

Grace Overflowing: Reflections on Paul's Theology of Reconciliation

Christopher Marshall

In my book *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment*¹ I draw attention to the prominent role that forgiveness plays in the teaching of Jesus, and connect it to the practice of restorative justice as a contemporary institutional application. In this essay, I want to focus on Paul's great theology of reconciliation. Like forgiveness, it too has a clear socio-political dimension, and one that has similarly been eclipsed by the doctrinal tradition's tendency to individualize and spiritualize its meaning.²

Paul as Exemplary Peacemaker

Prior to his conversion to Christ, Paul was a self-described "zealot",³ a term that at the time had the specific connotation of one who was prepared to use lethal violence to defend the religious community and to punish apostasy. Zeal was virtually a holy war term in first-century Judaism.⁴ Paul speaks expressly of his vicious terrorising of those he deemed blasphemers (Acts 26:11), and how he "persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it."⁵ Consumed with holy indignation, he became, in his own later words, "a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence...the foremost of sinners" (1 Tim 1:12-15). One prominent New Testament scholar draws a direct analogy between Paul's violent religious fundamentalism and that of Yigal Amir who assassinated Israeli politician, Yitzak

¹ Christopher D. Marshall, *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Grand Rapids MI: Wm B. Eerdmans 2001)

² This hitherto unpublished paper was originally prepared with a celebration of the work of Donald Schriver in mind, and in particular his two books *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1995) and *Honest Patriots: Loving a Country Enough to Remember its Misdeeds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

³ Gal 1:14; Phil 3:6, cf. Rom 10:2; Acts 21:20; 22:3. For a brilliant discussion of the "paradox of zeal", see Robert Jewett & John Shelton Lawrence, *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism* (Grand Rapids MI; Wm B. Eerdmans, 2003), 149-66.

⁴ See, for example, J.D.G. Dunn & A. M. Suggate, *The Justice of God: A Fresh Look at the Old Doctrine of Justification by Faith* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1993), 23-25; T. L. Donaldson, "Zealot and Convert: The Origin of Paul's Christ-Torah Antithesis", *CBQ* 51 (1989), 655-82; Vincent M. Smiles, "The Concept of 'Zeal' in Second-Temple Judaism and Paul's Critique of it in Romans 10:2", *CBQ* 64 (2002), 282-99.

⁵ Gal 1:13-14; 1 Cor 15:9-10; Phil 3:6; cf. Acts 8:3; 9:1-2; 22:4; 26:9-11

Rabin, in November 1995 for betraying his own people by pursuing peace with Israel's enemies.⁶

After his Damascus Road experience and his learning of the "ways of Christ" (1 Cor 4:17), Paul not only repudiated violence against Gentiles and their Jewish Christian sympathisers, he devoted his entire life and career to defending their rights of incorporation into the family of Israel, and to proclaiming how the "God of peace"⁷ – a term virtually unique to Paul – had now made peace through Christ between those who are near and those who were far off.⁸

In all this, Paul considered himself to be imitating Christ,⁹ and he offered himself to his converts as a role model for them to emulate in turn.¹⁰ Paul came to believe that this blasphemer – this persecutor, this man of violence, this foremost of sinners – had "received mercy" from God, and "a grace overflowing with the faith and love," in order that he might become "an example to those who believe in him for eternal life" (1 Tim 1:13-16). It is surely telling to note, in our current political context, that the most influential person in the early Christian movement was a transformed terrorist who saw his religiously inspired violence of the past as blasphemy and his repudiation of it to be a pattern for all other believers.

It was his personal transformation from terrorist to peacemaker that also helped birth his great theology of reconciliation. Although he does not use the vocabulary of reconciliation all that frequently, the concept of reconciliation clearly lies close to the heart of his theological outlook. Nowhere is this more obvious than in 2 Cor 5:16-21.

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So, we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his

⁶ Tom Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Oxford: Lion, 1997), 28-29.

⁷ Rom 15:33; 16:20; Phil 4:9; 1 Thess 5:23; cf. Heb 13:20

⁸ See esp. Rom 9-11; 15:7-13; cf. Eph 2:11-3:21

⁹ 1 Cor 11:1; 2 Cor 4:10-11; 1 Thess 1:2-6; Gal 6:17; Phil 2:5-11.

