

Reconciliation

*Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar.
First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.
Matthew 5:23,24*

Some words just feel right. They feel spiritual and healthy. A good example is the word “reconciliation.” When someone urges two people or groups who are in disagreement to be reconciled, we instinctively support his effort. This is especially true when the conflicting parties are believers in Christ, for we know that we as His body are called to be in unity.

The danger with using words such as reconciliation (or loyalty or trust or unity) is that there are situations where they can lead us in a direction that is in fact ungodly. For example, loyalty is good, unless one is loyal to someone who is not good. Trust is good, except when one trusts in something that is false. Unity is good—but then, Hitler’s troops were unified. So are most cults.

In the same way, reconciliation (which essentially means coming to a place of agreement) is good or bad depending entirely on what the parties are agreeing to. In other words, for believers, all of these words become “healthy” not when they are spoken by themselves, but when they are attached to something that represents the truth and character of God. In the matter of reconciliation, the key issue is not our agreement with each other, but our agreement with God.

Reconciliation can actually happen at several levels. A bookkeeper knows he must reconcile his cash accounts with the statement he receives from the bank. When all the errors are eliminated, the numbers will match. Two builders must reconcile their plans for constructing a building, so the work will go smoothly and everything will fit together properly. In this case, it isn’t a matter of error, but rather the merging of two different collections of data, both of which may be good.

When the Bible speaks of reconciliation, however, it is not dealing with the agreement of two equally viable positions. By far the predominant discussion of reconciliation in Scripture concerns the need for humans to be reconciled with their Creator. In this situation, God is absolutely true and right and good, and we have rebelled against Him.

This brings us to another aspect of reconciliation that is very important. When the separation between two parties includes wrongdoing on either part, reconciliation goes beyond simple agreement. It also requires repentance and restitution.

In the case of our separation from God, the wrongdoing is entirely on our part. We have rejected Him as a race and as individuals. In our fallen state, we have become arrogant and self-seeking. Even those of us who might not commit flagrantly sinful acts nevertheless have sinful thoughts which give evidence of the wickedness of our hearts.

In order for reconciliation to take place, we must come to see our wickedness as God sees it. We must take responsibility for having deliberately chosen to raise our self interests above His call to

holiness. The separation from God that we have caused by our own choices has broken His heart, and it must also break ours. That is the nature of confession and repentance.

The other requirement for reconciliation is that of restitution. Our sins, our rebellion, our ingratitude, our rejection of God—all these have hurt God deeply. Justice demands that we somehow pay for what we have cost Him. But here is where we encounter the unspeakable glory of the gospel. Because we have nothing with which to pay our debt, God Himself purchased our reconciliation through the costly death of His Son. “For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (Colossians 1:20,21). Complete reconciliation between man and God is possible, “not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5).

While God's unfathomable gift opens the door to our being reconciled with Him, we are nevertheless free to accept or reject His offer. Reconciliation in every situation is completely voluntary. When we choose to be reconciled with God (through authentic confession and repentance), He immediately restores us to unity with Himself. Not only does He bring our dead spirit back to life, but His Spirit “moves in” with our spirit, thereby enabling us to understand His mind and heart.

It is for this reason that believers have a unique ability to be in unity with one another. As we said earlier, our reconciliation is not based on our agreement with each other, but instead on our mutual agreement with God. In other words, God's truth and holiness provide a common standard by which our attitudes and actions toward each other can be tested. In addition, the Spirit of God gives us new grace for reconciliation within the body of Christ. We are able to move beyond self-centeredness into true love for one another.

How does reconciliation between believers actually work itself out in practical living? Because all of us are capable of wrongdoing, most damaged relationships carry fault on both sides. Therefore, complete reconciliation will probably require some measure of repentance on the part of each individual involved. For clarity's sake, however, let us look at the process of reconciliation from the point of view of one person.

The Scriptures speak of two distinct situations where brothers are divided against each other. In the first instance, my brother has something against me, which means I have hurt him. In the second, my brother has sinned against me. What am I called to do in each case?

Jesus tells us in His Sermon on the Mount, “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23,24). It is not accidental that the call to reconciliation occurs here in the context of someone bringing a gift to God. This person's memory of his sin against his brother causes his conscience before God to be clouded. As believers, we are compelled by our spirits to maintain a clear conscience before God.

Perhaps Christ is recalling God's word to Isaiah, "Stop bringing your meaningless offerings! . . . Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong" (Isaiah 1:13,16). Or Solomon's word, "To do what is right and just is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice" (Proverbs 21:3). Always our relationship to God is most significant. To preserve that relationship, He requires that we be in right standing with our brother.

