

Through
him God was
pleased to
reconcile to
himself all
things,
whether on
earth or in
heaven, by
making
peace
through the
blood of the
cross.

Colossians 1:20

In Focus

Phyllis Kilbourn

With the escalation of wars, racism, violence, abuse and exploitation worldwide, governments and leaders are focusing much attention on the need for reconciliation. But is this an area where workers with children in crisis need to be involved?

Delores Friesen, Professor at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, states, "As a counselor and teacher, I often meet victims of abuse, ignorance and suffering who are so discouraged they want to give up. In training others to work in the healing ministries of counseling, teaching and evangelism, I try to give at least as much attention to prevention and justice ministries as I do to the healing and caring ministries."

In Dr. Roberta Hestene's article, "Reconciliation: A Biblical Focus," we are first called to examine our own beliefs concerning reconciliation. Only when we assimilate these truths on a personal level can we adequately respond to the hurting children to whom we minister who are in need of reconciliation: children to parents who have abused them, preferred the bottle and drugs over nurturing them, abandoned them or sold them as "livestock" on the sex trade markets. Or to governments and officials who have offered them no protection from sexual abuse, from being coerced into becoming child soldiers or from abandonment from the misfortune of being born a girl-child. Or to the church who has failed to become a voice crying out against the injustices heaped on them day after day or

to intervene and provide holistic ministries that would provide alternatives to free them from the destructive cycle of abuse, enabling them to have hope and a meaningful future. And, most vital, to be reconciled to a God who they feel does not love them or care about their exploitation and pain.

Reconciliation is tough work. It must be genuine, not a superficial "patching up" job. Reconciliation involves authentic forgiveness and the delicate healing of broken relationships along with many painful, festering wounds. And it must be incarnated in the real world situations in which we work. Dr. Hestenes uses the Apostle Paul's message of reconciliation to give direction to the process. She uses four phrases from 2 Corinthians 4 to describe 1) our own relationship to reconciliation; 2) the power for reconciliation; 3) our source of confidence/security in reconciliation and 4) a new perspective on affliction from Paul's experience with reconciliation.

Roberta concludes by providing a helpful response to the question of how the cycle of bitterness, hatred, revenge, injury-for-injury can be broken. She gives a Biblical-based response that will enable you and the children you are working with to practice the ministry of reconciliation. Only through reconciliation will the children truly be healed and set free from the bondage of their exploitation and traumas. You will want to be sure to incorporate this teaching into your training programs.

Reconciliation: A Biblical Focus

Roberta Hestenes

The headlines of this morning's newspaper scream at us: Rwanda death toll said to top 100,000; U.S. to seek full embargo against Haiti; U.S. bombing and credibility linked in Bosnia; . . . We look at the brokenness; we know the reality. There are many temptations to discouragement. Yet, our biblical text of 2 Corinthians 4-6 helps us move beyond discouragement to reasons for encouragement.

There is a lot that discourages us: the size of the challenge, the depth of the pain but what encourages us is that God is at work through Jesus Christ giving us our ministry by the mercy of God. We must remember this when we read the headlines and we're tempted to turn away and not look; when we're tempted to disengagement; when we're tempted to fatalism.

Fatalism is one of the most serious threats to the human soul. Resignation says nothing can be done. Things are hopeless; we are helpless; we should give up. Henri Nouwen says fatalism is the attitude that turns us into passive observers, or victims of exterior circumstances beyond our control.

Christians are not fatalists. Christians are those who have faith instead of fatalism. Christians are those who see the glory of the gospel, the power of the gospel, the transforming work of God in the world, not only changing the world but changing us. Nouwen says that faith instead of fatalism is what the Christian community needs in the face of discouragement. Faith is the deep trust that God's love is stronger than all the powers in the world and can transform us from victims of darkness into servants of light. When we enter into the ministry of reconciliation, we are no longer victims of darkness but servants of love, servants of light. We do not lose heart.

THE MESSAGE OF RECONCILIATION

The Apostle Paul addresses the subject of reconciliation from a particular context, as we all do. The context within which he begins to address and develop the message of reconciliation is that of a divided and broken church. Within that context, he brings these truths for us to understand and build into our own lives.

There are four phrases which I see as crucial in each of the paragraphs of 2 Corinthians 4. The first is verse 5: "We do not proclaim ourselves. We proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake." That gives us the content of the gospel the good news of God's reconciling work in Jesus Christ. This passage

describes our own relationship to that reconciliation; we are those who proclaim and those who serve.

The second is verse 7: "We have this treasure in clay jars so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us." The power for reconciliation is not something we drum up from within ourselves but is the power of God at work within the world. We are not the powerful ones. We are the servants. We are the ordinary vessels.

This takes us from being off the hook to putting us squarely on the hook. We cannot say that it is not our responsibility because we are not great enough, wise enough, strong enough. This treasure of the gospel is given to ordinary people, demonstrating that the power belongs to God.

