

Conflict: Christian reconciliation against its trinitarian and evangelical base

From all evil and mischief; from sin, from the crafts and assaults of the devil; from thy wrath, and from everlasting damnation,
Good Lord, deliver us.

From all blindness of heart; from pride, vain-glory, and hypocrisy; from envy, hatred, and malice, and all uncharitableness,
Good Lord, deliver us.

From all fornication, and all other deadly sin; and from all the deceits of the world, the flesh, and the devil,
Good Lord, deliver us.

From lightning and tempest; from plague, pestilence, and famine; from battle and murder, and from sudden death,
Good Lord, deliver us.

From all sedition, privy conspiracy, and rebellion; from all false doctrine, heresy, and schism; from the hardness of heart, and contempt of thy Word and Commandment,
Good Lord, deliver us.

By the mystery of thy holy Incarnation; by thy holy Nativity and Circumcision; by thy Baptism, Fasting, and Temptation,
Good Lord, deliver us.

By thine Agony and bloody Sweat; by thy Cross and Passion; by thy precious Death and Burial; by thy glorious Resurrection and Ascension; and by the coming of the Holy Ghost,
Good Lord, deliver us.

In all time of our tribulation; in all time of our wealth; in the hour of death, and in the day of judgement,
Good Lord, deliver us.

(From *The Litany*, Book of Common Prayer, 1662)

1. Introduction

At the beginning of his litany, after calling upon the Persons of the Trinity, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer follows with the remarkable series of petitions I have outlined above. Here, as in the rest of *The Litany*, are all the scriptural and trinitarian elements which speak of the need and fact of atonement, or reconciliation. The dreadfulness of our alienation from a holy God and our hatred of each other; the reality of the wrath of God and the saving event of Christ's incarnation, cross, resurrection and ascension; the eschatological dimension of a work already begun, yet awaiting completion on the last day; all find careful expression. In the midst of so much appalling conflict, the response line in the opening section resonates: *have mercy upon us miserable sinners.*

And so, 454 years later we may see ourselves reflected in these supplications. Our contemporary world is marked by deep alienation from God and each other. The more we see the need for reconciliation, the more remote appears the possibility. In *Christian Rwanda*, genocide was so organized and executed that in its brutal efficiency it managed to outstrip the parallel action of Adolf Hitler. In Northern Ireland, Catholics and Protestants still cannot with respect live with each other, even after 25 years of the gun and the bomb. Muslims slaughter Christians in Timor, and Christians slaughter Muslims in Ambon. In the Southern Philippines, the MILF has escalated its warfare against the Government and against the Christian populace. In Australia, the attempts, from both sides, to reconcile the Aboriginal population with the descendants of the white invaders falters.

Yet, in that context we are reminded again of the amazing love and saving action of the one, true God, whom we know and confess to be Father, Son and Spirit. For the Scripture bears clear witness:

²Cor. 5:16 ¶ 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.¹⁷ So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation;¹⁹ 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.²⁰ So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor 5:16-21)

As the Fathers who produced the creed of Nicea-Constantinople saw, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." After the fact of the incarnation and the events which followed it, against enormous cultural pressure from their surrounding culture, the Church was forced to confess two things:

First, only *God* can save

Secondly, God can only be made know by God. "All things have been handed over to me by my Father", said Jesus; "and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him (Mat. 11:27)." We are brought into the otherwise closed circle of knowing and being in God through the Son of God, who is truly one with us as he is one with the Father. The Church Fathers grasped the fact that God could not be understood appropriately on the basis of his external relations to his created order, but only on the basis of his internal, unique relations as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Further, they saw that these truths, the evangelical and the trinitarian, are inextricably locked together. The only God who can save is the triune God; Father, Son and Spirit. To truly *know* this God, is a saving, a reconciling event. Conversely, we may only be reconciled, reconciled with God and our neighbour, in a triune way.

With respect to the desperate need of reconciliation we see around us, what strength may we take in our attempt to think these two truths into each other? Is their *hope*?

