

They may be slim booklets, but they are significant markers of a new and renewed possibility for Faith and Order and for the WCC.

Conclusion

In many parts of our own lives, we know so well that unity and love belong together. The very word “communion,” *koinonia*, a word that ecumenists sometimes now choose to use above unity, is itself often used to describe the kind of dynamic unity or union that is made when people are encountering love. When we “commune with nature,” we recognize our unity with it and we celebrate that. In our most intimate lives, we may experience, if we are truly blessed and if it is our vocation, the wonder of the kind of love that brings human beings together in such a way that they are made one – not just physically but, we might say, spiritually. Love draws us to one another, makes us want to be together, to share everything we have, to make a new community, to bring forth life, and to stand beside one another even when trouble comes and when suffering is deep. Love and communion, love and unity, go hand in hand, and we often discover the second when we are moved by the first.

In Faith and Order, and in the wider work of the WCC, we often work tirelessly to reach agreement on texts and to find doctrinal agreement, doing the kind of slow, patient work over decades that, in sometimes small and sometimes significant ways, does bring about change. But it has often been the experience of those who work in the ecumenical fields that the words come best when we have got to know one another so well that the will and the desire to cherish love between us is deep. Then the words flow much more easily. Then the defences can come down, the anxiety and even sometimes the resentment can be overcome, and a new wisdom can be spoken. The work is done as much in the friendship as in the debate. An ecumenism of the heart has the potential to cut much more deeply than even the most rapier-sharp minds among us. And an ecumenical journey that is more like a pilgrimage – engaging body, mind, and heart – is more likely to be one in which all of us can find ourselves on common ground, on level ground, and on fruitful ground. An ecumenism newly inspired by love, moved by love, and shaped by body, mind, and *heart* may find that it beats more strongly for new times and among new communities.

Reconciliation: Divine and Human

2 Corinthians 5 from a Theological Perspective

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Abstract

Reconciliation is one of the key motifs used by the apostle Paul and other New Testament authors influenced by him as they sought to express the significance and reach of God's salvific act in Jesus Christ. To reflect on the theme of reconciliation means reflecting on the very centre of the good news. This theme is not one aspect of the gospel alongside others. Rather, it suffuses the apostolic message as a whole. The theme of reconciliation lies at the very heart of Christian theology: it expresses the overarching intent of God in the face of human violence and conflict. If we follow the apostle Paul's key text on this theme, we must note that the root of reconciliation lies not in our actions but exclusively in God's act. We, as people who are as pilgrims on this earth, are not merely agents of reconciliation, but also those who are and who remain in dire need to receive the gift of reconciliation.

Keywords

reconciliation, καταλλαγή, 2 Corinthians 5, St Paul, reconciliation

An Unfamiliar (Greek) Term

Reconciliation is a key motif used by the apostle Paul and other New Testament authors influenced by him as they sought to express the significance and reach of God's salvific act in Jesus Christ. To reflect on the theme of reconciliation means reflecting on the very centre of the good news. This theme is not one aspect of the gospel alongside

others. Rather, it suffuses the apostolic message as a whole.¹ Arguably, this theme was also central in the Old Testament, and it remained so within the life of Judaism, as the feast of Yom Kippur attests. Yom Kippur is the “day of atonement,” a day which “means a new reconciliation”: “against the brokenness of guilt and the isolation of sin, Yom Kippur offers the wholeness of living, the oneness of community,” writes Rabbi Irving Greenberg.² It is the holiest day of the year for many Jews.³

Among the most important New Testament passages that express God’s work as a reconciling work is 2 Corinthians 5:14–6:2. In what follows, I examine this text, seeking to draw from it theological insights about reconciliation, which, very helpfully, the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) invites us to consider afresh with its theme “Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity.”