It is very important to understand this principle, that *the primary incentive for reconciliation with our brother is so we might have a clean conscience before God*. You see, it is entirely possible for our brother to "have something against us," or to be offended by us, when we have done something that in fact God approves of. When Daniel offended King Darius by not praying to him, God did not wish Daniel to "reconcile" (or agree) with the king. God's truth instead required that Daniel rebel.

In the end, obedience to God is enough. Daniel answers the king from the den of the lions, "My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight. Nor have I ever done anything wrong before you, O king" (Daniel 6:22). Proverbs tells us, "When a man's ways are pleasing to the Lord, he makes even his enemies live at peace with him" (Proverbs 16:7).

In most instances, of course, our brother probably has been offended for reasons God would agree with. In these cases, we are called to confession of our sin, repentance before that brother, and where necessary, restitution for the wrong we have done him. Zacchaeus knew this intuitively when he encountered Jesus. "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount" (Luke 19:8). Again, the real issue is the purity of our conscience before God, whatever that might require.

This covers one half of reconciliation. We now have made things right from our side. What about my brother's sin against me? Jesus also addresses this quite clearly. "And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins" (Mark 11:25). Interestingly, the context is again a place of communion with God. Bitterness against our brother closes our spirit to God's flow of grace. We must forgive the wrongdoing, as many times as is necessary, in order to stay in touch with God.

When we have truly forgiven our brother for the hurt he has caused us (or in some cases, for his neglecting to do something we really wanted him to do), this means that from that point on we cannot carry in our hearts any requirement that he make restitution to us. As it says in 1 Corinthians 13, "Love keeps no record of wrongs." The issue of our hurt has been relinquished to God, and from our view our brother is no longer indebted to us. If restitution is to be made, it will be solely the result of the Spirit's conviction in his heart.

Perhaps as a test of our forgiveness and release, God also calls us to express our love for our brother by confronting him. We cannot merely leave him in his sin. Matthew 18 outlines the procedure. "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three

witnesses.’ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector” (Matthew 18:15-17).

Paul gives similar instructions. “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted” (Galatians 6:1). “And the Lord’s servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of truth” (2 Timothy 2:24,25).

As can be seen, full reconciliation between believers is not always an option. Paul tells the Romans, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18). “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification” (Romans 14:19). Perfect reconciliation can only occur when both parties are submitted to God, and specifically to the standard of truth and righteousness that He embodies. Because this submission is the free choice of each individual, there is nothing one person can do to compel another to that place.

This is a very important point. We sometimes hear believers demand that their brother be reconciled to them. There is no scriptural support for this whatsoever. When a brother sins against me, not only must I completely forgive him, but also I must release all obligation that he may have toward me. The temptation to demand any kind of reciprocating response from him (including repentance) indicates that my forgiveness is incomplete.

Incidentally, it is feasible that I might be calling for the other person’s confession of wrongdoing in order to offload some of my own guilt. We humans have a tendency to play balance games. That is, if the other person will confess to having hurt me, then whatever wrong I have done him feels somehow “cancelled out.” This is not reconciliation on God’s terms, but simply self-justification. I am clearly refusing to deal with the realities of my own sin.

We need to reemphasize here that *the most compelling reason for reconciliation between believers is not the healing of our relationships with each other, but the protection of our relationship with God.* In His mind, there is no place where one sin is ever justified by another. On the contrary, we are clearly told that any trace of unforgiveness on our part blocks God’s forgiveness of us. The story of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18 ends with the servant being thrown back into jail until he could pay his debt in full. Jesus continues, “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart” (Matthew 18:35).

When reconciliation becomes an end in itself, there is risk that the group will simply be brought into agreement with the views or demands of the strongest member. Cults frequently demand that their members stay “reconciled” with the leaders. But here the reconciliation process is not functioning by God’s principles. Nor does it reflect God’s requirement that leaders give themselves in humble service to the people. These men are instead distorting God’s truth “in order to draw away disciples after them” (Acts 20:30). They assume a position of proud self-righteousness, keeping those under them in an unnecessary posture of repentance.

In this case, division of the group is actually healthier than unity (1 Corinthians 11:19). We should not forget that Jesus Himself said, “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father. . . a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household” (Matthew 10:34-36).

Proper reconciliation between brothers is a source of great joy in the kingdom. When the biblical process becomes perverted or ignored, those involved will inevitably find themselves drifting away from God. Unrepentance and unforgiveness quickly clog the vital flow of God’s grace into each of our lives. But as we walk in the overwhelming awareness of the great price God paid for our reconciliation to Himself, we are able also to reach toward our brothers with “compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience,” allowing God to bind us together in the “perfect unity” of His love (Colossians 3:12,14).

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