In the third paragraph, the crucial verse is 14: "We know that the God who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will bring us with you into his presence." We have confidence because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We participate in that resurrection in that we will be raised also with Jesus. This security allows us not to hold so tightly to our own reputation, to our status, to our place in the world. We know that our lives are wrapped into Christ's life. If he was raised, so we ourselves will be raised with him and brought into the presence of God.

In the last paragraph, I selected verse 17: "For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory." Paul is a man who has been confronted by Christ on the Damascus road. He has had his whole life reoriented. He has taken the gospel out into places where the name of Jesus has never been named. He has experienced persecution, stoning, riots and imprisonments; and will go on to martyrdom. He is a man who has taken up the suffering of Christ into his own life and has experienced the divisions, the accusations, the conflicts, the struggles, and the pain. He calls all this "slight momentary affliction."

The only way you can suffer like that is to have a new perspective. Paul's new perspective has said that all the affliction, all the suffering, all the pain, is real and it must be taken seriously. But it is real in the light of eternity, in the light of God's overwhelming love for the human family, in the light of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

When you look at the context for reconciliation it weighs on you, whether it is brokenness in the family, brokenness in the church, brokenness in the work place, or brokenness in our community, nation or world. It weighs down and feels so heavy. But then all of a sudden

something else comes onto the other side of the scale: the weight of glory, who God is, what God is doing, and our participation in the glory of God. The weight of glory is much stronger and more real than the slight momentary affliction. Our perspective is transformed.

MOTIVATION FOR RECONCILIATION

Second Corinthians chapter 5, then, focuses on what motivates us as Christians, what motivated Paul to be involved in the ministry of reconciliation. The focus is not on the need of the world: the need is the context.

Second Corinthians 5:11 says "Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord we attempt to persuade others." At one level, we as contemporary American Christians look at a phrase like "the fear of the Lord" and question "fear" as a motivation for ministry. A useful word that defines this phrase is "accountability."

Two great mantras in the American scene are spoken over and over again. They are "It's not my fault" and "It's not my job." Between these two refrains we are paralyzed into passivity. Paul says that we will be in the presence of Christ; we will give account for ourselves. We should work together with God in the ministry of reconciliation, knowing that we will stand before him.

Every teacher has had a similar experience in a classroom: The first day of class you go in, lay out the syllabus, talk about the requirements, and launch into your subject. Without fail, somebody sitting in the classroom will blurt out, "Professor, is this going to be on the test?" The clear assumption is, "If the material isn't going to be on the test, then I'm not going to write it down, I'm not going to pay attention, I'm not going to be accountable for my behavior in relation to this material."

In a way, when Paul talks about knowing the fear of the Lord, he is saying that our behavior and motives are going to be on the test. They matter. We will give account before God.

In verse 14, he moves in another direction. "For the love of Christ urges us on." We do have a sense of accountability, a sense of responsibility. The ministry of reconciliation is our job, but it is the love of Christ which urges us on.

One of the realities present in conflict is that, when you are in a situation of brokenness and hostility, the temptation is to continue or escalate a cycle of revenge. Or the temptation is to move in a way that distances yourself from the offense and tries to put space between you and the other person who has injured, hurt, or betrayed you.

At the core of these complex and difficult situations, whether in a personal or global context, is the reaction to hostility which continues the cycle of revenge. Sometimes the language goes like this: "It is unforgivable what they did."

How is that cycle of bitterness of hatred, of revenge, of injury-for-injury to be broken? Remember the love of Christ: the sinless son of God, carrying the sin of the

world. Soldiers gambling at the foot of the cross held his life in contempt, and others—common people and leaders, soldiers and civilians—had cried for his blood.

"Crucify him! Crucify him!" If anyone was ever tempted to say, "It is unforgivable. They don't deserve forgiveness," it was Christ on the cross.

Instead what we hear are the most astonishing words in all of human history: "Father, forgive." In that cry for forgiveness, the cycle is broken, love replaces hate and revenge, and a new possibility comes into being.

A friend of mine at Fuller, Lew Smedes, has written a wonderful book called *Forgive and Forget* in which Lew talks about the cycle of forgiveness. He talks about the first phase as being hurt. When you experience injustice, when you experience betrayal, when you experience brokenness, the first response to that is hurt. That is the human response. Even Jesus hurt.

The second stage is the one in which we move from hurting to hating which wells up within us. In our brokenness, in our fallenness, in our alienation and distance from God, it is a natural, human, fallen response to move from hurting to hating. Somebody attacks me and I want to attack back. Somebody slanders me, I want to slander back. Someone destroys my reputation, I want to destroy their reputation back. People and groups move from hurting to hating. Hating can escalate into conflict and war.

The third stage, if we will receive God's grace and enter into it, is healing. We yield our hating to God. We practice forgiveness. We cease to hold on to the frozen part of our hearts within us: we let it melt, and we yield it. Sometimes it takes a long time. Healing doesn't happen all at once. We're tempted to hatred again, and we must redo the work of forgiveness and be open to the healing work of God in the midst of our brokenness. One of the greatest needs we have is for inner peace, for inner reconciliation that leads to outer reconciliation. We need to let this work of God make peace within us.

