

Reconciling
ALL THINGS



A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace and Healing

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Resources for Reconciliation

series editors

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I

Prevailing Visions of Reconciliation



We live in a broken world. Start the day with the newspaper or start it with a quiet time, you'll soon come face to face with the sin that separates us from God and puts up walls between people. The brokenness of our world is more than a point of Christian doctrine. It is a reality that shapes our daily lives.

In 1964, in Trosly-Breuil, France, two men with mental disabilities woke up in an isolated institution, shut off from a world that had little time for them. Useless to the economy that determines success for most of us, these men were destined to be little more than the recipients of mental health services. Meanwhile, in the same French town, a former naval officer and promising young academic named Jean Vanier had just finished his doctoral dissertation. Although to all appearances successful, Vanier was

lonely. Like the men in the mental institution, he was isolated and unsure whether anyone loved him for who he was. Vanier had no idea that he shared anything in common with men in a mental institution. Nothing had taught him to question society's division between "normal" people and the disabled.

In 1970 John Perkins, an African American pastor and community organizer who lived on "the black side" of rural Mendenhall, Mississippi, was nearly beaten to death by white state police officers. The Christianity that Perkins and the police officers shared did nothing to challenge the wall that racism had built between them. Indeed, in the aftermath of a brutal assault, Perkins could only hope that division would protect him from further violence. In the turmoil of 1970, he had good reason to want nothing to do with white people.

In 1974, Billy Neal Moore, an Army soldier at home on leave in Georgia, tried to rob seventy-seven-year-old Fred Stapton in his home. When Stapton heard an intruder, he shot into the darkness. Moore shot back and killed him. "When I found out that I had actually killed somebody, I couldn't believe it," Moore said. He pled guilty to the murder and was sentenced to death. Stapton's family had lost their father and grandfather; Moore had lost any hope of a future. Literal walls stood around Moore to ensure that he would never meet the people his actions had hurt. United by violence, Moore and his victim's family were divided by a society that could not imagine redemption.

In 1990, a white South African Anglican priest named Michael Lapsley, chaplain of the African National Congress at the time,

opened a letter from forces inside the apartheid government. The bomb inside blew off his hands and an eye, shattering his eardrums. For years Lapsley had patiently worked for justice in his country, only to be betrayed by white South Africans who considered him a traitor. Lapsley had tried to cross a dividing line and had come face to face with the power of division. Was he too idealistic, imagining that South Africa could move beyond apartheid to become a society that embraced white and black as equals?

In northern Uganda, where families live in fear inside one of the world's most pressing (and least talked about) situations of violence, 139 children were abducted from their school by the Lord's Resistance Army in 1996. The children included the fourteen-year-old daughter of Angelina Atyam, a midwife and nurse. Atyam knew she would never see her daughter again. Thousands of parents before her had bitterly resigned themselves to a brutal reality that could not be changed. She had every reason to be angry, but little room to hope that anything could change.

Though not all of us have experienced the large-scale trauma of war or the violence of brutal racism, we all know brokenness and division at some level, whether through divorce, abuse, social injustice, conflict in our community or right inside our own family. We live together in a broken world, and we do not have to live long to learn that we need healing. We need reconciliation. We know from experience that our world is broken and needs to be fixed.

But our problem is even deeper than this. We've also seen enough to know that our attempts to fix the problems of this

world further reveal the depths of our brokenness. The worst evils are committed not only in the name of evil but also in crusades in the name of fixing what is broken. Genocide attempts to wipe out whole peoples in order to “cleanse” society of entire ethnic groups. Wars are always waged for the sake of peace. On the interpersonal level, we’re always harshest to our friends when we think we need to fix them or feel the need to protect ourselves.

We know the world is broken, and we know we’re too broken to fix it ourselves. We teach our children a realist’s rhyme: “Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall / Humpty Dumpty had a great fall / And all the kings horses and all the kings men / Couldn’t put Humpty Dumpty back together again.” But Humpty-Dumpty realism begs the question, can anyone fix us? What or who is out there beyond our landscapes of brokenness?

In the modern world we try to bracket this question even as we seek reconciliation. We are aware that differences in religion can create conflict. So we try to find common ground without reference to anything beyond the common human experience. This makes reconciliation a very popular yet hopelessly vague (and therefore increasingly unhelpful) concept. It also forces some (especially those who have suffered great injustice) to insist that reconciliation is not the right goal in human conflict. “When were we ever unified?” they ask.

