing at each other only a year ago.

The main focus of the summit seemed to be nuclear disarmament in North Korea, and commitment to work for

peace in the Korean Peninsula. President Trump described their conversations as ‘honest and direct’ and went on to say that the ‘past does not have to define the future’. However apart from satisfying the narcissistic tendencies of both the leaders for their photo opportunity there doesn’t appear to be a genuine reconciliation- an acknowledgement of wrongs and a coming together as friends, nor did it deliver a programme for de nuclearization but just warm words. Trump brushed off questions about North Korea’s appalling human rights record with perhaps an envious comment that Kim is a young man who had to make hard decisions (and doesn’t have the constraints of democracy).

This week also saw the anniversary of the Grenfell Tower Fire. Moving ceremonies were held to mark the tragedy to help in healing and reconciliation. I read an interview with the Bishop of Kensington, Graham Tomlin,ⁱⁱ who was at the scene within hours of the disaster co-ordinating the churches response. He spoke about how the faith communities worked together and how they didn’t have to parachute themselves in they were already on the ground – the churches, the mosques. He said it was very significant that in those moments people went to the faith centres. ‘We have a motivation for opening our doors: to make sure that we do whatever we can to love our neighbor, not

just to tolerate our neighbor – the person that God has put next door to us, whatever they may look like and whatever they may be like. We are motivated by our belief that every single human being is someone for whom Christ died and who is made in the image of God: valuable, regardless of their background, colour or religion.’ He was asked about the righteous anger of local people after the event and their quest for justice. The Bishop said ‘there is a feeling local that there was an unwritten policy to gentrify the area and gradually neglect social housing because at the end of the day, if we sell off to overseas investors then we can make money out of it. I’m not saying that’s right or wrong – but there is a perception of that in the local area.

There’s been all kinds of speculation as to who was to blame, but the public inquiry has that job to get to the bottom of it. Without the truth, you can’t get to justice, and without justice you can’t get to reconciliation. And that’s the ultimate goal here: reconciliation.

Truth and justice is needed for true reconciliation according to the Bishop.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines reconciliation as a situation in which two people or groups of people become friendly again after they have argued.

The root of reconciliation is the word conciliation, which is the action of stopping someone from being angry. When we have reconciliation, it means that we restore our relationship to one that enables us to be compatible and friendly with one another again.

In the Old Testament the word reconciliation is the Hebrew word *kapar*, (pronounced kaw-far). This is one of the most theologically significant words in the Bible. In addition to reconciliation, *kapar* is also translated into English words such as forgive, purge away, and merciful as well as a few others. By far, the most commonly translated word for *kapar* is the English word atonement.ⁱⁱⁱ

When the word atonement is broken down to its historical parts (at -one-ment) it means a condition without tension. When Christ died on the cross for us, He removed the tension between us and God (Romans 5:10; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21.) His shed blood, reconciled the conflict between us and the Father. With this in mind, reconciliation has its Biblical foundation in the atonement of Christ.

So Paul can say *God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them... God made him who had no sin to be sin^[b] for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

What does the Bible teach us about reconciliation?

The first thing the Bible teaches about reconciliation is that we must make it a priority to reconcile. This is stressed in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:21-25 where we are told that if we have an unresolved disagreement with someone that we should resolve it as soon as possible, even before we go to church again. Elsewhere (Hosea 6:6, Matthew 6:6, and Matthew 12:7) Jesus told us that restoring relationships are more important than religious practices.

The context of this letter, 2 Corinthians, is that the church in Corinth has fallen out with Paul. They don't regard him as a proper apostle and have rejected his authority and ministry. Paul has written to them a 'painful letter' which we no longer have. His friend Titus delivered it and now has come back to Paul and told him that the Corinthians want to apologize and make up with him. So now Paul is heading back to them hoping for reconciliation.

The second thing the Bible teaches about reconciliation is that if we are approaching someone about a situation, we should do it in a spirit of meekness and keep it private (Matthew 18:15). The goal is to communicate that you want to resolve the problem, not make the other person look bad or put them in their place. When we take this approach, it communicates grace and love to the other person. We are told that love should be our motivation for reconciliation based on the love of Christ for us all. (Proverbs 10:12, Galatians 6:1-5, and Ephesians 4:1-3, 25, 29-31). Paul says in verse 14 '*For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died.* ¹⁵ *And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again*'.

Finally, the Bible teaches us that reconciliation means that we must be willing to ask for forgiveness and forgive if asked (Matthew 18:21-35). The very term forgive is a word that was made up of the words force and giving. Together, they describe forgiveness as the process whereby the offended party "gives" up the right to "enforce" justice. Therefore, forgiveness involves a two-way transaction: the humbling and asking for forgiveness by the offender and the release of the right of the offended to enforce justice.

How should I make reconciliation with someone?

Practically speaking, a person in the wrong should humble them self and confess to the other person that they have sinned against them. They should then ask for forgiveness for what they have done. Most people won't because they are too proud or too hard hearted or too insensitive. That's why the world is so full of hatred and broken relationships. It makes God weep and Satan smile. Paul says in chapter 2 that he forgives in order that Satan might not outwit us (2 Cor 2.10-11)

The other person should grant forgiveness based on the fact that the person confessed their sin and asked for forgiveness. This is what Proverbs 10:12 means when it says: "Hatred stirs up conflict, but love covers over all wrongs". Love enables us to forgive all sins!