Much has been written on reconciliation, both exegetically and theologically, and yet who would say this is a familiar topic for Christians today? Many know the Greek word that corresponds to the English term “gospel” (εὐαγγέλιον; *euaggelion*). Other significant theological terms, such as the words μετάνοια (*metanoia*) or καιρός (*kairos*), are used widely among Christians. But few, it seems to me, know the Greek term used by the apostle Paul and other early Christian authors to speak of “reconciliation”: καταλλαγή (*katallagē*). This term was used in Hellenistic literature to designate the overcoming of enmity between people, mostly in political and legal or juridical contexts. Plato used it to speak of the kinds of things prayers and sacrifices may achieve.⁴ The verb καταλλάσσω has connotations of “changing,” which is the primary meaning of the verb *allassō*, alongside the meaning of “exchanging,” whereas κατά serves as an intensifier (κατά + ἀλλάσσω). Usage of this verb in religious contexts is rare, but

¹ “Es geht ums Ganze der apostolischen Botschaft, nicht um ein Thema unter anderen.” Gerhard Sauter, “Was heisst, was ist ‘Versöhnung?’” in *Versöhnung als Thema der Theologie*, ed. Gerhard Sauter in cooperation with Heinrich Assel (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1997), 16. Ralph P. Martin goes too far, however, when he writes, “If we are pressed to suggest a simple term that summarizes his message, the word reconciliation will be the ‘chief theme’ or ‘centre’ of his missionary and pastoral thought and practice.” Ralph P. Martin, *Reconciliation: A Study of Paul’s Theology* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 5.

² Irving Greenberg, *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays* (New York: Touchstone, 1988), 207 and 212.

³ “Many Jews who observe only one holiday a year make it Yom Kippur.” Ibid., 111. “The Old Testament has reconciliation at the heart of its Torah. There we see the elaborate and carefully worked out system for bringing the people of Israel into right relationship with God.” Christopher Seitz, “Reconciliation and the Plain Sense Witness of Scripture,” in *The Redemption: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on Christ as Redeemer*, ed. Stephen T. David, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O’Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 41.

⁴ Plato, *Menexenus* 244a (where both the verb διαλλάσσω and the related noun διηλλάγηθα appear). See Jean-Noël Aletti, “God Made Christ to Be Sin (2 Corinthians 5:21): Reflections on a Pauline Paradox,” in *The Redemption*, 105. For other Greek mentions of “reconciliation” in relation to the gods, see Cilliers Breytenbach, *Grace, Reconciliation, Concord: The Death of Christ in Graeco-Roman Metaphors* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 176.

instances can be found within Hellenistic Judaism. It is in fact mostly in this particular cultural context that one finds this verb used in a religious, or theological, sense.⁵

God the Reconciler Urging Human Beings to Be Reconciled

The apostle Paul makes two basic and forceful claims in relation to the event of “reconciliation”: namely, God has “reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18). A Christian theology of reconciliation cannot bypass the first claim in order to focus on the second one, nor can it delve into the first one at the expense of the second.

Our predicament, as Christian theologians, seems to me to be quite clear: we have difficulties articulating these two facets of reconciliation; therefore we find it difficult to follow Paul in what he is doing in his letter to the Corinthian community. We tend to hurry toward the second claim, on the ministry of reconciliation that has been entrusted to Christ’s disciples, losing sight of the fact that what has been entrusted flows directly and decisively from God’s reconciling act through Christ. Others, in contrast, are so fascinated with what God did and does in Christ that they sideline the ministry that God entrusts to those who listen to God.

“In Christ God Was Reconciling the World to Himself”

In 2 Corinthians 5:19 we read “In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself” (θεὸς ἦν ἐν Χριστῷ κόσμον καταλλάσσειν ἑαυτῷ).