2. Atonement as a trinitarian event

It is clear from the Scriptures, and perhaps outstandingly so in St Paul's letter to the Romans (e.g. Rom. 1:16-3:31), that the bringing together of the holy God and a rebellious humanity required that sin be "propitiated" as well as "expiated". "Expiation" means the removal of the offense, and can be understood impersonally. "Propitiation" highlights the personal nature of the offense, for our sins are not merely an impersonal barrier, but a disobedience which is deeply offensive to God himself. Propitiatory atonement, or to use a clumsy expression, "propitiatory reconciliation", speaks of the satisfying of God's just wrath against us, and with it, the expiation or removal of the offense which has caused the division.

The problem for Christian thought and action is how to understand this in a way which sees reconciliation as *God's* act. That is, how may we appropriately understand Christian reconciliation against its foundation in God, and thus avoid the inappropriate intrusion off secular concepts and ways of acting?

It as we resolve this, I believe, we may answer our contemporary question: is there *hope* of reconciliation?

Perhaps at no other place does the fact of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, who is truly human and truly God, throw as much light on theology as it does as we think about the meaning of the cross.

In short, the uniqueness of Jesus Christ tells us that the propitiatory act of atonement wrought by his incarnation, life of obedience and especially by his death, is in fact an act *in* God himself.

That is, the one who "has borne our sins in his body on a tree" (1 Pet. 2:24-5), and "become a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13), "the Judge who has been judged in our place" (2 Cor. 5:10-21, and to use Karl Barth's felicitous phrase), also reveals by his life and person that the reconciliation wrought by this act of propitiatory atonement not only penetrates to the very depths of *our* being (Heb. 9:14),¹ but also falls within the being and life of God himself.

How is this the case? In what follows I am much indebted to the fine exposition of the Scottish theologian, T.F. Torrance.²

First, because the Father/Son relation subsists eternally within the being and life of God, we must think of the incarnation of the Son as *falling within the being and life of God*. Even though it is something genuinely "new" for God. The incarnation does not lie outside of God. Because the Son of God is in an eternal, unbreakable and mutual relation to the Father (for that is what makes him "Son"), then the taking of human nature by the second Person of the Trinity

¹ "For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God."

² Here I am much indebted to the exposition of the cross by Thomas F. Torrance in, *The Trinitarian Faith: the evangelical faith of the ancient catholic church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993) pp. 154-90, and *The Mediation of Christ* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992 rev. ed.) pp. 109-26.

cannot be adequately describes as lying outside of the life and being of God.

Secondly, since Jesus Christ is God and man in *one Person*, the atoning mediation and redemption which he wrought for us falls *within* his own being and life as the one Mediator between God and fallen humankind. That is, the work of atoning salvation does not take place outside of Christ, as something external to him, but takes place *within* him, *within* the incarnate constitution of his Person as Mediator. Since, to use Athanasius' words, as Mediator Christ acted "instead of all" (ἀντὶ πάντων) and "on behalf of all" (ὑπὲρ πάντων), his redemptive work was fully representative and truly universal in its range.

This is not a mere "physical theory". No, the incarnate Logos acts *personally* on our behalf, and this he does from within the ontological depths of our human existence, which he has penetrated and gathered up into himself. Christ's Person and work are inseparably linked. He not only makes our nature his own, but also takes on himself our lost condition subject to condemnation and death, so that he might substitute himself in our place, discharge our debt, take on himself the penalty due to all in death, and offer himself in atoning sacrifice to God on our behalf.

Thirdly, it follows then that atonement, as with the incarnation, also falls *within the life and being of God*. In Paul's words, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor. 5:19, cf. Phil. 2:5-11, Heb. 5:7, Rom. 8:32). That is, the atoning propitiation which God himself provides in the sacrifice of his incarnate Son occurs *not external* to God, but *within God*. In this way, the *homoousion* of Nicaea ("of the same substance with God and the same substance with humanity") gives expression to the unbroken relation in being and act between the incarnate Son and God the Father, and likewise between the Holy Spirit and God the Father.

