

THE GIFT AND MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION

"God has reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us" (2 Corinthians 5:18 & 19).

What is it that gave rise to this gift of God to us through his Son, Jesus Christ? What is our call as ministers of reconciliation? To understand this, we need to go back to the beginning.

When an artist creates a work, it is intended to be an expression and reflection of the thoughts, intentions, ideas, and even personality of the artist. Thus, from the work of art, we are able to know quite a bit about the artist. When the artist, on the other hand, comes personally and explains what his or her intentions and purposes were when the work of art was created, we are able to know even more about the artist.

God has done this in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. God's Word, the Scripture, is the written revelation of God himself made complete in his Son, Jesus Christ. God, the artist, came to explain the purpose and the intentions of his creation, and we can know more about his nature and personality than would have been possible just from observing his artwork.

When God created the world, he expressed order, purpose, and variety as his aspects (Genesis 1:1-2; 4). He showed creation to be not haphazard and accidental but purposeful and under the control of an Intelligent Being.

When God created man, he saw that it was not good for him to be alone. So he gave him a helper and a mate, woman (Genesis 2:18; 21-24). He told them to multiply and to become family (Genesis 2:27 & 28). In their unique creation, they revealed personality, the ability to create, and interrelationship as additional aspects of God.

In creation, God revealed order: material creation was to help and to serve the human beings who were over it but who themselves were to be under the God who created them. Human beings were given the very authority and dominion of God over all creation (Genesis 1:26, 28) and were commissioned to reveal, and to be an extension of, God in the world. Man, his wife, and their children were to bear a family resemblance to their Father, God (Genesis 1:27).

What happened in the Garden of Eden? First, Satan, disguised as the serpent, called God's truthfulness into question. He reinterpreted God's Word in such a way as to cast doubt upon it, and the woman fell for it. In submitting to the creature instead of to her Creator, she began to turn God's order upside down.

When the man submitted himself to the creature, woman, instead of to God over him, he

further disrupted God's order. Creation became, then, a reflection of man's disorder instead of God's order. Instead of God - human beings - creation, the order became creation - human beings - God. Herein is the very nature of all sin -- it puts a creature first and God last. This is the reversal of God's order and leads to the destruction of right relationships.

Thus, family became a reflection of man's disorder instead of God's order. With disorder in the family came disorder in the world. So it still is today. Creation still "awaits with eager expectation the revelation of the children of God; creation was made subject to futility, not of its own accord but because of the one who subjected it, in hope that creation itself would be set free from the slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Romans 8:19-21).

Into this disorder, God injected a promise of one who would come and restore the order that God had intended (Genesis 3:15). It is important for each of us to recall that "at one time we were without Christ, without hope, and without God in the world. But now, in Christ Jesus, we who once were far off have come near by the blood of Christ. He is our peace, he who broke down the dividing wall of enmity through his flesh that he might create in himself one new person" (Ephesians 2:11-15), a corporate Body, the Church. "We who were once alienated and hostile in mind because of evil deeds he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through his death to present us holy, without blemish, and irreproachable before him" (Colossians 1:21 & 22).

"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. In him, were created all things in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible; whether thrones or dominations or principalities or powers, all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him, all things hold together. He is the Head of the Body, the Church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead that in all things he himself might be preeminent" (Colossians 1:15-18).

Yes, "he reconciled us with God in one Body through the cross, putting enmity to death by it. He came to preach peace to you who were far off and to those who were near, and through him we have access in one Spirit to the Father" (Ephesians 2:16-18).

"God has reconciled us to himself through Christ, not counting our sins and transgressions against us. And he has entrusted to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:18 & 19). God chooses to establish a personal relationship with each one of us. He desires and wills for us to establish that same type of relationship with each other. He intends for us to live in peace and harmony with one another and in right relationship with him. This condition of "all-rightness", or righteousness, is described as "shalom", which means "peace".

When there is a violation of our relationship with God or with one another, a wrong occurs that violates *persons* as well as the relationship itself. As we have already seen, this is the underlying meaning of what we call *sin*. It is contrary to the condition of

"all-rightness" that God intends. That is why sin has both a vertical and a horizontal dimension.

The Ten Commandments are important not only for what they prohibit but because they are necessary for the protection and preservation of right relationships. Violation of the commandments results in damage to or destruction of both the person and the relationship in the long run if not in the short run.

God's justice and the ministry of reconciliation focus on "right-ordering": to do justice is to make things right. The overwhelming theme of salvation throughout the Bible is one of reconciliation and restoration of right relationships. Whenever God punished Israel, and then only after repeated warnings over a long period of time, he always preserved and restored a faithful remnant through whom he restored his people.