Exegetically and theologically speaking, reconciliation is first and foremost *God’s* own act. No human participation or collaboration is mentioned at this stage. It is God, and God alone, who in Jesus reconciled the world to Godself. Note that the apostle Paul is speaking of a past event here. In addition, this event does not concern a particular group of human beings (the “elect,” for instance, or the people of Israel), for God’s reconciling act alters “the world” (κόσμον; *kosmon*) as a whole.⁶

How did God effect this reconciliation? By “not counting their trespasses against them” (verse 19; τὰ παραπτώματα αὐτῶν), by taking upon Godself what belonged to

⁵ Thomas Schmeller, *Der zweite Brief an die Korinther – Teilband I: 2Kor 1,1-7,4* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag and Ostfildern: Patmos-Verlag, 2010), 329.

⁶ Christoph Schwöbel underlines both the theocentric and the universal dimensions of “reconciliation” in 2 Corinthians 5 in his article: “Reconciliation: From Biblical Observations to Dogmatic Reconstruction,” in *The Theology of Reconciliation*, ed. Colin E. Gunton, 13–38 (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 16–17; see also Cilliers Breytenbach, *Versöhnung: Eine Studie zur paulinischen Soteriologie* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1989), 192.

us – namely our injustice – and by conferring upon us what belongs to God – namely justice – in what Luther, following late medieval mystics, called a “joyous exchange.”⁷

This is the event of God’s forgiveness, which is the very ground of reconciliation. Instead of practising the kind of retribution we as humans are so prone to favour, God did (and does) not count our rebellion as a motif for punishment. God reached (and reaches) out to human beings *despite* their actions and their sin. The sending of the Son as well as the Son’s entire ministry occurred not in order to condemn but in order to restore and renew. This is another way to express the fact that God did not count our trespasses against us. In other words, God did not wait for a likely (or, rather, unlikely) “satisfaction” that human beings might offer to restore their broken bond. “What can we say when the offended partner himself provides the means to reconciliation and permits his only Son to be mortally struck by sin?”⁸ God took the initiative of restoring the bond with his creatures, knowing full well the cost of such a decision. The *kenosis* of the Son of God is expressed in all its radicality in 2 Corinthians 5: “For our sake [God] made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin” (2 Cor. 5:21). On the cross, Christ “became a curse” for our sake (Gal. 3:13). The heart of reconciliation, for the Christian faith, lies in the event of the cross and the overcoming of sin, that is, of division, which this event effected and effects. *How* exactly this was effected lies beyond what any of us can explain in full. That this took place, and that it changes everything for us still today, is a core tenet of the Christian faith.

These certainties arguably lie behind the apostle Paul’s forceful formulation: “For the love of Christ urges us on” (2 Cor. 5:14; ἡ γὰρ ἀγάπη τοῦ Χριστοῦ συνέχει ἡμᾶς). Here, we see the very basis of Paul’s apostolic ministry, that is, the reality that sent him on his way to become the apostle of the Gentiles, ceaselessly witnessing to the gospel in the face of various kinds of perils. Christ took death upon himself, consenting to it rather than attempting to circumvent or resist it: in this, he manifested his love even to those who were putting him to death. For Christ’s forgiving love included even those who were torturing him.

It is this love that “urges us on,” Paul writes: this love exerted a powerful effect on the former enemy and persecutor of Christ’s earliest disciples. This love completely upended Paul’s life, conferring upon him a new identity that came to be expressed in his renaming: from Saul to Paul. Just as Christ loved not in order to gain anything for

⁷ Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian,” in *Luther’s Works*, trans. W. A. Lambert, revised by Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958), 31:349, 351–52. For this expression in the German original, “fröhlicher Wechsel,” see also the Latin version, “admirabile commercium”; see Weimarer Ausgabe (WA) 7:25, 34, in Luther’s 1520 treatise *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen*.