Thus, we can only rightly understand the meaning of the atonement as it occurs between God and humanity, between God and us poor sinners, in the light of the fact that it as an act first within Christ himself, and thus within God. This theological and ontological priority gives us the ground against which the meaning of our reconciliation becomes clear. To separate our reconciliation from this theological and ontological ground invites distortion.

Positively, this ontological deepening of our understanding produces several beneficial insights:

Amongst which are:

a. We are spared a superficial socio-moral or judicial transaction between God and mankind which does not penetrate into the ontological depths of human being and bear savingly on our deep corruption and distortion (Heb. 9:14). Reconciliation is not some sort of legal or moral fiction. Although its expression in our behaviour is conditioned by eschatology, reconciliation is nevertheless real.

b. Union with God in and through Jesus Christ who is of one and the same being with God belongs to the inner heart of the atonement.

c. It overcomes the moral problem of how one person can take the place of another in bearing moral responsibility for the other's actions. The inexplicable fact that God in Christ has taken our place lifts the questions we ask of the atonement to a far higher level. For

what God in Christ acting in redemption tells us is that the *whole moral order itself*, as we know it in this world, needed to be redeemed and set on a new basis. Redemption is indeed of those "under the law", but it occurs "apart from the law", Gal. 4:3f, Rom. 3:20f. As Torrance puts it: "In this interlocking of incarnation and atonement, and indeed of creation and redemption, there took place what might be called "a soteriological suspension of ethics" in order to regroup the whole moral order in God himself (*Trinitarian Faith*, 160)." That is, the forensic or legal elements are held within the doctrine of atonement at a deeper level.

d. The incarnation means that "substitution" is at a very great depth. "The whole Christ became a curse for us" (Athanasius). All of Christ's life is atoning. Since atonement was *in* Christ himself and not in some external way, therefore the whole human person, body and soul, is delivered from penalty, debt, ignorance, law, death and devil. In this way then, the image of God is restored, and we come to know God, to enter into his own inner rationality, to share his life. In the self-sanctification of the Son of God, we are sanctified (Jn. 17:17-19).

e. Against their internal ontological ground in Jesus Christ, we can view the various aspects of the biblical presentation - deliverance, propitiation and expiation, and advocacy - not only as interrelated concepts (for that is how they occur in Scripture) speaking of the love of God and the riches and depths of our reconciliation, but also in a way which avoids the intrusion of secular concepts which tend to take over when the atonement is seen primarily as an *external* transaction. Thus, fathers like Irenaeus have no concept of a "ransom" paid to the devil. By way of contrast, Gregory of Nyssa spoilt his otherwise helpful work on the notion of "sacrifice" by reading it too narrowly as purification, and giving insufficient attention to the gravity of guilt. The moral requirements of God's nature highlight the propitiatory and expiatory nature of the atonement. Given these, Gregory of Nyssa may well have avoided the morally repugnant concept of a ransom being paid to the devil.

f. The notion of the great, atoning exchange (2 Cor 8:9) is shown to embrace the whole relationship between Christ and ourselves. Thus we are caught up in a transforming consecration into Christ himself into the immediate presence of the Father. In this we see:

- (i) That the benefits of the exchange are inexhaustible and eternal; even for Christian Rwandans who slaughtered Christian Rwandans of another tribe.
- (ii) Our passion, hurt and suffering are taken up by the unchanging God in his measureless love and compassion and consequently they are exhausted in his divine impassability, absorbed by the immensity of his eternal holiness.
- (iii) Likewise, our ignorance is transformed by our participating in his wisdom.
- (iv) The atoning exchange means our theopoesis, our "divinization", in which God's and our ontological differentiation are not confused, but our lost humanity is recreated "to enjoy a new fullness of human life in a blessed communion with the divine life (*Trinitarian Faith*, 189)."

In this, the Holy Spirit is mediated to us through the humanity of Christ, so that we may be sanctified, John 17, 20:19-23. In the receiving of the Spirit by Christ in his self sanctification *for* us and in his subsequent giving of it to us, we see the atonement operating in the depths of human being. "Pentecost must be regarded, not as something added on to atonement, but as the actualization within the life of the Church of the atoning life, death and resurrection of the Saviour (*Trinitarian Faith*, 190)."