Without reference to an explicit beyond, we are left with versions of reconciliation that offer little concrete hope that fundamental change is possible. We want to be clear: when we

talk about the “beyond,” we mean the God who is revealed in Christian Scripture as Creator and Redeemer of the cosmos, the God of Israel who raised the crucified Jesus from the dead. A Christian vision of reconciliation needs a theological foundation. More than that, however, the term *beyond* reminds us that reconciliation is a journey beyond our own vision, beyond human actors and our strategies and programs. God’s desire and vision is beyond our desire and vision. Reconciliation is not merely the sum total of our work; it’s also the peculiar gift we learn to receive as we live into the story of God’s people. This explicit reference to God’s story is missing in the prevailing versions of reconciliation today.

RECONCILIATION AS INCREASINGLY POPULAR

Reconciliation has become a popular notion in our time, finding its way into the political rhetoric and public policy of many governments. South Africa and its apparently successful Truth and Reconciliation Commission have captured the imagination of many post-conflict societies (including Rwanda, Bosnia and some southern cities in the United States) as they debate the merits and possibility of such a commission in their own countries or communities. Interest in reconciliation in the academic world has increased, with scholarship on the topic and with institutions setting up “reconciliation studies” in the growing world of “peace studies” programs. Faith-based and other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in conflict areas around the world are working for reconcilia-

tion alongside Christian ministries that have adopted reconciliation as one of their goals.

It is perhaps not surprising that reconciliation has become a common goal. The end of the Cold War did not bring in the new world order of peace that many had hoped for. On the contrary, fragmentation, war, violence and civil unrest in a world polarized between rich and poor continue. Ethnic and religious identities seem to intensify as cultural and family ties disintegrate. In the midst of such a fragmented and broken world, reconciliation is a rallying cry for some hope of peace, solidarity and a better world.

With this growing popularity, reconciliation has become a vast buffet line from which anyone from power brokers to minority groups can pick and choose whatever they might want. The result is a fuzziness concerning reconciliation—and with it the danger that reconciliation's popularity may result in it meaning nothing. In an attempt to appeal to as wide a constituency as possible, we leave reconciliation to stand on its own, without reference to an explicit vision of life and society toward which it should lead.

We have been at many reconciliation events where people shed tears and exchanged hugs. But after those events, we always ask, what next? People usually go back to their normal way of life. What and where are the patterns of life and social structures to sustain a vision of reconciliation? Without them, reconciliation devolves into a one-time event. The question we want to ask is, reconciliation *toward what?*

RECONCILIATION AS INDIVIDUAL SALVATION

An emphasis on right relationship with God is crucial to a Christian vision of reconciliation. Faithful obedience to God is an invitation into a whole new way of life, a journey with God where our desires are increasingly transformed toward God's desires.

Yet there is a widespread notion in some of the most energetic contemporary Christian movements that the biblical call to reconciliation is solely about reconciling God and humanity, with no reference to social realities. In this view, preaching, teaching, church life and mission are only about a personal relationship between people and God. Christian energy is focused on winning converts, planting and growing churches, and evangelistic efforts. We have heard pastors say, "We appreciate the work you're doing, but as the leader of my church I'm called to stay focused on the gospel and not get distracted by other ministries." For them, Christianity is exclusively about personal piety and morals.

Another variety of this version of reconciliation is the explosive momentum of preaching and teaching centered on guarantees of personal prosperity. The gospel of wealth sells well in the United States, and it is doing even better in Africa, drawing in people by the thousands. I (Emmanuel) talked to a pastor in Rwanda who told me how enthusiastic he was about the growth of his megachurch outside Kigali. He did not mention his country's recent history of genocide. He was so confident that God was blessing his parishioners that he did not think it important to address the recent history of violence between Christians in his country.