⁸ Aletti, “God Made Christ to be Sin (2 Corinthians 5:21),” 120.

himself but in a movement of complete self-giving, Paul was the beneficiary of this radical change of perspective whereby one’s life is no longer something to be “grasped,” “exploited” (Phil. 2:6), and controlled, but instead something to be freely given in service to Christ, to the gospel, for the sake of others. This is one way of interpreting the apostle’s sentence: “And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them” (2 Cor. 5:15). An entirely new way of discerning, of judging (see the expression κρίναντας τοῦτο [*krinantas touto*], from the verb κρίνειν, *krinein*: 2 Cor. 5:14), has come into play, flowing from the encounter with the love of Christ, that is, with Christ’s own love even for those who rejected him and for those who were thought to be “impure.”⁹

God Reconciling Rather than Being Reconciled

The apostle Paul does not enjoin the Corinthian community to reconcile God to themselves.¹⁰ Rather, he says, “be reconciled to God” (end of verse 20). In other words, “let yourselves be reconciled to God.” Paul is stressing that God is the primary agent, and therefore not the object, of reconciliation.¹¹ Reconciliation comes from God’s sending of Jesus Christ. Reconciliation began in the past event of this sending. And yet this past event is not closed upon itself, remote from us. Rather, it impacts the very present of the disciples and of the world: this past event is in fact open toward our own situation, effecting something for the Corinthian community and still for us today.

Not that our response to God’s reconciling work in any way enacts this work: it remains *God’s* work (see also Col. 1:19–22). But God’s work is directed at the world and at us, and therefore it somehow must include our own response to it. God’s work calls for a corresponding response on the part of human beings.

This somewhat subtle claim concerning God’s work as both effected in a past event and calling for a human response is based on the use of verbal tenses in Paul’s text: in verse 18 one finds a past tense (καταλλάξαντος; *katallaxantos*), whereas in the subsequent verse the apostle uses an imperfect tense (καταλλάσσω; *katallassōn*).¹² A theological interpretation of this passages requires us to take note of these two verbs rather than exclude one for the sake of the other. There is both a past efficacious event *and* ongoing implications of that event for us today. We cannot overturn or cancel this past

⁹ Erich Grässer, *Der zweite Brief an die Korinther: Kapitel 1,1–7,16* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus and Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 2002), 216–17.

¹⁰ Schmeller, *Der zweite Brief an die Korinther*, 334–35.

¹¹ Among others, see Breytenbach, *Grace, Reconciliation, Concord*, 16 and 177; Martin, *Reconciliation*, 106.

¹² Schmeller, *Der zweite Brief an die Korinther*, 335.

event, but we can to some extent obstruct it, blocking its light from reaching us as well as others around us.

The Ministry of Reconciliation

To be a Christian, to be part of the community of Jesus Christ's disciples, means living in the light and power of God's reconciling act. If, as Christians confess, Christ is himself "our peace," breaking down the wall of separation (Eph. 2:14) between Jews and Gentiles, then members of Christ's body cannot busy themselves erecting walls between people. All of us human beings, and all living creatures, are called by God to come into existence, to live in God's light, and to render witness to God as reconciler. It is very sad, and indeed scandalous, to see Christians either erecting walls themselves, speaking positively of walls that are erected to keep "undesired" populations away, or defending politicians who thrive on a message of fear of others and of disregard of human beings who seek a better life for themselves and for their children (as if these politicians, and their Christian supporters, would not themselves attempt to reach safer and more stable countries if they lived in the kinds of troubled countries from which these populations are fleeing).

True and False "Unity"

Prophetic messages in the Hebrew scriptures are filled with disputes over the interpretation of Israel's state of affairs. Supposed "prophets" turn out to be messengers of lies, whereas God's prophets at times suffer at the hands of people, including religious authorities, who are ready to use violence to silence them.

The people of Anathoth, Jeremiah's hometown, are said to have warned the prophet with these words: "You shall not prophesy in the name of the Lord, or you will die by our hand" (Jer. 11:21). Later in the book of Jeremiah, the reader finds out that a violent conflict opposed Jeremiah to Hananiah, a supposed prophet who had in fact not been sent by God (Jer. 28:15). After listening to Jeremiah in the temple, the priests, the prophets, and all the people "laid hold of him, saying, 'You shall die!'" (Jer. 26:7-8). Another prophet at the time, named Uriah, son of Shemaiah, had a message similar to Jeremiah's. He was hunted down by King Jehoiakim all the way to Egypt, where he had fled, brought back to Israel, and executed (Jer. 26:20-23). We are then told that Jeremiah would have suffered the same fate had he not received the protection of a powerful family (Jer. 26:24).

