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Progress to Reconciliation: A Journey with Lewis, Bono, and Spider-Man

By David M. Johnstone

Abstract

Reconciliation is a word full of profound inferences. It has implications steeped in the biblical landscape, yet it is also challenging to define. Using Miroslav Volf's guidance, twentieth century fiction, and film and pop music icons, this article seeks to glimpse a deeper biblical vision of grace and reconciliation. Volf observes that "[t]o triumph fully, evil needs two victories, not one." Reconciliation sabotages and steals that victory from evil. Forgiveness and reconciliation do not negate justice; they provide the opportunity to go beyond justice and retribution. Simply put, reconciliation allows a terrible situation to be redeemed.

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Reconciliation is a word and idea full of profound inferences. It is often viewed in the context of racial and ethnic strife, yet it has significant relevance to other areas as well. In responding to interpersonal strife, often counsel and training focus solely on conflict mediation. While this tactic is helpful, bringing the loop to a close is often neglected; therefore, reconciliation is not fully achieved because there is more needed than just mediation. Further, reconciliation has broad implications, particularly for the follower of Jesus. It is a word steeped in the biblical landscape. Yet there seems to be a struggle in defining it, clarifying what it should look like and the steps for how to achieve reconciliation.

The impetus for this article has been my observation that there are men and women who actively and successfully engage in community reconciliation. Unfortunately, some of these individuals are also mired in the debris of their personal lives. They have unreconciled relationships with family members and neighbors. These strained and broken relationships become roadblocks to their reliability as reconcilers. The dissonance of their personal and public lives compromises their credibility.¹ Further, for the past dozen years, I have lived and worked on evangelical campuses. I am also familiar with dozens of other campuses across the United States and Canada. One of the common features has been the unresolved tension and conflict that exists at all levels within these campus communities. This paucity of conflict resolution is distressing for observers, members, and communities who seek to assist students in following Christ's admonition to reconcile relationships. I am personally interested in how reconciliation can be encouraged and facilitated at the personal level.

¹ John Perkins calls this a "contradiction." His meanings are tied to the notion of both hearing and following the gospel. A contradiction arises when hearing and following do not lead to the same action. The contradictions in this context are advocates of reconciliation who lack congruence in their personal lives with what they advocate.

While I have never met Miroslav Volf, professor of systematic theology at Yale Divinity School, he has become an important intellectual guide in helping me understand reconciliation. I am reminded of Virgil for Dante Alighieri (Dante, Sayers, & Reynolds, 1981) or George McDonald for C. S. Lewis (Lewis, 1946) and how they served as guides in their fictional journeys together. Volf has become my guide on this particular road to understanding reconciliation. He has given me a glimpse of our destination by observing that full and final reconciliation may not happen until our arrival in heaven (Volf, 2006). However, there are significant paths which can bring us closer to this final goal. Volf (2006) reminds us that a follower of Jesus who seeks to be faithful is expected to seek, pursue, and encourage reconciliation no matter how hopeless its success might seem. Truthfully, in each of our lives we can imagine relationships that seem impossible to reconcile. In many ways this article reflects an adventure into the bewildering hope and possible restoration which can be wrought by the Holy Spirit.

My hope is that Volf and others will help clarify what reconciliation means. Drawing from these and other sources, I would like to suggest how it might be achieved and then how it could and should look. Lastly, I would like to propose a process for encouraging and facilitating it in my own life and the lives of others.

Presuppositions

Before we begin, it is important that I clarify some presuppositions with which I begin this exploration. I believe that forgiveness is an important part of our genetic code as followers of Jesus; it is an inescapable part of the biblical priority to promote reconciliation. Further, I believe that God is active in this world. Our very beings are tied to the fact that Jesus is active and interactive in our personal lives and the larger world. His purpose is to bring about our reconciliation with the Father. Those realities in themselves should make us committed to the idea of reconciliation. If we refuse, then we deny the kindness and grace that God extended to us through Jesus' act on the cross. These premises and presuppositions are the foundation from which I start.