Some have rightly described this as the “gospel of evacuation.” This false gospel promises either an afterlife of eternal bliss or blessings for individual well-being, which are not connected to the transformation of social realities. As we have written with a number of other Christian leaders from throughout the world, “the transmission of the gospel and the ministry of the church do not run in a pure, separate historical stream, but are carried on inside of and tainted by the world’s poisoned, muddy histories. All the agents of brokenness must be discerned and confronted—personal, social, and spiritual.”¹

The problem with individualistic Christianity is what we call “reconciliation without memory,” an approach that ignores the wounds of the world and proclaims peace where there is no peace (see Jer 8:11). This shallow kind of Christianity does not take local places and their history of trauma, division and oppression seriously. It abandons the past too quickly and confidently in search of a new future. Reconciliation as evacuation detaches the gospel from social realities and leaves that messy world to social agencies and governments. The result is a dualistic theology and superficial discipleship that separates individual salvation from social transformation.

RECONCILIATION AS CELEBRATING DIVERSITY

One of the most widespread and cherished notions of our time is that reconciliation is about promoting diversity in a pluralistic world. In a shrinking world of rising conflict over identity and difference, where we all face the presence of more and more

ethnic “strangers” in our midst, many seek a common ground on which to unite humanity. Nearly every American university has a center for multiculturalism. Promoting diversity just makes good business sense. Reconciliation becomes synonymous with celebrating difference or with making institutions and societies more “inclusive” of diverse people groups.

One positive contribution of the focus on diversity and multiculturalism has been to acknowledge that differences are not a threat but a gift to our life together. How boring when legitimate social, historical, cultural and ethnic differences are dissolved into a world of drab uniformity, a world without color, where all cats are gray. Even if such a world were possible, no one would want to live in it. The unique particularities of colors, histories, geographies and cultures make life interesting.

The problem arises when each group begins to think it is self-sufficient in its own identity. Moreover, in the absence of an explicit beyond, it is not clear what diversity really means, whose interests it serves, what it leads toward or why it is a good thing. For Christians, the language of reconciliation is not grounded in a historical or sociological reality, but in a theological one. A vision of reconciliation grounded in the story of God not only affirms diversity but also displays it as part of God’s purpose in creation. We are created with different gifts for the sake of playing different roles in Christ’s body (see 1 Cor 12:12-31). God’s story also names how all our diverse loyalties and allegiances have been compromised by Adam and Eve’s rebellion against God (see Gen 3). If the world is diverse

in ways that should be celebrated, we contend that it is also diverse in ways that are deeply disordered because of long histories of separation, injustice and struggles for power.

That is why a vision of reconciliation limited to “diversity” or “inclusion” does not go far enough. It easily becomes another ground on which interest groups contend for more power, failing to offer a higher vision than promoting one’s ethnicity or gender or culture as ends in themselves. Diversity fails to deliver a vision that makes it worth deep personal, cultural and national sacrifices such as being transformed by strangers, engaging enemies and absorbing pain without passing it on. Too often “diversity” becomes a cheap form of coalition building by essentially silencing difference, as in interreligious efforts that presume all religions are basically the same. An authentic way to work together in a pluralistic world is not to silence our differences but to truthfully share the convictions by which we see the world and to seek the common ground where that leads us.

RECONCILIATION AS ADDRESSING INJUSTICE

Another prevailing vision maintains that reconciliation must never be mentioned without saying “justice” in the same breath. Sometimes it is even claimed that justice must precede reconciliation. It is easy to understand the basis of this claim. Often reconciliation has been invoked as a naive, “can’t we all get along?” sentimentality or as the agenda of the powerful to “move on” without facing intricate demands for justice.

Much is at stake in who is saying “reconciliation,” what they mean by it and the experience and story out of which they speak. “No reconciliation without justice” can be an attempt to resist a politically or historically naïve vision of reconciliation that doesn’t take into account the complex processes and long history through which people’s sense of who they are has become connected to the past and its conflicts.

Once when I (Chris) was speaking about racial reconciliation to a group of black pastors in Houston, one said, “Look, you can’t talk about reconciliation apart from liberation.” He went on to talk about the historical politics of public education in Houston. He pointed out how whites and blacks were voting differently on an upcoming school bond issue based on their interests. He said the pursuit of a new relationship must not overlook the realities of power and insisted that these issues needed to be on the table when pursuing a new racial future in Houston.

Talk of reconciliation alone, especially when it sounds like a call to forget the past and move on, threatens not only the future of particular communities but individual identities as well. Martin Luther King Jr. often talked about the need for African-Americans to be integrated *into* power, not out of it. Minority groups feel this in particular. They know intimately the dangers of the false prophets who say, “‘Peace, peace’ but there is no peace” (Jer 8:11).