¹⁰ 1 Cor 4:16; 11:1; 1 Thess 1:2-6; 2 Thess 3:7-9; cf. 1 Peter 2:21, cf. 1 Tim 1:16.

appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

This highly compressed account of Paul's theology of reconciliation contains several important insights into the nature and task of reconciliation, especially when we bring it into conversation with the other passages where reconciliation language occurs, such as Romans 5 and Ephesians 2. At least four lessons emerge.

A discovery

The first thing to note is that, for Paul, *reconciliation is discovered, not manufactured*. It is energised by the discovery of divine grace, not by the strength of human will power. That is why in Romans 5:11 Paul speaks of "receiving reconciliation", not of "achieving" it. Paul reached out in friendship towards those he once persecuted, not because he had grown tired of violence and enmity, but because he had been utterly overwhelmed at the immensity of God's reconciling mercy towards him. He didn't talk himself into tolerating his foes; instead he found that the love of God poured into his heart through the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5) overflowed in reconciling hospitality towards others.

That is not to say Paul found it *easy* to be a reconciler. Even as an apostle, he had many enemies in the Christian movement, and we know from his letters that he sometimes burned with outrage at their destructive actions – not least, their insistence on excluding Gentile believers from full equality in the community of faith.¹¹ But Paul knew that he had no choice but to be committed to the hard work of reconciliation, because of the reconciling grace he had himself experienced.

Moreover, he knew that his own experience was not just happenstance, some arbitrary benefit fortuitously bestowed on him. It was a revelation of something far grander at work behind the scenes; it was an initiation into God's transcendent work in Jesus Christ of "reconciling the *world* to himself" (2 Cor 5:19; Rom 11:15).

In his useful little book on reconciliation, Robert Schreiter emphasizes that reconciliation is a spirituality more than a strategy. It is not simply a set of technical, problem-solving skills applied to situations of conflict. Above and before all else, it is a response to *God's* reconciling action in the world. "We experience God's justifying and

¹¹ See, for example, Gal 1:6-9; 2:11-14; 5:12; 2 Cor 2:17; 11:4-5, 13-15; 12:11.
The Kenarchy Journal (2021), 2, 64-72 Copyright © 2021

reconciling activity in our own lives and in our communities”, Schreiter proposes, “and it is from that experience that we are able to go forth in a ministry of reconciliation”.¹² This was certainly Paul’s experience.

A divine initiative

This leads to a second observation. What was most remarkable about Paul’s experience was that he discovered that God had taken the initiative in bringing about reconciliation. “All this is from God”, Paul writes, “who has reconciled us to himself through Christ” (2 Cor 5:18). It was God – the supreme victim of human depredation and rebellion – that had taken the decisive step to embrace his enemies. “For while we were yet enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son” (Rom 5:10).

Paul hammers this point home repeatedly in Romans 5: Christ died for the “ungodly”, while we were “still weak”, “still sinners”, still “enemies” (vv.6,8,10). But how can this be? If reconciliation is, by definition, a two-sided affair, where former foes mutually agree to live at peace with each other, how can God unilaterally confer reconciliation on those who are his enemies, those who remain hostile?

The answer lies, I suspect, in Paul’s understanding of Christ’s representative or mediatorial role. The early Christians believed that heaven and earth met uniquely in the person of Jesus Christ. From the divine side, as the Son of God, Christ represented and embodied God’s peacemaking initiative towards the human race. From the human side, as second Adam, he represented and exhibited humanity’s willing acceptance of God’s gracious offer of reconciliation, displayed in his steadfast obedience to God that endured even to the point of death on the cross (Rom 5:19).

In Christ, divine mercy and human faithfulness converged, and peace was secured between God and humanity. That which blighted humankind’s relationship to God was exposed and dealt with. “For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (v.21). No longer, then, does God count humanity’s trespasses against us (v.19), for “through our Lord Jesus Christ”, Paul proclaims, “we have now received reconciliation” (Rom 5:11; Phil 2:8).