In our own time, we find instances of similar conflicts between genuine prophetic figures and defenders of institutional religion and traditional social patterns. When Martin

Luther King Jr arrived in Birmingham, Alabama, in early 1963, several pastors sent him a message asking him to leave their city, for chaos was sure to happen. These pastors, who were all white, titled their message "A Call for Unity."¹³ As they saw it, King's protests were both "unwise and untimely." Retrospectively, one cannot but think of Jeremiah's message: "They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace" (Jer. 8:11).

King wrote a lengthy response to his colleagues' "call." This response has since achieved classic status, becoming one of his most celebrated texts: the "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" (April 1963).¹⁴ Here is a brief excerpt from King's answer to his fellow clerics:

You deplore the demonstrations that are presently taking place in Birmingham. But I am sorry that your statement did not express a similar concern for the conditions that brought the demonstrations into being . . . I would not hesitate to say that it is unfortunate that so-called demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham at this time, but I would say in more emphatic terms that it is even more unfortunate that the white power structure of this city left the Negro community with no other alternative.¹⁵

King is denouncing the utter blindness of the white pastors, who do not seem to see the plight of the African American population in Birmingham and elsewhere. These pastors' participation in "the white power structure" rendered them utterly unable to see this plight. They simply did not have "eyes to see." It took a modern prophet like King to begin to open the eyes of millions of white Americans, including fellow ministers and preachers, to the scandal of segregation and injustice and to the necessity of reconciliation.

The white pastors' "Call for Unity" was premature and completely misguided. Another path was needed, and urgently so. First, the demands of justice had to be heard. Before unity and reconciliation occur, or before they become realities we may hope for, justice needs to be taken seriously. Without justice, unity is a sham that profits those who are already in positions of power (in the case of Birmingham and the United States, "the white power structure").

Against the defence of superficial, merely apparent peace or, rather, "order" by the white pastors, King recommended and practised a different approach, in four steps that

¹³ See S. Jonathan Bass, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers: Martin Luther King, Jr., Eight White Religious Leaders, and the "Letter from Birmingham Jail"* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001).

¹⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," in James M. Washington, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper Collins, 1986), 289–302.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 290.

are still crucial today wherever the work of reconciliation is urgent or necessary: first, collection of the facts to determine whether injustices are alive; second, negotiation; third, self-purification; and fourth, direct action.¹⁶ This blueprint, drawn from Gandhi's approach to peace, can serve the difficult work of furthering justice and true "unity" in any given context.

The Cost of Reconciliation

Anyone who thinks reconciliation is easy should think again. Very often, the work of reconciliation comes at a cost, for human beings do not wish to acknowledge the reality of injustice, violence, and their participation in it. We prefer to lie to ourselves. We prefer to practise our own vision of justice, that is, retribution, rather than God's vision of justice: through reconciliation and with the aim of full restoration of broken relationships. Just as the prophets of Israel suffered greatly as a result of their mandate, modern-day prophets have given their lives for the sake of true peace. They have done so in very visible ways, by becoming victims of assassination and thus as figures of martyrdom. But also, in many cases, they have done so as almost unknown and at times invisible witnesses of the gospel of peace – not to mention the many witnesses to peace we find in other religious traditions as well as among non-believers.