God's justice is not based on merit but grows out of love, in spite of who or what we are. It is balanced by mercy and grace and is essentially restorative in nature. True justice means that relationships must be addressed. It also suggests that damages must be rectified. But reconciliation and restoration need to take precedence over punishment and retribution. The focus on meeting human needs, on reconciliation, on healing individuals and relationships, is the responsibility especially of God's people. It places right relationships above right rules.

God the Father has reconciled us to himself through Christ. God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world but that the world might be saved, healed, and delivered through him (John 3:16 & 17). On behalf of God, therefore, if you have never made friends with the God of the Universe, be reconciled to him now. Receive the gift of reconciliation for yourself and take this gift to those around you who so desperately need it. We are called to be co-mediators with Jesus Christ, and he has shown us where to begin.

If we bring our gift to the altar (the altar being any place of meeting with God) and there recall that anyone has anything against us, we are to leave our gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled, and then come and offer our gift (Matthew 5:23 & 24).

When we stand to pray, we are to forgive anyone against whom we have a grievance so that our heavenly father may in turn forgive our transgressions (Mark 11:26).

If someone wants to take us to court, we are told to settle with our opponent quickly while on the way to court with him (Matthew 18:25a; Luke 12:5b).

Read also what Matthew 18:15-17, 1 Corinthians 6:1-8, and Galatians 6:1 have to say regarding conflict resolution.

Let reconciliation, then, begin, especially in your family and in your home. Woman is not independent of man, nor is man of woman in the Lord (1 Corinthians 11:11). In Christ,

both man and women are reconciled to God and share his life. Thus, they are equal spiritually. Yet, the theological principle of both the Old and the New Testament regarding God's order for the family is that *positionally* God is the head of Christ, Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife (1 Corinthians 11:3). This must be the order within the Christian home.

We are told that a wife should not separate from her husband. If she does separate, and there are many situations, especially of abuse, where she should separate, she must either remain single or become reconciled with her husband. A husband should not divorce his wife (1 Corinthians 7:11). Just because the world so easily practices divorce and remarriage, this should not be the case within the Church. Again, people often marry the wrong person for the wrong reasons, and there are times when these marriages should be nullified. God does not put all marriages together. Church leaders, and the Church family, must bear much responsibility for not properly discerning the relationships that they are being asked to bless.

"Husbands, love your wife and avoid any bitterness toward her even as Christ loved the Church and handed himself over to sanctify her, cleaning her in the bath of water with the Word, that she might be holy and without blemish" (Ephesians 5:25-27). "Wives, be subordinate to your husband as to the Lord. The husband is the head of the wife, just as Christ is the Head of the Church" (Ephesians 5:22 & 23). We have just seen the reason for this above.

The underlying and overriding principle in family relationships is that we are to be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:21). "Each husband should love his wife as he loves himself, and each wife should respect her husband as she respects herself for the two are one flesh" (Ephesians 5:33). Note: this does not mean that she has to be *loveable* or that he has to be *honorable*! While this should be the standard for each spouse, the command is unconditional.

"Children are to obey their parents for this is right" (Ephesians 6:1). They are to obey their parents in everything for this is pleasing to the Lord (Colossians 3:20). Note: this does not mean that parents always have to be *right*! Children are to honor and to respect their father and mother anyway so that it may go well with them and that they may have a long life on earth (Ephesians 6:2 & 3).

The most critical need today is the restoration of God's order in the world. But it begins in the family and extends to and through the Church. God's purpose in the Garden of Eden, thwarted by man's and woman's disobedience, is to be the goal of God's reconciliation and restoration of all things in Christ, the obedient Son. Through our submission and obedience to him, he teaches us love for and submission to the Father. We must also let the holy Spirit of unity-in-love seal us together as never before.

God is always ready to forgive, to reconcile, and to restore us when we sin. But true repentance and reconciliation lie not in empty words and hand wringing but in changed

behavior. Reconciliation, on our part, is a transaction that involves recognizing and acknowledge injustice (confession), asking forgiveness of the person we have offended, restoring the equity now if necessary (penance and restitution), and making clear decisions to do things differently in the future (repentance and purpose of amendment). When these things are completed and mutually experienced, a transformation occurs. Persons who were formerly estranged and hostile become open to friendship again. As they keep agreements between them, trust grows, and their relationship deepens.

Unfortunately, because of free will, reconciliation between people doesn't always happen. Some things simply cannot be made right. This, in part, is where forgiveness enters in. We must still forgive a person or persons for whatever was done to us, just as Jesus did on the cross, and we must forgive ourselves for whatever we did to contribute to the breakdown in relationships. However, it is important to offer the opportunity for reconciliation. People can choose to accept or to reject this opportunity, and healing may only be partial. "True justice" may not be possible, but "approximate justice" may nevertheless assist the healing process. In a very imperfect, but hurting world, the ministry of reconciliation is a good place to begin. In union with Jesus, we can accomplish much.

--Patrick J. Hession