The fourth phase is reconciliation, the full restoration of relationship. On the human side it takes both parties: each one willing to enter with compassion, with repentance, with a desire to be made whole, and to have the relationship restored. Both parties come together and there is a new beginning.

Second Corinthians 5:19 says, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." What is inside the circle of God's love? We are. But more than us, it is the world God has in mind. All of those people I want on the outside God longs to have on the inside.

"It is not God's will that any should perish, but that all would come to repentance and a knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). In 2 Corinthians 5:20, Paul says, We entreat you . . . be reconciled to God." A response is needed to what God has done. The invitation has been given, the work accomplished. Now the response of faith is needed to enter into the reconciliation of God.

Our accountability and our responsibility motivate us, but even deeper is our awareness of the love of God. This love gives us a sense of security which gives us a new inner feeling and a new outer ministry. The love of God is what motivates us so that the message of reconciliation, the good news of God's intention for humanity and God's work for the whole world, can be shared, can be proclaimed, can be lived, can be demonstrated.

SHARING THE GOSPEL

We have the message, we have the ministry, we know the fear of the Lord and the love of Christ. How then, is that to be shared? Notice the way Paul does it. First of all with speech. Notice the way he carries out his speaking in verse 20. "So we are ambassadors for Christ . . . [We are Christ's representatives.] Since God is making his appeal through us: we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."

In verses 6:11-12, he says, "We have spoken frankly to you . . . our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affections . . ." This is not the language of coercion but the language of persuasion. Not the language which attempts to bully, but the language which pleads. This is a language full of conviction of the truth, the reality, and the certainty of the gospel. Yet, it is spoken in a way which respects the dignity and the freedom of the persons who are being entreated.

Paul founded this church and this church is rejecting him. He has every right to exercise power over them and say, "Don't you know who you're dealing with here?" Instead, he entreats, he pleads, he appeals. He seeks an opening of the heart, not just the arguments of the head. Head and heart come together in his attempt to win his opponents. He does not deny the truth, but he does not deny the persons who need to respond to that truth either. We do not want to put any barriers of attitude or language in the way, so that people can respond to the love of God in Christ.

As someone said one time about offensive adult behavior, "Don't you know the children are watching?" Don't we Christians know the world is watching? Don't we know that the very faith of those alongside are affected by the way in which we live our lives, by the way in which we handle conflict, by the way in which we enter into the ministry of reconciliation?

It isn't only important to get the message right, it is important that the messenger be right. This is summed up in the phrase, "The weapons of the righteous," or "The weapons of righteousness." We have heard all this language of culture wars. There is a temptation when you define something as to war to start thinking about world weapons that you use to win the war. Paul is talking about different kinds of weapons. He knows the conflict is real. People are perishing. Much is at stake. The weapons he chooses to fight with are not the weapons of

power, intimidation or coercion: they are the weapons of righteousness.

Look at his words in 2 Corinthians 6:4-5. ". . . As servants of God, we commend ourselves." How do we put ourselves forth? What is the basis of our credibility as we are out there in a broken world as servants of God? "We have commended ourselves through great endurance and afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleeplessness, hunger."

We're not in this for the short sprint. We are in this for the long haul. We stay. We serve. Situations hold afflictions, hardships, calamity, attack, sleepless nights. Is there one of us who, in our burden for a friend, for a child, for a colleague, has not known sleepless nights?

In verse 6 and following, Paul writes of purity and knowledge: the importance of understanding what is really going on, being informed, not being content with clichés, but wrestling with things to grasp their complexity. Sometimes we want it all in a slogan, or we don't want to commit. But here is purity of life, the willingness to learn, to listen, to know.

Next is patience. That is one of the hardest ones. World Vision began in China. Above the map of the world that was in the World Vision board room for many years, there was a little sign that said, "Pray for China." Decade after decade after decade, God was at work there although little could be seen. Patient prayer persevered. When the country opened up we discovered that there are now between 50 and 70 million Chinese Christians. Patience was rewarded.

Last is kindness. Words are, in a sense, at the heart of Richard Mouw's book, *Uncommon Decency*, and the word that is the weapon of righteousness is kindness, that which is gentle. It is a fruit of the spirit. It takes God working in us by the power of the Spirit for us to be kind to those who attack; for us to be kind to those who differ; for us to be kind to those who need to know and see lived out in our character the kindness of God. Using all the weapons of righteousness strengthens our work of reconciliation.

Lord, help us from saying, "It's not my fault. It's not my job." Help us from using words to hurt and wound. Help us to use words to heal, to tell the truth. Help our love to be genuine. Help us to rely, not on deceit or on power or manipulation or anything but the Holy Spirit and your power of love at work in Christ to reconcile all things in heaven and in earth. Lord, you know the cries of our hearts as people who live in brokenness in a broken world. We thank you. Through Christ's love we pray. Amen

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