

In Search of the Church: Paul—Communities of Reconciliation

The writings of Paul were the earliest in the Christian movement and took place between 50-60 A.D. To understand the context of his work and writing one must look at his conversion. Paul was an early opponent of Christianity. He took part in the stoning of Stephen; opposed Jews in Jerusalem; and was on his way to persecute them when Jesus appeared to him. This encounter with the risen Christ changed him and led him to be an apostle to the Gentiles.

Paul became an “urban organizer” supporting existing Christian communities and establishing new ones in various communities. Apparently he didn’t work alone but traveled with a team of 40-50, including women. In the Bible his letters are arranged by length—from *Romans* to *Philemon*. Some were travel letters written during his active ministry. Others were prison letters to congregations. Still others were pastoral letters to Timothy and Titus.

They cover a wide variety of topics and situations. Some are personal, others very public. Some are to households he knows only by reputation while others are very dear to him. Some are pastoral and very specific to time and place, while one is a rebuke and an argument. Many images of the church come from his letters: *new creation, first fruits, new humanity, fellowship of faith, people of the way, household of faith*. Two though are central to his theology: ***body of Christ*** (the church), while the corollary image of the members is ***agents of reconciliation***.

For Paul, the primary experience of reconciliation is the event signifying what it means to be a Christian—to claim Christ as the Messiah. Paul proclaims that something has happened in and through Jesus and that this changes our very nature. Paul declares that this is from God and was for the benefit of an alienated and estranged humanity. As Paul understood it, we were so estranged from God that God was moved to overcome this gap and be reconciled to us. What God did in Jesus was to ensure that we would no longer be strangers/enemies ¹⁸ *for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.* ¹⁹ *So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, Ephesians 2:18-19 (NRSV)*

According to Paul, if we would accept this gift, we would become something new. 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. 2 Corinthians 5:17-19 (NRSV)* In as much as we are recipients of this gift, we are called to extend it to others. We are supposed to form communities where this “new” can emerge.

3 Dimensions to Paul’s view of Reconciliation

1.) **Personal:** this is offered to all of us in the midst of our brokenness. All that Paul received and experienced is available to everyone. To be reconciled means to come face to face with one’s own sin and be brought into relationship with God. When scripture speaks of sin, it is not so much of an act, but rather a condition—we are all out of sorts with God and each other, but through Christ, this condition can be changed. To be reconciled is to be something new—you become something you weren’t—a new creation. *“It is a conversion from some old perspective to a new perspective, with Jesus and a new community as the center around which to organize personal identity and life purpose.”* Suppose that you were on the margins and this was presented to you? You become someone very precious and loved in a new community. Is it any wonder that the new Christian community grew so rapidly?

2) **Social:** Reconciliation has the power to change us. Through reconciliation, one would “disconnect from the values of the Greco-Roman world.” A new set of values could be adopted which opened a “place for strangers, the exile, the widow, the orphan and the slave.” This personal sense of reconciliation puts one in direct conflict with the dominant, popular culture since to be a Christian is to proclaim Jesus as Lord, not Caesar.

3) Communal: Through reconciliation, you joined a new community. This new community gave folks a new structure into which they could live their lives. For Paul, reconciliation always had a communal effect. This provided (and still does) the greatest challenge for us as Christians. It is one thing to say we are reconciled to God, but what does it mean for us to be reconciled to each other? Just saying we are reconciled doesn't make it so--of course there were struggles and difficulties in those communities. Yet, reconciliation in Christ means that the boundaries of race, gender, class, and need were broken down. Still, though we all know this isn't a "done deal." The reconciliation in Christ is a work in progress.

Ephesians says it well regarding the struggle. *12 For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Ephesians 6:12 (NRSV)*

Because of this inevitable struggle, we need the community of believers. It is only in the faithful community, with Christ as the head, that we can experience "love, forgiveness and accountability."

Outreach and Mission as an offshoot of Reconciliation

The initial mission of the church was simply to share their experience of reconciliation with others. In doing so, they invited others to join this new reality of the body of Christ. In effect, the initial outreach was to create the church. They didn't experience outreach as we necessarily know it today. We see it as giving to those less fortunate. In the early church, however, it was the less fortunate, the marginalized, who joined and became members of the church. So, their outreach was focused internally, on the body. It was the nature of this new reality that the community was the focus of mission and outreach.

"The notion that life could be new, hates forgiven, and walls of separation overcome enabled ordinary men and women to create alternative communities; it gave them the courage to offer what they had found to others. The imperfection of their results should not surprise us. What is remarkable is that they tried to create such a new and different community at all." p.59

Today, our outreach is opposite of the Pauline church, as we tend to go outside of our congregational boundaries. What does this have to do with reconciliation? Does reconciliation have anything to do with our outreach and mission?

It is worth asking ourselves if our outreach is an expression of our effort to create reconciliation between ourselves and our neighbors or simply an extension of social welfare? Has charity replaced our "commitment to reconciliation"? Reconciliation with charity at its center is a different understanding of outreach than charity as an end in itself. What do we have to give those outside of our community with lasting value but ourselves?

"An invitation to be loved, forgiven, and accepted is a rare event for most people. The possibility of belonging to a community of people working to reconcile the haters and hated, those on top form those on the bottom, those who have and those who have not, the citizens and the aliens never fails to strike a responsive cord. The very act of reconciliation to God, to ourselves and to one another, or the possibility of that reconciliation, is precisely what we Christians have to offer." p. 62

Of course, when we are intentional about this with others, we will experience a deeper sense of our own conversion. Often, I believe, we are reluctant to offer reconciliation to others because we have failed to experience it in our own lives.

- How do our "mission and outreach" activities build up reconciliation in our community?
- Have we substituted charity for reconciliation in our outreach?
- How much of a community of reconciliation are we? How much do we want to be?