For others, seeing justice as prior to reconciliation is connected to beliefs about a deeply fallen world and the political realism associated with such beliefs. Given that all human en-

terprises are marked by sin, many believe war and conflict are inevitable consequences of this fallen reality. There will always be enemies. Instead of pretending we can build a perfect world where all hostilities are reconciled, we are better off accepting these tragic facts and concentrating our efforts on designing policies and structures that allow us to secure “the greatest good for the greatest number of people.” That is what justice promises.

No doubt, a strong emphasis on justice is crucial as it embraces the truth about evil and sin in the world. However, the challenge is, whose justice? The definition of justice is not self-evident. If it is to make sense or to lead to a transformed vision of human relations, justice requires a story. The justice of the Lord’s Table, for example, is not simply a punitive or retributive justice but a far more radical form, pursued within a vision of costly communion to bring together what has been torn apart.

Accordingly, if there is the “realism” that notes the limits of living in a sinful world, there is also the “realism” of the transforming, mysterious power that raised Jesus from the dead. Acts of injustice can be punished, repented of, publicly named and denounced, or even repaid, but they can never be undone. No act of justice can make up for the horrific loss of an abducted child or for the trauma of a near-death beating. Within a vision of pure, tit-for-tat, “realistic” justice, forgiveness can look naive indeed.

The quest for reconciliation and the quest for doing justice are closely connected to the quest for truth—not only the truth about “what went wrong” and how that is mended but also the truth about God’s costly embrace of an undeserving humanity in

spite of all that has gone wrong. Christians are a people whose life is to be a sign and ferment within the world, pointing to the truth about God's grace. One insufficient version of Christian mission is reconciliation without memory, jumping over the past too quickly by offering cheap grace to those who have done wrong and never repented.

But the other extreme is to create sophisticated initiatives that speak of redressing the structural results of historical injustices yet do not cast the vision of a new future of community and friendship between historic enemies. We call this "justice without communion." A future of shared life with enemies requires a long journey of persuasion and transformation of hearts, minds and desires. Such a future may seem unreasonably costly, but Jesus' story is a constant reminder that we live not by the logic of cause and effect but rather by the mysterious order of death and resurrection.

RECONCILIATION AS FIREFIGHTING

In the absence of a clear vision of where it leads, reconciliation has largely become a matter of addressing the urgent needs of division and conflict—relief, mediation, advocacy and conflict resolution. The image that comes to mind is that of firefighting—pragmatically trying to "put out" (or at least minimize) local and national fires of conflict, division, war and brokenness. In firefighting, we always need more water, better equipment and better-trained fighters. The focus is on better techniques. As a result, programs, initiatives and studies of reconciliation fo-

cus on developing and delivering skills, processes, strategies and how-to guides to places of conflict. More and more we look to professional “peacebuilders” and “reconcilers” as reconciliation becomes the exclusive terrain of “experts.”

We see this in work to decrease violence, feed the hungry, bind up the broken, forge truces in conflict situations and negotiate cooperation between historic enemies. Such works of mercy are desperately needed. Indeed, it is central to the Christian vision to practice and support such works. Many Christians not only engage in these but also lead the way around the world, from the governmental level to the grassroots. Some have even suggested that Christianity provides the deep motivation required for works of mercy, justice, forgiveness and truth-telling in a broken world.

However, in serving these social aspirations, Christianity can become one more way to achieve the same ends as an NGO or state diplomacy. If reconciliation as evacuation disconnects the gospel from social realities, reconciliation as firefighting transforms the church into a social agency. It is often unclear whether what Christians believe and practice makes any difference for what reconciliation looks like. The church fails to offer a unique answer to that crucial question, reconciliation *toward what?*

At best, Christian beliefs are seen as providing motivation to do more and better firefighting, to service the same ends sought by the “real” players in the worlds of diplomacy and statecraft. The church is the ambulance driver while others put out fires. What Christians believe does not seem to offer a unique vision

of healing in the midst of conflict or of human flourishing on the ground in real places. It is still the same world of fire, water, hoses, ambulances.

What we need is not simply better gear and techniques but a story that helps us remember another world is possible. The good news is that God's story offers us just that. In the midst of our world's deep brokenness, God's kingdom breaks in to create new possibilities.