The Journey Begins

In many ways, the implications of this study must be personal. I begin with Volf's suggestion for a starting point; I acknowledge the depth and selfishness of my own actions that have caused offense, consternation, and pain. I realize that these actions are present in minor or major ways in the lives of others as well. While it is important not to embellish (or diminish) my own evil, it is important to take responsibility honestly for my own sin. Taking this responsibility and choosing to "sin no more" (John 8:11) brings us to the first milestone on the path toward reconciliation.

Repentance: The First Milestone

This first milestone brings us to repentance or *metanoia* (in Greek), which is both a visual and an action word. It suggests changing direction or turning around. It literally implies changing one's mind, particularly over a moral matter or concern. Scripturally, it suggests the first steps of conversion or beginning to acknowledge the supremacy of Christ over one's life (Merklein, 1990, pp. 415-419). Surprisingly, repentance is not something people are able to stir up of their own volition. It is viewed by church tradition as a gift from God initiated by the Holy Spirit (Volf, 1996, p. 119).

True repentance involves honest and deep appraisal of what has occurred. Volf (1996) states, "Repentance implies not merely a recognition that one has made a bad mistake, but that one has sinned" (p. 113). Others observe that if assessment or remembrance of sin is not completely honest then reconciliation is sabotaged, meaning that "there is no hope for a peaceful tomorrow that does not seriously engage both the pain of the past and the call to forgive" (Katongale & Rice, 2008, p. 149). True and honest remembering is critical for true repentance; it prevents embellishing or diminishing the act which needs repentance. Further, this remembering enables the victim to neither demonize the perpetrator nor magnify the offense (Volf, 2006).

To repent means that an individual chooses "to make a turnabout of a profound moral and religious import" (Volf, 1996, p. 113). True repentance places the response and power back into the hand of the victim or the one whom has been sinned against. Repentance is a pretty momentous marker on the path to reconciliation. Volf spends a lot of time helping his readers understand the importance of this step. While repentance is critical, for it enables the "sinned against" to respond well, it is not an end in itself.

Forgiveness: The Next Milestone

Confession, demonstrations of remorse, and repentance are increasingly fashionable in our society, but forgiveness is an action that our Western culture struggles to understand. The Greek *aphiemi* (to forgive) implies abandoning an offense, giving up an injustice, or cancelling a debt. It suggests that while a legitimate claim can be made against someone, it is abandoned as no longer being desirable to pursue (Goodrick & Kohlenberger, 1990). Justice is implied in the act of forgiveness. Often forgiveness cannot be truly given unless repentance takes place, which requires a truthful appraisal of the action, causing the need for repentance. Justice could be demanded, but it is deferred or made unnecessary through forgiveness.

While illustrations from popular culture are limited in their usefulness, they can be instructive. In 2007, the release of *Spider-Man 3* included a scene where the true killer of the hero's uncle was identified. After a number of violent and belligerent interactions, the killer (Flint Marko) and the hero (Peter Parker) have a final confrontation. Death and havoc surround the lives of both characters, and the hero himself has made poor decisions. Flint (the antagonist), standing some distance from Peter (the protagonist), surveys the chaos and death he has created and states: "I didn't want this. But I had no choice." Peter, with anger in his voice, challenges him: "We always have a choice. You had a choice when you killed my uncle." Flint tries to explain: "My daughter was dying, I needed money. ... I was scared. I told your uncle all I wanted was the car. He said to me 'Why don't you just put down the gun and go home?' I realize now he was just trying to help me. ... Then I saw my partner running over with the cash... and the gun was in my hand..." Flint remorsefully laments that Peter's uncle was shot by mistake. Flint continues reflecting with remorse and speaking to Peter: "I did a terrible thing to you; I spent a lot of nights wishing I could take it back. ... I'm not asking you to forgive me. I just want you to understand." After a significant pause, Peter looks at Flint, and quietly responds, "I've done terrible things, too." Despairing, Flint comments, "I didn't choose to be this. The only thing left of me now... is my daughter." Then after a pause, Peter states, "I forgive you" (Ziskin, et al., 2007).