You may be thinking yes but this is hard. Of course, it's hard. Our world believes in harboring a grudge, letting resentments and hurts fester. We don't believe in apologizing or saying sorry, or the demeaning practice of confession and asking for forgiveness or giving forgiveness. We believe we need to be strong and proud and not vulnerable.

This is why Paul is eager to press home that in Christ we are a new creation.

⁶ So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come:^[a] the old has gone, the new is here!

A worldly point of view may not see the value of reconciliation or forgiveness. But Paul believes through Christ a new world has started. The kingdom of God has broken in, the Spirit is making all creation new and the Spirit of Christ is making those who have experienced the love of Christ new.

In this letter he is contrasting the old ways of the world with the new ways of being in Christ.

For example, the world admires celebrity culture – this is what we aspire to: fame, wealth and influence. Real leaders will have this charisma and fortune. Attractive people will have bodies like the 'hunks in trunks' from Love Island. But Paul says a true Christian leader will be humble and a servant, prepared to suffer for Christ, as Christ suffered for us. It's not so much what you look like on the outside as to what you are in the inside.

Paul wants the Corinthians to give generously for the work of Christ, especially for the poor in the Jerusalem church. The old world would say, hang on a minute – they should look after themselves. Charity begins at home. This is my money that I've earned. Why should I give it away? Paul will argue the new way of being in Christ will count all things as a blessing from God – your wealth is a gift to bless you, but also so that you can bless others and bless the work of Christ and his ministry through the church. Give with a generous heart because God has given generously to you Paul will argue.

In this chapter Paul is saying the old way of the world is to stay with your pride and your differences and your tensions. But the new creation in Christ will seek reconciliation – will be ambassadors for Christ – be reconciled to God.

I've been a Christian now for over 36 years. It's not so new to me anymore. I don't feel like a new creation. I sometimes feel like a very stale and fading creation. But every day I am challenged to put off the old and put on the new. A daily renewing through the Spirit is needed. The ways of the world are pernicious and all pervasive. They penetrate us mind soul and spirit because this is the society and the values we live in. The renewing of our mind, the openness to the renewing strength and guidance of the

Spirit is so vital to keep us a new creation. That's why its important to worship with other Christians, to read your Bible every day, to pray. Like an acid bath you have to cleanse yourself of the grubby ways of the world and put on the new ways of the kingdom of God.

But why should you? The energy comes from knowing you are loved by God through Christ. The love fo Christ compels you. Unless you know the love of Christ for you, you may do all this out of cold sense of duty, or a fear of being punished. We respond to the love shown to us with a warm-hearted response of love back. Love has reached out to us, reached down and reached us.

I first realised the love of Christ was transformative at the age of 8. I was in the Sunday school at the church I grew up in Burnley. (It's a tale of the importance of a church's children and youth ministry – because you have the chance to influence our young people – you get to be ambassadors of Christ). We 'd all gathered to hear Mrs Pasowvic tell us about Jesus on the cross. Mrs Pasowvic was a Polish refugee who fled her country at the age of twenty when the Soviets invaded repelling the Nazis in the Second World War. She was a little lady just four foot tall but she had a big heart. A big heart for God whose love through Jesus Christ had touched her.

She stood before us arms outstretched as Jesus did on the cross. She said Jesus died for you and me. He died to show us how much he loved us and how much he would forgive us. Those people who killed him he asked God to forgive them. He will forgive us if we ask him to. He wants us to be friends with God, to come back, to know his love and throw his arms around you in welcome. As she said those words tears came down her face and she shook with emotion. As an eight-year-old it got my attention. I thought wow, Mrs Pasowvic is crying this must mean something to her. This is important. And as she cried I found myself tearing up.

What I didn't know as an eight year old but found out later in life was her father had survived the Nazi invasion only to be killed by the Soviets. Her mother had been raped but she had managed to escape. Love and forgiveness were more than just words for this woman. Now the love of Christ compelled her to speak of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Paul writes: *Christ, demonstrated His love for us while we were yet sinners. God made him who had no sin to be*

sin^[b] for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Reconciliation is the process of restoring a relationship to one that is friendly and compatible with each other. God values the reconciliation of relationships more than religious practices. If you are distant from your creator – know that God wants to be reconciled to you! Love and forgiveness are guaranteed through Jesus on the cross – just come and say sorry.

Once forgiveness is granted and reconciliation is completed, the sin is no longer allowed to be brought up. Our motivation to reconcile with someone should be because of our love for Christ because of the reconciliation He gave us with God by His death on the cross.

Love compels us. Love covers over all wrongs. It was the love of Christ Paul says, that makes him an ambassador for God. And as God's fellow worker urges us not to receive God's grace in vain. Now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation. Don't miss the opportunity.

ⁱ Tim Lowe, Roots Online, <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2018/95-may-june-2018-b/proper-6/postscript>

ⁱⁱ Premier Christianity magazine June 2018

ⁱⁱⁱ Dr. Michael L. Williams
<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/christiancrier/2015/04/16/what-is-reconciliation-how-does-the-bible-define-it/>