The work of reconciliation is very risky. We should never forget this. At times, theological discourse on reconciliation tends to depict this work in overly rosy ways. People who work for peace may well become the target of the violence that runs deep in human societies and cultures. They become the target of violence precisely as they seek to uncover the violence and injustice that are ingrained in our broken webs of relations. It is amazing what humans will do to avoid the uncovering of our broken social and personal relationships. Work for peace and reconciliation often unleashes not our admiration (which may emerge belatedly) but a violent reaction. Our history is filled with instances in which hatred and bigotry are the overwhelming responses to nonviolent acts in the pursuit of justice.

The Urgency of Reconciliation

Let us return to the apostle Paul's key text on reconciliation (2 Cor. 5). On the basis of his *anamnesis* of God's reconciliatory work in Christ, Paul issues a call to let ourselves be reconciled. Here the urgency of reconciliation comes to the fore: "So we are

¹⁶ Ibid. By "self-purification," King means the following: "We started having workshops on nonviolence and repeatedly asked ourselves the questions, 'Are you able to accept blows without retaliating?' 'Are you able to endure the ordeals of jail?'" Ibid., 291.

ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20); "See, now is the acceptable time (καιρός εὐπρόσδεκτος; *kairos euprosdektos*); see, now is the day of salvation (ἡμέρα σωτηρίας; *hēmera sōterias*)!" (2 Cor. 6:2).

Banishing anti-Judaism

How is it that Christians, in the early centuries of the faith, instead of pursuing peace and reconciliation with the faith from which they originate, namely Judaism, widely adopted language that terminates or suppresses that faith, the "true Israel" (*verus Israel*) having been supposedly transferred from the Jews to Christians? Why did so many Christians, including some of their most significant thinkers, erect a new wall between themselves and Jews?

In so doing, these Christians blatantly contradicted the message of reconciliation. Certainly, historical battles as Christianity was emerging as a new, distinct religious tradition alongside Judaism played a significant role in the growth of the enmity Christians directed at Judaism.

In recent decades, in the wake of the atrocities of the Shoah, Christians have begun to acknowledge and repent for the enmity and hatred they showed toward Jews in the course of two millennia of common, all too often bloody, history. Thinking about reconciliation as Christian believers compels us to look long and hard at all of our ways, yesterday and today, that amount to a betraying of this central notion in our faith. This includes looking at our ways of relating to our fathers and mothers in the faith: namely, Jewish people. We are commanded to honour our father and our mother (Ex. 20:12) – a commandment we actually have received from the people of Israel. And yet we do the opposite: we show very little love, and even sometimes the opposite of respect and honour, to the members of the people of Israel who are our contemporaries.

A covenantal approach

The apostle Paul's message in 2 Corinthians 5:14–6:2 is reminiscent of the covenant formula that recurs throughout the scriptures: "I will be your God, and you will be my people." God reveals Godself as a reconciling God: God forgives even those who rebel against God, searching for a new relationship with them, even at the cost of assuming and enduring the curse of human violence and hatred. The witness of Jesus of Nazareth manifests in all clarity the depth of these five words: "I will be your God."

The covenant formula, however, does not stop there. It continues, "you will be my people." The ministry of reconciliation is not just God's own work – even if it is primarily God's own work, and even as it somehow never ceases to be God's own work.

Reconciliation is entrusted by God into the hand of God's people. To live as a community of believers who have received the great gift of reconciliation – that is, the gift of a restored relationship with God – implies the quest for reconciliation among human beings and with all of the reality of which we are a part. Having received this great gift, how could we not extend it to others as well (see the parable of the unmerciful servant in Matt. 18:23-35)?