The significance of this illustration is that Flint acknowledges the terrible things he has done, yet Peter also acknowledges that he is not without fault. This becomes a visual illustration of forgiveness. In that process of confession and repentance (Hollywood style), forgiveness was extended. A tremendous debt was owed, a tremendous debt was cancelled, and grace was given.

Grace: Going Further

Pursuing reconciliation can become exhausting and many will cease at forgiveness. This stopping point is significant. Settling at this place would be adequate; significant progress would have been achieved. But sadly, one would miss what could have been offered. There is more that could be achieved. As a guide, Volf (2006) keeps prodding and encouraging his readers to keep their eyes up and focused on the path. The milestones after forgiveness offer a country of incredible beauty, and he does not want his readers to miss anything. *Grace* is the name of this splendor.

Grace is one of the most powerful and misunderstood concepts in the current Western world. The Greek word *charis*, often translated *grace*, means *something given*, but more than just a gift—it is something which is given freely, cheerfully, openly, and without coercion (Berger, 1990). By God, it is a gift from him to those who were his enemies in the past and have chosen a different path for themselves; his gift was given when they were still enemies (Volf, 2006). It costs those who repent very little, but as Bonhoeffer (1959) observes, it is very costly for God: “it cost God the life of his Son” (p. 37).

One of the most perceptive descriptions and explanations of grace was in a conversation between U2 front man Bono and the French journalist Michka Assayas. The two were discussing faith and the many spiritual paths available in the world. Bono remarked that much of the world functions in a state of *karma*. “You know, what you put out comes back to you: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” (Assayas, 2005, p. 204). He observed more specifically that much of the world responds in a retributive manner. *Karma* suggests justice; yet *karma* also provides justification for revenge. Bono continued by observing that “... along comes this idea called Grace to upend all that ‘As you reap, so will you sow’ stuff. Grace defies reason and logic” (p. 204). He makes it personal by remarking, “I’d be in big trouble if Karma was going to finally be my judge. ... It doesn’t excuse my mistakes, but I’m holding out for Grace” (p. 204). For Bono, God’s grace prevents people from reaping what they sow. No longer will they get what they deserve; or in other words, they get what they do not deserve. This is *grace*; justice is identified, but the consequences are not meted out.

C. S. Lewis also presented a unique explanation of grace. In his book *Till We Have Faces*, the main character Orual has been called before a divine court to explain her accusations against the gods for cruelty and injustice. Before her judicial appearance, the spirit of her deceased teacher counsels her. He explains that while he is not her judge, he must bring her before her “true judges.” In confusion, she is taken aback, for she is the accuser, not the accused. The teacher explains further, “The gods have been accused by you. Now’s their turn.” She despairs and laments that she “cannot hope for mercy.” The teacher remarks, “Be sure that, whatever else you get, you will not get justice.” Shocked, she asks, “Are the gods not just?” He replies: “Oh no, child. What would become of us if they were?” (Lewis, 1957, p. 297).

Again we see that grace can be viewed as *not receiving* what we deserve, for if we did, what would become of us? Grace is not justice. Orual's teacher knew that justice was not what was needed; grievances might be aired, but absolute and complete justice would be crushing. For Orual's sake, justice would not be given; if justice were actually handed out, the poor decisions and actions of her life would have required a terrible judgment. In a similar way, if justice were served in all circumstances, few of us would survive.

