

## RECONCILIATION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

by

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"I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies. Though ye offer me burnt offerings, I will not accept them; neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts. Take away from me the noise of thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols.

But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream." (Amos. 5:21-24)

"Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee;

Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift." (Matt. 5:23-24)

"And all things are in God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation.

...God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation." (II Cor. 5:18-19)

### I. What is Reconciliation and What are its Dimensions?

The human situation is one of estrangement or brokenness. We are separated from God, from ourselves and from others. We participate in a threefold condition of separation from the divine intention of human life. This condition of sin is a divide between the health and wholeness or the salvation God has designed for human life.

Reconciliation exists when we are able to overcome that condition of broken relations: with God, ourselves and other selves. Reconciliation is togetherness, communion and community.

Just as estrangement or separation in human relations is multidimensional, even so reconciliation is multidimensional. We have spoken of the spiritual, psychological and sociological dimensions of separation inherent in human sinfulness. Sin has an upward, inward and outward direction. It is vertical with reference to God. It is introverted with reference to the self and it is horizontal with reference to other human beings.

Tillich referred to the demonic dimension of sin. While his focus was predominately existential, this character of sinfulness has recently been given further explication by both Holocaust theologians and liberation theologians of various persuasions. That is to say we have become increasingly aware of the need to address another dimension of sin from the mere personal and interpersonal dimensions. Sin can become institutionalized in families, communities and churches. We are becoming more aware of the "principalities and powers" as characteristic of human sin.

The Gospel of the New Right which is "domesticating" God in the culture should raise the ire of those who believe in the God of Jesus Christ who transcends all cultures. The dangers pointed out by Black theologians have now assailed the churches. Neither Liberal nor Evangelical Christians were prepared for the unholy alliance between a Jerry Falwell and a Ronald Reagan. What do we say when in the name of God, preachers are upholding prayer in the schools, the inerrancy of Scripture and the approval of deadly weapons of death at the same time.

Reinhold Niebuhr in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* anticipated these profound insights on the demonic nature of institutionalized sin and evil. Even though we were tone-deaf to his message, truth has a way of catching up with us. While we were obsessed with a personal, privatized Gospel, Niebuhr pointed us to our national sins. He spoke of America's three prides: The pride of wealth, the pride of race and the pride of power. We need to face frankly a fourth pride, the pride of righteousness. This is the last pride before the Fall.

We cannot treat reconciliation without dealing with the realities which must be addressed. A physician cannot write a prescription without a careful examination of the patient. Recently a doctor prescribed some eyeglasses for me without a thorough examination. I wore the glasses several months before it became clear that I had the wrong prescription. I expected my eyes to adjust to the glasses as they had always done, but this just didn't happen. Upon a careful selection of a new doctor, I received a thorough examination and new glasses. The mistake began by selecting a doctor who was more interested in politics than the care of his patients. We cannot be reconciled unless we know the malady which must be healed. We must deal with sin on the personal, interpersonal and collective levels. Many Christians are prepared to confront sin on the first two levels, but they shy away from collective sin and evil. A theology of reconciliation has to be aware of the multidimensional nature of sin and evil if it is to be adequate.

## II. Reconciliation is a Costly Grace.

If I had quoted only from St. Paul, we could perhaps have avoided the message of St. Matthew. We surely would not have had to deal with Amos. We could find a pious way to gloss over the oppressions which divide people by race, sex and class. Our preaching, theology and worship could go on as usual. Matthew shatters this somewhat by suggesting that our own forgiveness is based upon our willingness to seek forgiveness from those we have offended. In fact, he is bold to assert that it is important to be reconciled to the offended party as a prerequisite for genuine worship. But it is Amos who lays the claims of social justice clearly before us. Amos dogmatically states that offerings, prayers, bible reading and all acts of piety await the humane treatment of the poor.

There are those who would assert that my interpretation of Scripture is out of step. They would say that I am reading the Bible backwards rather than forward. Amos, they would say, is of the Old Covenant; while Paul speaks out of the New. The Bible is a unity. I assume that God's revelation in Christ, alone, supersedes the words of Amos or Paul.

It is instructive that Black scholars and preachers have been exposed to the most rigorous biblical and theological scholarship of the West. And yet they have read the Bible through their experience and have discovered in the Bible "a message hidden to the wise and given to babes." M. L. King, Jr. quoted in the same paragraph from Amos and Jesus. He saw in the Old and New Testaments alike the Gospel of Freedom. Howard Thurman writing on Jesus and the Disinherited, noted that Jesus cast his lot with the underclass while Paul leaned toward the Establishment. My perspectives, therefore, are not new, they are a part of a great tradition of biblical preaching and theological reflection in the black church.

Reconciliation is not a cheap grace. It is a costly grace to use Bonhoeffer's language. In developing a theology of reconciliation, we will not be able to reject the claims of liberation. Forgiveness and social justice are inseparably linked as a pre-condition for reconciliation.

I like Dr. McCall's statement in honor of Dr. Victor Glass, whom I have had the privilege of knowing through the years. The movement from paternalism toward fraternalism in the relationship between Black and white Baptists is indeed a constructive direction. Wherever social justice is taken seriously, there can be reconciliation only between equals. As long as there exists a superiority-

inferiority syndrome between the races, what Winthrop Jordan has aptly described as whites over blacks, there can be no genuine reconciliation. Equity, equality and justice, no less than compassion, love and mercy are attributes of reconciliation in the Body of Christ. I prefer inter-racial over integrated fellowship. The latter has a tendency to degenerate into a relationship unworthy of black Christians who affirm their dignity under God as persons and as peoples. Inter-racial provides for meaningful fraternalism over against an easy paternalism which is a type of cheap grace which blocks the way to genuine reconciliation. The way to fraternalism is the way of the cross. It is laden with hardship for black and white Christians. It is hard for white Christians to come to terms with the depths of the sin of racism. They find it difficult to repent because they do not understand fully the awesomeness of racism as a collective evil and what it has done to its victims. On the other hand, it is difficult for blacks to forgive; for they know too well the desolation and depths of deprivation of this evil which stalks every black person throughout life and scars the souls of unborn generations. It is difficult for blacks to forgive. The way to reconciliation between blacks and whites is a costly grace.