¹² Robert J. Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 60, cf. 26-27.

God's work of reconciliation is, of course, unique; it is not something we can simply copy. But there are still profound lessons we can learn from God's endeavor. That God has taken the initiative in Christ, for example, underscores the truth that reconciliation depends, finally, on the willingness and capacity of victims to forgive. Even if the first move comes from the perpetrators of violence, torture and brutality (and this is rare), it is only victims who have the power to reconcile. And victims can only do so if they know that the sins perpetrated against them will not be ignored or minimized, but will be confronted honestly and dealt with restoratively.

Similarly, the fact that exposing and dealing with sin on the cross meant that Christ had to endure the horrors of bodily torture, humiliation, and death underscores the lesson that reconciliation is never cheap. It not only requires that we address the physical and emotional consequences of violence on victims, it also requires us to confront the malevolent epicentre of violence itself. It calls us to face up to the structural and systemic nature of violence, to recognize the extent to which its poison permeates all of life, a poison which seeps deeply into the very bones of those directly embroiled in it, whether as victims, perpetrators or bystanders.

This confrontation with structural evil is precisely what God did on the cross, achieving what Paul believed to be the reconciliation of all things to himself (Col 1:20) – an objective, trans-historical shift in the actual order of things.¹³

A response of faith

Yet Paul knew from his own experience that in order for anyone to benefit from this cosmic transaction, there must be an answering response of faith on the part of each individual, which is a third feature of Paul's understanding of divine peacemaking.

Reconciliation between persons can never be coerced or imposed; it can only be invited and received. This is what Paul considered to be the "ministry of reconciliation" (v.18), the extending of an invitation to all people to recognize and appropriate the cosmic reconciliation that God had already accomplished. "So, we are ambassadors for Christ", he explains, "since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you, on behalf of Christ, be

¹³ See my recent book, *All Things Reconciled: Essays on Restorative Justice, Religious Violence and the Interpretation of Scripture* (Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 2018)
The Kenarchy Journal (2021), 2, 64-72 Copyright © 2021

reconciled to God” (v.20, cf. Col 1:23) – that is to say, enter personally into what God has already done in Christ.

It would be a mistake, however, to reduce this ministry of reconciliation to a purely evangelistic level, as is usually done. It is not simply a matter of summoning isolated individuals to get right with God. Rather it is inviting them to be reconciled with a reconciling-God, to be reunited with a God who is unceasingly engaged in the business of the healing and restoring and reconciling all creation. “So, if anyone is in Christ”, Paul explains, “there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (v.17).

Again, the apostle is not just talking here about personal regeneration. He is affirming that God’s work of reconciliation is all-embracing in scope and transforms the entire created order, even if it is only those who are “in Christ” who can see and understand what God is doing, and begin to make it their own.

A commitment to peacemaking

This brings us to a fourth point. For Paul, the most obvious and pressing implication of being caught up in God’s new creation was an urgent commitment to peacemaking between hostile human communities, in particular between Jews and Gentiles.

Perhaps this is what he means when he says, “From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way” (1 Cor 5:16). The categorizing of people as friend or foe on the basis of secondary human distinctions, such as gender, class, nationality and race, no longer governs God’s new creation. A new humanity has been inaugurated, “where in there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female” (Gal 3:28; Col 3:11). This is spelled out with unmistakable clarity in Ephesians 2:12-16.

Remember that you [Gentiles] were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

This mention of “one new humanity in place of the two” does not mean that all human distinctions are abolished in Christ, with Jews somehow ceasing to be Jews, and Gentiles ceasing to be Gentiles, any more than males cease to be males or females, females. It means, rather, that distinctions between individuals and people-groups are celebrated and no longer fuel rivalry and odium.

But it means even more than that too: it means that the lived-experience of each community is now incorporated in the shared experience of both, so that together both become a new, inclusive form of humanity. Gentile Christians now find their identity shaped by the story of Israel; Jewish Christians find their Jewishness enriched and completed by their embracing of non-Jewish believers in Messiah as brothers and sisters; and both find their identity fulfilled in Christ.