Reconciliation

Volf's encouragement and guidance leads us through repentance, forgiveness, grace, and ultimately to reconciliation. Reconciliation (*apokatallazo* in Greek) is a word only used a few times within the New Testament (see Eph. 2:26, Col. 1:20). In its Greek context, it usually refers to the relationships between men and women, not the divine and human connection. However, in the New Testament, it perfectly describes the intent and purpose of Jesus' sacrifice as viewed from God's desire for *reconciliation* between himself and men and women. While sparingly used in scripture, the word's impact is felt in the depths of Christian theology, tradition, and ideas about community. It is a word that implies the possibility of a hostile relationship becoming intimate; a broken relationship once again becoming friendly (Danker, Bauer, & Arndt, 2000).

What does reconciliation look like for relationships? There appears to be the need for a radical transformation in how people view themselves and align their priorities. It is "a transformation of desire, habits and loyalties" (Katongole & Rice, 2008, p. 151). This transformation is deep and assisted by God's grace; it is not done alone (Katongole & Rice, 2008). It is more "than just purifying desire and mending ways, more even than making restitution to those they have wronged" (Volf, 1996, pp. 117-118). It is a deep and transformative action. Volf guides us to the place where relationships are restored to pre-sin unbroken relationships.

Further Thoughts on the Meanings of Words

As I have engaged with each of these words and concepts, I have tried to make them more robust than our Western Christian culture usually views them. Many of these words are heard so frequently that within certain contexts they have lost their meaning. My hope is that the reader has discerned some of the depth of these words, and that she is able to discern the simple progression which leads toward reconciliation. While the progression is simple, it is not simplistic, and our individual contexts make it complex.

The Simple Journey

At its most simple level, reconciliation is part of the role a follower of Jesus takes in combating evil. It is an aspect of what Christian tradition and history identify as spiritual warfare. Volf (2006) observes that "to triumph fully, evil needs two victories, not one. The first victory happens when an evil is perpetrated; the second victory, when evil is returned" (p. 9). Therefore, an offense, injustice, or sin is evil's first triumph, but retaliation provides evil with a complete victory. Reconciliation sabotages that process and steals the final victory from evil.

A paradigm or model for the process is fairly simple: (a) an offense occurs and a relationship is broken, (b) there is a truthful assessment and "remembering" of what has occurred, (c) the perpetrator repents of his action and seeks forgiveness, and (d) the

victim acknowledges the harm or injustice that has been done yet chooses to extend forgiveness. At that point, grace enters the context of the broken relationship. Volf describes the process in a more eloquent manner:

By showing how reconciliation reaches completion: a wrongdoing is both condemned and forgiven: the wrongdoer's guilt is canceled; through the gift of non-remembrance, the wrongdoer is transposed to a state untainted by the wrongdoing; and bound in a communion of love, both the wronged and wrongdoer rejoice in their renewed relationship. (2006, p. 149)

Providing some cautions and limitations to this process, Volf continues, "In the here and now this rarely happens—and for the most part should not happen. In a world marred by evil, the memory of wrongdoing is needed mainly as an instrument of justice and as a shield against injustice" (2006, p. 149). Volf's observation sparks the question of whether this "renewed relationship" happens within this world.

In the many discussions about the meaning of reconciliation, *transformation* is often a descriptor used to explain the process. This transformation refers to the relationship between an attacker and victim, the powerful and weak, or the sinner and the sinned against. This transformation is essential in order to reestablish trust and possibly accomplish the forgiveness necessary for reconciliation. Volf uses the phrase "*bound in a communion of love*" (2006, p. 149). A paucity of love is one of the reasons that many relationships break down. Transforming a relationship will require increasing or sometimes just introducing the presence of love. Volf's realism certainly comes into play when we consider the need to love an attacker or someone who has perpetuated injustice against another. Volf realizes that it may not happen as it is often exceedingly difficult. However, followers of Jesus need at least to consider this process, even if they are unable to complete it until eternity. Volf reminds the reader that "Since in Christ we ourselves were reconciled to God while still God's enemies, we in turn must seek to extend unconditional grace to (fellow!) wrongdoers, irrespective of any and all offenses. No offense imaginable in and of itself should cause us to withhold grace" (2006, p. 121). Such grace is incomprehensible. The suggestion that the Holy Spirit initiates the process provides the only hope for success in this enterprise.