## III. The Ministry of Reconciliation

We turn now to praxeological considerations. What does a theology of reconciliation have to do with the ministry of reconciliation? Again, there are "dimensions" to be explored. There is a ministry to persons, to families and communities and to larger collectives. The perspective we bring to a theology of reconciliation determines the limits or the outreach of our ministry of reconciliation. A holistic view of reconciliation requires a comprehensive ministry of reconciliation. The theology of reconciliation presented here requires a ministry of reconciliation which is both comforting and disturbing, both priestly and prophetic.

First, there is the ministry of reconciliation to the individual. One of the weak spots in the Theology of Liberation is its tendency to place most of its emphasis upon collective sins and salvation to the neglect of personal sin and salvation. In Latin America, the priest-theologians have adopted the Marxist Model of social analysis with attention to class conflict. Everything is viewed in terms of economic distinctions between the rich and poor classes. This is limited in its vision of oppression, i.e. oppression based upon sex and race, for example. While it serves as a corrective to a privatized faith-- a one-dimensional Gospel preoccupied with soul and savior-- it is also one-dimensional in the opposite direction. In the dialectical

fashion of Western Thought the Marxist-Christian dialogue intended to uproot the existential domination of theology in Western Europe, on one hand. This European transplant took a practical turn in Latin America, but it is still only the other side of the Gospel.

Sin and salvation must be personal before they are social. We are persons-in-community. Kierkegaard's emphasis upon the individual before God still has meaning. The I-Thou formula of Buber is at the heart of the soul's confession before God. Each person must confront God as the one who has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. This emphasis of the Evangelicals is essential to a profound understanding of the Gospel of Reconciliation.

Each must stand privately before God as a penitent soul seeking divine forgiveness. The prodigal soul must confess before the loving God. Faith has a vertical and personal dimension. The relationship between God and the human person has a vertical void that must be filled. There is a divide which must be overcome between the human soul and the forgiving and gracious God. A Gospel of reconciliation and a ministry of reconciliation have to contain this healing dimension. Reconciliation with God is an integral part of any meaning of reconciliation with oneself and other selves.

Secondly, a ministry of reconciliation is inter-personal. There is a brokenness between persons on an intimate plane. Human sin creates estrangement in families between brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, parents and children. There is conflict and strife between neighbors and friends regardless to race, class or sex. Sin can make otherwise healthy families sick. Wherever selfishness and self-centeredness enter inter-personal relationships, love and fellow-feeling are dismissed. There is a ministry of reconciliation to intimate social groups, including families, churches and religious fellowships. Even where such small communities are homogeneous--that is of the same race or class--there can be great separation which requires a ministry of reconciliation. It is because God through Christ has reconciled us, in spite of our unworthiness, that we are called to a ministry of reconciliation. It helps us to accept others when we understand God's grace in Tillichian terms as "God's acceptance of us, even though we are unacceptable." God's reconciling grace has worked a miracle of transformation in our lives which leads us to share this reconciling experience with others. This is the basis of our participation in a ministry of reconciliation.

Finally, this ministry of reconciliation is not limited to ourselves as individuals or intimate friends and relatives and members of our own families. It is not limited to our own kind, whether of

race or class. The homogeneous church groups of the Church Growth movement have given up the struggle for racial and social justice. They boast of large budgets and memberships. But they thrive on cheap grace. They do not link the forgiving love of God with making life more human for those who are different, but who are still within divine favor.

It is much easier to get people to join the church in the same neighborhood if the neighborhood is segregated. If society is homogeneous, people naturally get along better together and especially if they are of the same race. When blacks and whites of the same class mingle, they are able to give the appearance of harmony. A homogeneous fellowship does not give people an experience of loving the other--the enemy, the disinherited and those of another background. It is short on social justice. By preaching that ministry to one's own kind is the most loving thing to do, people do not understand the Gospel in its other dimension of justice as well as love. Since God is loving just, love and justice are two sides of the same coin. They coexist and are mutually enriching.

A ministry of reconciliation is inadequate which does not address "immoral society." Christians are immature and ill-equipped for the struggle who do not understand that there are sinful social structures. An adequate faith demands that we confront the "principalities and powers" of this world. Without this awareness we are likely to settle with an understanding of reconciliation as a cheap grace.

For some years I taught an advanced course on theology and ministry. There were two books that every student in my class had to read as a pre-requisite. These books were Richard Niebuhr's The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry and D. Bonhoeffer's Cost of Discipleship. Before the end of the course, the students had to encounter M. L. King's Letter from a Birmingham Jail. In all instances I was introducing the prospective minister to a dimension of the Gospel which takes us beyond personal and intimate inter-personal relations into the stubborn collective evils which also must be addressed.

The church is too often like the fisherman who keeps his boat anchored in the harbor, afraid to launch out into the deep. Those who would really follow their Lord's example will forsake the safety of the harbor and go out into the deep blue waters. There are risks involved. There will be suffering and rejection. But this is where the ministry of reconciliation calls us to serve. We may accept this ministry with the assurance that the Lord of the church is already in the deep.