There is a profound practical truth here. When former antagonists are reconciled with one another, both sides are changed forever. A new creation comes to pass. Reconciliation is not the restoration of the parties to some former state, minus the antagonism. It is the start of something different, a *creatio ex nihilo*, a new type of human experience.¹⁴ It is the commencement of a new kind of relationship between the parties, stemming from the fact that the identity of each side has been transformed by their acceptance of the other’s concrete experience.

Both sides, separately and together, come to a new place. The sufferings of victims and the atrocities of victimizers, on both sides of the divide, are not simply forgotten or denied. They are taken up into this new creation, integrated into the experience of both sides in a transforming, restorative way, so that a new identity and a new future are opened up for both. No wonder Ephesians calls the transformation afforded by the experience of reconciliation a “mystery”, indeed the very “mystery of Christ” (Eph 3:3-5).

Clearly, then, Paul’s theology of reconciliation is profound and searching. It was birthed in his own Damascus Road experience of God’s reconciling grace, and it fundamentally shaped his subsequent missionary practice. Paul’s life and teachings show that those who have been reconciled with the reconciling-God have no choice but to be committed to working for reconciliation between human communities divided by enmity,

¹⁴ “If we really believed in a God who creates *ex nihilo* we would practice restorative justice more often, realizing, like the psalmist, that even in hell God seeks our salvation”, Michael Battle, *Practicing Reconciliation in a Violent World* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2005), 70.

violence, or hated. This is no easy task, of course, for if it cost God the suffering and death of his beloved Son, it will be no less free of cost for those who follow in his footsteps.

But the responsibility to practice reconciliation is inescapable. To fail to do so is to throw the Christian community into a profound identity crisis. As Michael Battle observes, “The church finds itself in an identity crisis when its members do not practice the messiness of reconciliation on a regular basis. In fact, one may argue that until Christians understand reconciliation as our primary work in the world, we will never understand Christian identity”.¹⁵ For the good news of the gospel is that God has acted in Christ to vanquish sin and transform the very structures of reality, entrusting to his people the responsibility to proclaim this reconciling event “to every creature under heaven” (Col 1:23).

This proclamation must involve more than just words, and certainly more than just religious words intelligible only to fellow believers. It also requires concrete actions that give flesh to the word, both within and beyond the community of faith. Within the believing community, it requires a commitment to deal with past and present harms, hurts and conflicts in a spirit of just peacemaking and forgiveness. Beyond the church, it involves bearing witness in the public square to the restorative nature of divine justice and to where the wind of the Spirit may be blowing in contemporary struggles for peace and social justice.

If Paul were to time-travel into our own day, and could witness, not only the modern church’s failure to reach out in reconciliation across the bitter divisions that afflict the human family, but also its proclivity to sanction, sometimes even to bless in God’s name, the use of violence by nations to achieve partisan goals, I am sure he would snap at us with the same words of rebuke addressed to the church at Ephesus: “That is not the way you learned Christ!” (Eph. 4:20). For reconciliation is nothing more than giving feet to what we see modeled in Christ, what we have learned of Christ, and what Christ has done for us.

Bibliography

Battle, Michael. *Practicing Reconciliation in a Violent World*. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2005.

Donaldson, T. L. “Zealot and Convert: The Origin of Paul’s Christ-Torah Antithesis.” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 151, 1989.

¹⁵ Battle, *Practicing Reconciliation*, 78
The Kenarchy Journal (2021), 2, 64-72

Dunn, J. D. G. & A. M. Suggate, *The Justice of God: A Fresh Look at the Old Doctrine of Justification by Faith*. Carlisle: Paternoster, 1993.

Jewett, Robert & John Shelton Lawrence. *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism*. Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2003.

Marshall, Christopher D. *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001.

..... *All Things Reconciled: Essays on Restorative Justice, Religious Violence and the Interpretation of Scripture*. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2018.

Schreier, Robert J. *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992.

Schriner, Donald. *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1995, and *Honest Patriots: Loving a Country Enough to Remember its Misdeeds*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Smiles, Vincent M. "The Concept of 'Zeal' in Second-Temple Judaism and Paul's Critique of it in Romans 10:2." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 64, 2002.

Wright, Tom. *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* Oxford: Lion, 1997.