BUT, if Christ is *not* truly man and truly God, then the act of atonement he wrought is an act *external* to God. "Propitiation" then will either, after it has been reasoned out against a holiness of God which is too awful to contemplate (Is. 1:1-20, 6:1-5; Hab. 1:13; Heb. 12:18-29 ff.), be dismissed as mythological language, or it will suffer distortion by being subjected to the unbending strictures of the secular definition of human justice. If Christ is not the unique Son of God who is himself God then his substitutionary sacrifice will dissolve into mere example; representation into mere empathy; victory over sin, death, devil and alienation into, at best, a pluralism of beliefs and lifestyles in which the Christian church must make the best account of itself it can, or worse, descend into mere relativism.

I want to now say something more briefly about how we understand the human dimension, the human response to God's reconciling act in Christ.

3. Atonement as an evangelical event

The Church has had to struggle to understand how to offer this reconciliation to we who so badly need it. There has been a long tradition of thinking of "repentance" in "legal" terms. Here, God's gracious forgiveness and reconciling activity may only be appropriated by showing him we deserve it, have a legal title to it. The form of legal repentance goes like this: IF you repent, THEN God will forgive you. IF you can show that you are deeply and truly sorry for your sins, THEN God may forgive them. This is repentance cast in the form of a commercial or legal contract. The theological order is: law, then grace.

Biblical examples of the generally unproductive nature of legal repentance can be seen in the repentance of King Saul, and the repentance of Judas Iscariot, in a sorrow "according to the world" which leads only to death, as Paul puts it (2 Cor. 7:10).

However, there is another tradition of understanding the human response, "evangelical repentance". Here the form is: faith, then repentance. Grasp the amazing fact that because of the cross-work of God you have in heaven, instead of an angry Judge, a loving Father, then you will be able to repent with joy, even in your tears. The theological order is grace, then law; faith, then repentance.

This is of course the order of repentance we see in the Evangel. This theological order is seen in the opening of Mark's gospel, where Jesus proclaims: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent . . . (Mk. 1:15)."

Biblical examples of evangelical repentance are seen in Peter's repentance after disowning his Lord, and in the parable of the prodigal son.

As we seek to be ambassadors of Christ, seeking and proclaiming reconciliation, is our call and work "legal" or "evangelical"?

3. Contemporary models of reconciliation

How may we draw down on the vast riches of the reconciliation that is held out to us in Christ? Three main models are evident.

First, we may treat Christian reconciliation as *a set of principles* to be applied to the human predicament. This was particularly so in 19th century Protestant liberalism, where their conception of God was not trinitarian, but unitarian. Here, Jesus Christ, because he is not truly God, can only offer us an example to follow. After detaching the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith, we abstract a set of principles or guidelines for action. God, because he is not the triune God revealed in the person and work of his Son, stands outside reconciliation. Except by way of an external encouragement, God is not in all his fullness and majesty a direct part of the action.

Now, to look towards the cross for a set of principles, or an example, is not without its merits, for the triune God has done his reconciling work in our reality, under the conditions we live, in our human and created world. The danger of this model is practical atheism, where God is remote. God is neither part of the conflict that needs reconciling, nor is he in his act and being the solution.

Secondly, even within otherwise solid, trinitarian Christianity we have tended to reduce reconciliation to *an individual and a psychological event*. We have done this, not by denying that Jesus Christ is both God and human person, but in our failure to see that in his own person and work he brings our *whole human existence*, both corporate and individual (and at the deepest level of our being), into a reconciling fellowship *with the Father*. Our worship and being-set-right with God tend here not only to be thought of primarily in individual terms, but also to terminate on just Jesus, and our love of him. This can be observed to find expression in the existential theology of Rudolph Bultmann, the modern catholic and charismatic movements, and in some forms of evangelical theology and practice.