What does this mean to the people of God? What might it look like to live together as God's people? Certainly, it means striving for peace among human beings, which is a tall order for us in a world marked by relentless economic and political competition as well as the quest for personal and national prosperity. Here, too, Jesus shows us the way – not just on what “I will be your God” means, but also on the meaning of “you will be my people.” As Christians – and even non-Christians should be able to agree – we can say that the world is different because of Christ. As Christians, we are urged to witness to this by embodying a new way of relating to one another, to the world, and to God: a way that is suffused by both the *gift*, first, and, second and inseparably, the *task* of reconciliation. It is suffused by a shared renewal of the mind, a shared joy as we receive this gift again and again, and a shared commitment as we are entrusted with this task always anew.¹⁷

For the calling to reconciliation is not simply a past calling. It is as relevant and crucial today as it was yesterday, especially as God's Spirit of life is the very bond of communion within God as well as between God and God's creation: “Reconciliation is not only a past historical event, but also the present activity of the Spirit of God in the life of the world drawing men and women into its orbit.”¹⁸

The ecumenical imperative

The fact that Christians have fought one another in the course of their history, especially in the wake of the two main schisms (in the 11th and 16th centuries), is yet another instance of the betrayal of the “gospel of reconciliation” by those who were called to live according to the gift of reconciliation. The 20th century represented a very deep shift in that regard, as Christians moved, not without hesitation and setbacks, from antagonism, vehement suspicion, and distrust to dialogue and friendship. There is no doubt that the reconciliation God gives and entrusts into human hands calls for a renewal of our commitment, as Christians of various confessions, to seek visible unity among us. This is simply not “optional” to our identity as Christians.

¹⁷ See Kathryn Tanner's remarks on these points in *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 210–11 and 218.

¹⁸ John W. de Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* (London: SCM Press, 2002), 56.

And here the very notion of “reconciliation” can help us envision the kind of visible unity we may be called to pursue: reconciliation never entails a fusing of the parties that had experienced a conflict. It involves, rather, an overcoming of enmity and a renewal of our relationship. We should not talk of a “restoration” of relationships, since what is achieved through reconciliation is not a return to a previous situation, but a markedly *new*, or *renewed*, relationship. In practising reconciliation, Christians manifest a central dimension of their faith, and of God in whom they place their faith. For God, as Creator, makes all things new (Rev. 21:5; see Is. 42:9; 43:19). It is not a coincidence if, as the apostle Paul speaks of reconciliation as God's central work in relation to the world, he alludes to God's creating work as a “new creation” (“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” [2 Cor. 5:17]). God's reconciling work effects a complete renewal of how we see one another and reality as a whole. One could go further and argue that it is not merely our way of seeing that has been wholly renewed, but reality itself. Here, it seems to me, objective reality and our act of beholding reality cannot be severed: they go hand in hand. Our act of beholding both draws from objective reality (in our case, God's reconciliatory act in Jesus, as witnessed by the New Testament and the Christian tradition) and, to an extent, construes it (it is *faith* that sees in the event of the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ the event of reconciliation; no objective, indisputable demonstration of truth is available to us).

“God was reconciling the world to himself” as grounding human dignity

Theological ethics and Christian morality have long based their claim regarding human dignity on Genesis 1:26 and the statement found in this verse that human beings are created in God's image and likeness. As is well known, a vast, multifaceted theological and ethical discourse is based on this verse. One wonders, however, whether a Christian commitment to respect the dignity of all human beings and indeed of all of creation may not also be derived from the apostle Paul's key claims in 2 Corinthians 5, especially verse 19: “In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself.” We have noted above the universal scope of God's reconciliatory act. If the world in its entirety is the object of this act, then does not this confer an unshakable, irrevocable dignity to the world as such?¹⁹ Isn't there, in a verse like this one and certainly in other similar passages in which Paul stresses the “for us” dimension of salvation or grace, a key for grounding a Christian theological ethics?