In the small French town where the mentally disabled men and the lonely academic lived, a parish priest offered a bit of pastoral guidance to Jean Vanier. Vanier asked the priest what he should do with his life. The priest said, "Invite these two disabled men to live with you." This small act of trust and hospitality birthed the first L'Arche (the Ark) community. Today in some 130 L'Arche communities throughout the world, thousands of people with disabilities and long-term assistants share daily life in family-like homes within neighborhoods and towns. While L'Arche certainly works to help disabled people reach their full potential in society, Vanier maintains that the heart of their vocation is "communion" between the disabled and "temporarily-abled," across their mutual isolation, as they eat together and transform one another in the process.

As John Perkins recovered from the beating that had almost killed him, he had time to think. Lying on that hospital bed, he believed he was done with white people. But God interrupted his thoughts with a vision of an interracial community in the heart of Mississippi. Over the next four decades, defying the refrain that

Sunday is America's most segregated hour, the Voice of Calvary congregation and community development organization Perkins planted maintained a vibrant interracial life across economic boundaries. Inspired by this vision, many others started similar beloved communities in America's inner cities, with thousands joining in a movement called the Christian Community Development Association.

When Billy Neal Moore was in jail, awaiting the trial in which he would be sentenced to death, a minister shared with him the good news that Jesus loved him and wanted to forgive his sins. Moore learned that no one is beyond redemption. From prison, he wrote to his victim's family and asked their forgiveness. Astoundingly, they immediately wrote back to say that they also were Christians and that they forgave him. Then the family decided to petition the Georgia parole board to commute Moore's death sentence. In 1991, Moore was paroled from prison, transformed by the grace of God and his victim's family members. "When I was released, they embraced me like a brother," Moore said of Stapton's family. He has been preaching the gospel of forgiveness to schoolchildren and church groups ever since.²

In the painful aftermath of his near-fatal bomb injuries, Michael Lapsley struggled to find the real hope God offers to people who would rather kill their neighbors than have to deal with them. Knowing that the future we imagine has everything to do with how we remember the past, Lapsley founded the Institute for the Healing of Memories in South Africa. At this retreat cen-

ter, thousands of everyday South Africans of all colors and backgrounds have taken intensive weekend journeys together into healing their wounds of violence and separation. It has become a place where all South Africans can gather to imagine a new future, even as they live in a society unimaginable in 1990.

We can never forget the rest of Angelina Atyam's story. She refused to be silent when her daughter was abducted. Atyam and other mothers of abducted children began the Concerned Parents' Association, seeking the release of the children while advocating a different approach toward their captors. "Our message is unconditional forgiveness and reconciliation," she said. "We have absolutely forgiven them. We can turn to a fresh page; we do it for the sake of the children who are alive." She continued, "I have waited more than three years; some parents even longer. We are tired of war, and our children need a better life. Of revenge I would say that we cannot throw petrol on a burning fire; otherwise we would be like them. We can say this because we have been at the center of the pain."³

At the center of pain, God breaks in to reveal a new creation. Within landscapes of deep brokenness, these five interrupted lives were sustained by particular convictions about God and God's mission of reconciliation in a broken world. Apart from these convictions, their journeys do not make sense in a world where the endless cycle of "an eye for an eye" and group self-interest is the norm. These five journeys embody a unique vision of reconciliation, somehow received from beyond the normal realm of human actors.

This book is about unveiling God's distinct vision of reconciling all things in Jesus Christ. The prevailing visions of reconciliation in our church and society are insufficient because they cannot make sense of stories like those of Jean Vanier, John Perkins, Billy Neal Moore, Michael Lapsley and Angelina Atyam. We need a new vision for reconciliation, and we believe God has provided it in the peculiar story of Scripture. But we don't just believe it because it sounds good or because we're unsatisfied with the other options. We believe it because we've seen it in the lives of people and communities transformed by the ministry of reconciliation, and we have experienced it in our own journeys. We believe it because we've been caught up in the story of God that continues to unfold in the midst of our broken world.

So we'd like to invite you to step back from the world of prevailing visions and rediscover this story with us. Maybe you can even catch a glimpse of what God's new world might look like in the midst of the brokenness you know intimately. We want to begin by remembering together the story of God's new creation.