Transformation of Relationships

Conventional wisdom suggests that the opposite of love is hate. Some years ago Anthony Campolo, professor emeritus of sociology at Eastern University, suggested that the opposite of love might actually be *power*. Using Jesus as a model, Campolo observed that Jesus put aside his absolute power in order to love humankind. Philippians 2:6-7 illustrates how Jesus "made himself nothing" (NIV) in order that he could love fully. Campolo (1984) sees power as a "coercive force to make others yield to your wishes" (p. 11). While Campolo does not discuss power in terms of reconciliation, I suggest that power could be one of the key factors needed for relational transformation after forgiveness and grace have been extended. If the absence of love is one of the causes of hurtful or sinful actions, using Campolo's thoughts, we might surmise that the perpetrator had some form of power over the victim. Therefore after repentance, confession, forgiveness, and extension of grace, what needs to happen? I believe there needs to be a realignment of power. Let me provide a personal illustration.

In a relationship where there is no need for reconciliation, there is still the need to assess the components of our relationship affected by power. Over the past three years, I have been blessed with a growing relationship with a current student. We are both followers of Jesus, males, and living on a college campus. He is a student, and I am an administrator; he is young, and I am middle-aged; he is single, and I am married; he is a son, and I am a father; he is Kenyan, and I am Canadian; he is black, and I am white. There are plenty of similarities, but there are also plenty of differences. The differences are at the same time minor and yet also defining. Reality is that I, as an administrator at the college he attends, could make this student yield to my wishes. While I have sought to be benevolent in all my interactions with him, I (and he) am aware of my power over him. As we explored how we might become closer than our roles allow, it became clear that one of the factors was our location. Though an immigrant, I know how to navigate through our institution, town, and culture – this made me more powerful. We came to understand that unless we spent time building a history of intentional vulnerability while exploring each other's heritage and priorities, things would most likely not change very much. We anticipate that his graduation will be fairly transformative for our friendship, particularly in terms of the power relationship. Most of all, we realize that until I left my familiar world and placed myself in his environment with situations where I rely on his benevolence and guidance, the power difference in our relationship would remain.

How does this illustration assist us in understanding the need for transformed relationships in the journey toward reconciliation? Obviously, power cannot be set aside in all of our roles, yet in situations where evil, offense, or sin has occurred and forgiveness has been extended, the perpetrator must intentionally place himself in situations where he must trust his victim's mercy and benevolence. Seeking forgiveness is part of this process. When power decreases and the opportunities for loving increase, broken relationships have the opportunity to be transformed and reconciliation has the potential to occur.

Conclusion

Returning to Volf (2006), the reader is encouraged to consider that in reconciliation, essential changes in the relationship of the sinner and victim must occur after forgiveness and grace are extended. This transformation appears to be the element that enables the various parties to move beyond those two initial, but significant, steps toward reconciliation. However, forgiveness and reconciliation do not negate justice; they provide the opportunity to go beyond justice and retribution. Reconciliation allows a terrible situation to be redeemed and placed under the care of the Father.

Reconciliation may ultimately not be possible on this earth. Sometimes, there is such a profound and deep break that it is inconceivable that reconciliation is possible. At the same time, it is important to remind the follower of Jesus that he is the one of hope. On those rare occasions when steps beyond forgiveness are possible, Volf encourages the reader to take them.

These thoughts may seem basic, but they provide challenges that are both substantive and realistic. These challenges are particularly important in a world where reconciliation is encouraged but not always practiced at a personal level. These reflections may not

provide the step-by-step strategy for which we could hope, but they do provide a glimpse of the destination. Being one who tries to encourage others on this path, I am challenged by knowing I have my own unreconciled areas. Volf, Campolo, Lewis, Bono, and even Spider-Man provide me with hope and direction. While this article is not a road map, it intends to direct us to one of the possible roads leading to reconciliation. *Soli Deo Gloria.*

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