Such Christological grounding should not suppress other ways of grounding appeals to human and creaturely dignity, including what we may call the “creational” appeal found

¹⁹ John M. G. Barclay has mentioned to me this interpretive possibility, which certainly deserves closer scrutiny, in private correspondence. I am grateful for this insight.

in Genesis 1:28. But this way of anchoring theological ethics *Christologically* may deserve to be integrated in a robust Christian reflection on an ethic of the dignity of all human beings and of creation as a whole. This will have the benefit of adjoining a “thicker” account of how we are called to treat our neighbour, on the basis of an ongoing meditation and study of Jesus’ message, especially his parables (the parable of the good Samaritan, in Luke 10, comes to mind here, of course), as well as a meditation and study of the gospel narratives that depict Jesus’ concrete ways of encountering people in the entire course of his messianic ministry. Here the old theme of *imitatio Christi* has its legitimate place in Christian theology.²⁰

Conclusion

The theme of “reconciliation” lies at the very heart of Christian theology: it expresses the overarching intent of God in the face of human violence and conflict. “Christians live from reconciliation towards reconciliation, from the reconciliation that God has achieved in Christ to the consummation of God’s community with his reconciled creation.”²¹ If we follow the apostle Paul’s key text on this theme, in 2 Corinthians 5, we must note the root of reconciliation, which lies not in our act, but exclusively in God’s act. Here John Calvin’s fondness for speaking of God as the “fount” (*fontaine*) of all good things is significant, especially in avoiding at all costs the idea that God, somehow, needs to be reconciled to the world.²² No! It is the world, not God, that stands in need of reconciliation.

Certainly, we are called to take part in this act, but not as those who are “producing” it from scratch, as it were, and also not as those who are “completing” it.²³ Rather, we are invited and indeed urged to conform our actions and our lives, both communally and

²⁰ Protestants have been hesitant at times to embrace the theme of the imitation of Jesus Christ, viewing it as a late medieval theme. If they read Martin Luther’s treatise on *The Freedom of a Christian* (written in 1520; trans. W. A. Lambert and Harold J. Grimm, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 31, 333–77), especially the second half of this treatise (see 366–67), their hesitation might diminish or even disappear.

²¹ Schwöbel, “Reconciliation,” 35.

²² “You cannot behold [God] clearly unless you acknowledge him to be the fountainhead and source of every good.” John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I, ii, 2, ed. John T. McNeill and Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 42 (see also I, ii, 1); “God is the fountainhead of all righteousness.” *Ibid.*, II, xvii, 2, 530; see also the *Confession of La Rochelle*, which was written by Calvin, art. 5 (later version: art. 9), in *Calvini Opera*, vol. 9, Corpus Reformatorum 37, ed. Wilhelm Baum, Eduard Cunitz, and Eduard Reuss (Braunschweig: C. A. Schwetschke, 1870), 743.

²³ See John Webster’s comments on the tendency, in certain quarters, to make human beings “omnipotent or omniresponsible” with regard to reconciliation: “The Ethics of Reconciliation,” in *The Theology of Reconciliation*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 109–24, at 115.

personally, to what God did and does in Jesus Christ and through the Spirit.²⁴ The history of Israel as well as the history of Christianity, even in recent decades and in our present, show with unmistakable clarity that Christians all too often betray this command and invitation. Instead of healing wounds, we create and provoke new ones. Whereas Christ was the one in whom God was reconciling the world, we as people who are *in statu viatorum* – that is, pilgrims on this earth – are not merely those who are called to be agents of reconciliation, but also those who are and who remain in dire need of receiving the gift of reconciliation, in dire need of being forgiven by God as well as by other human beings for our trespasses against God’s vision of justice. As pertains to ecumenism, I would argue that it is only as we, always afresh, become aware of this need and open ourselves to receiving this gift from the giver of peace that we may begin to embark on the path of genuine dialogue with others. We take this journey for the sake of the unity of all Christians and, since this goal should never become a goal in itself, for the sake of a more authentic witness to the gospel and a more humane life throughout our, and God’s, world.

²⁴ “Dies gehört zum Wunder der Versöhnung: dass Gott sie nicht einfach über uns verfügt, sie nicht über uns kommen lässt oder sie uns aufdrängt, sondern dass er uns einlädt, uns in ihre Wirklichkeit hineinnehmen und sie an uns wirken zu lassen.” Sauter, “Was heisst, was ist ‘Versöhnung?’” 13–14.