But **thirdly**, we have a trinitarian and evangelical model. Here, not only is God acknowledged to be a real party to the conflict, one to whom we need desperately to be reconciled, but is also acknowledged to be the primary and sufficient agent of reconciliation. Because we hate God, we hate each other. This God, who once was our enemy, has by his own act in Christ made us his friends, if we would but open out our hands and grasp that friendship. We get a glimpse of this in St Paul's letter to the Christian slave owner, Philemon. He argues, take back your run-a-way slave, Onesimus, without penalty, because he is your *brother*, in Christ. Regard him, no longer from a human point of view, but in Christ.

4. Conclusion

It has been observed that ethnic division, and bloodthirsty ethnic warfare, occur where four conditions prevail:

- i. **Sectarianism.** Here, our understanding of the truth becomes identified with "The Truth" in some absolute way. Then, acceptance of the other person becomes conditional on their accepting our formulation of the truth. "We shall accept you IF you accept our formulations!"

Sectarianism may be overcome by seeing that because reconciliation is a trinitarian event in God, and Christ is the Truth, by comparison all of us are unenlightened. Our ignorance begins to be dispelled as we participate in the wisdom of God.

- ii. **Nationalism or Civil Religion.** The ethnic group gives an exclusive loyalty to "our nation", "our people". Here, as in the recent conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, folk or political myths define a people over and against their neighbours. In this process, "God" becomes "the God of our nation". Divine sanction is seen to undergird nationalism.
- iii. **Ideology.** Ideology distorts reality, and the Bible, to the advantage of vested interests. The idea of "apartheid", played out in South Africa, is an example of this.
- iv. **A cause of complaint.** This cause of complaint may be real or imaginary, but allied to the three conditions above, this feeling of injustice becomes the trigger for attempts at resolving the conflict by treating the opposing group as less than human, and therefore less than deserving of common justice, let alone grace, mercy and love.

That much of our present day areas of conflict fulfil these conditions is obvious.

The temptation for us, I take it, is not rank indifference, for that would be sub-Christian, but a "practical atheism" which does not see how much our rebellion against God is at the foundation of the problem, and how much what God himself has done is in the end, the only solution. We cannot appropriately cut-off Christian reconciliation from the Church's confession and preaching of the one, triune God of grace, the God who saves.

If we accept the risk of being thoroughly committed in word and deed to the reconciliation which has already been won for us by "God in Christ", what may we expect? Two things come to mind.

First, because the triune God continues to be the primary agent in ongoing reconciliation, we may expect reconciliation at a great depth. This depth is described in John's first letter as "communion", "fellowship with us . . . and with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ."³ In the human sphere this means not just accepting our former enemies as neighbours, with whom we live at peace, although at a respectful distance, because the scars and wounds to some extent remain. No, it also means being able to take them into our arms as brothers and sisters, to trust ourselves to them. That is a high hope. Seen against the ethnic cleansing of Bosnia, it can only be a Christian hope.

³ 1 Jn. 1:7; cf. 2:1-2, 4:8-11.

Secondly, as the Croatian and American theologian, Miroslav Volf has so compellingly discussed, we live and work for this reconciliation realizing its eschatological and historical limitations. Reconciliation is God's act, in the past and in the present, an act he himself will complete on the last day, when "God will be all in all (1 Cor. 15:27-8)." That God has promised. Therefore, in this matter of reconciliation we must avoid being content with an historical bare minimum of reconciliation. Further, we must also avoid seeking to construct on earth the heavenly maximum, for that inevitably dissolves into the disappointment which accompanies utopianism. Instead, we ought see ourselves, by God's grace, moving forward from "the historical minimum to the eschatological maximum".⁴

Suggested Reading

- T.F. Torrance *The Mediation of Christ*; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992.
- Miroslav Volf *Exclusion and Embrace: a theological exploration of identity, otherness, and reconciliation*; Nashville: Abingdon, 1996.

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⁴ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: a theological exploration of identity, otherness, and reconciliation*; Nashville: Abingdon, 1996.