

BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES ON RECONCILIATION AND PEACE¹

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1. INTRODUCTION

By way of introduction I want to make a few preliminary remarks:

Firstly, I have decided to alter the theme of my paper. The theme the committee gave to me was "Biblical perspectives on peace and reconciliation". I have altered it to "Biblical perspectives on reconciliation and peace. It will follow later why I have made this decision.

Secondly, you will pardon me if I focus more on the Old Testament than on the New Testament. I do this mainly for two reasons. I am much more at home with the Old Testament because this is the subject I teach at the university. Secondly, I believe that the Old Testament is particularly relevant to our theme and has something to say to us.

Thirdly, it struck me once again when I was busy preparing this paper that concepts such as peace and reconciliation (and for that matter a host of other terms) are very popular terms in politics. There is virtually no political party that does not want peace. There is no political party that does not want reconciliation in our country. But, we should remind ourselves that these terms are first of all theological terms, belonging to the theological vocabulary of the Bible. What the politicians did was to borrow these terms from the Bible and fill it with a political meaning. I think part of our task as church people is to regain the Biblical meaning of this kind of terms that are essentially theological terms.

In the fourth instance, I have tried to be sensitive to issues of gender by making use of - if possible - inclusive language. At times, however, I have made use of terms like "he" or "man". By doing this it was not my intention to offend anybody.

In the final instance, it is a basic presupposition of this paper that

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reconciliation and peace are terms that presume a relationship. One has to reconciled with someone in order to be reconciled. One has to be at peace with a fellow human being. It is meaningless to talk about reconciliation and peace when there are no human beings involved. Reconciliation and peace manifest themselves in the realm of human relations. Ethical behaviour, the conduct of people to one another, is very much an issue in the Bible. Large parts of the Bible deal with the manner in which human beings should behave to one another. For instance, six out of the ten commandments deal with the way in which human relations should be conducted. A considerable part of the lawcodes in the Old Testament deals with questions on human behaviour. The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 can be called the constitution of God's kingdom and to a large extent it deals with the conduct of people to each other. Jesus Christ himself summed up the will of God as love for God and one's fellow human being in Matthew 22:37-40. When one turns to the letters of St Paul it is interesting how the second part of his letters deals with human relations. It can therefore be safely said that the Bible is a thoroughly person orientated book. The Bible deals with individual human beings and how they should conduct themselves as part of a community of God's people and the world.

Life has many dimensions. A person can be a husband or a wife, a father or a mother, a member of a family, a neighbour, an employer or an employee, a member of sports and cultural organisations, a citizen of a country - there are a vast number of relations in life. Theologically speaking, human beings do not only live in a relationship with their fellow human beings, they also live in a relationship with God. Life is also related to God. This is the special emphasis of the Bible. Therefore, I should correct myself when I said that life is also related to God, the emphasis of the Bible is that life is always related to God. Although the Bible is a person-orientated book, it always takes man's relationship with God into account. Let us remind ourselves that there is simply no other institution, body, company, organisation that will highlight this vital aspect of human life except the church. We, as church people, should be aware of the dangers of either over emphasising man's relationship with other people or man's relationship with God. Both of these relationships are equally important to our theme of today.

What I intend to do is to highlight the biblical content of terms such as reconciliation and peace, keeping in mind that a person lives in a relation with both God and fellow human beings.

2. RIGHTEOUSNESS IS THE FOUNDATION OF RECONCILIATION AND PEACE

Before one can make an inquiry on the Biblical content of reconciliation and peace it is of fundamental importance to note that righteousness is the foundation of any discussion of these terms.

In the Old Testament God is the ultimate standard of righteousness and justice for they are part of God's intrinsic character (Wright 1983:136). God is the righteous and just God. Ps. 89:14 says:

14 Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; love and faithfulness go before you. (NIV)

Whatever God does is, by definition righteous. This basic conviction that God is righteous forms the ground upon which all human relations are constituted (Childs 1992:488). That God is righteous is known through his acts of righteousness. He is the just God who vindicates the innocent and judges the guilty. That God is righteous can especially be seen in his acts of redemption on behalf of his people. The one act of redemption par excellence in the Old Testament is the redemption of his people from Egypt. The people of God were the oppressed people who were now rescued from the hardships of Egypt and led to the land God promised to them.

In the New Testament the apostle Paul takes up this basic conviction of the Old Testament and said time and again that God is righteous and that his righteousness must be satisfied. That means that the sins of humankind must be punished and that some one must be able to take his punishment. Jesus Christ was sent by God to fulfil this mission. It is especially in Paul's letter to the Romans that he has made this clear. In Romans 3:21-26 one reads:

21 But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.

22 *This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference,*
23 *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*
24 *and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*
25 *God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished -*
26 *he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. (NIV)*

What is clear from the Old Testament is that because the people of God experienced his righteousness through the redemption from Egypt it called for a response of imitative righteousness and justice from those who have experienced God's righteousness. Believers who belong to the people of God have the duty to reflect the righteousness of God. This is made clear in a very striking way in Psalms 111 and 112. What is said of God in Ps 111, is made applicable to the righteous one in Ps 112. For example, in Ps 111 God is praised as righteous, kind and merciful. In Ps 112 the righteous person is called merciful, kind and just. In Ps 111 it is God who provides food for those who have reverence for him; in Ps 112 it is the righteous person who gives generously to the needy. The righteous person reflects in his or her actions the righteousness of God.

According to von Rad (1975:370), there is no concept in the Old Testament with so central a significance for all relationships of human life as that of righteousness. It is the standard not only for man's relationship to God, but also for his relationships to his fellows. An attitude of righteousness can be described as the highest value in life, that upon which all life rests when it is properly ordered (von Rad 1975:370). Righteousness is especially a term denoting a relationship. The righteous man/woman is the one who measures up to the particular claims that this relationship lays upon him/her (von Rad 1975:372). It will be a worthwhile experiment to examine a couple of the relations we are engaged in to see whether we shall be judged righteous or not. Husband and wife stand in a particular relationship of marriage to each other. If a person treats his spouse as his personal slave, that would not be in accordance to the demands of righteousness expected in a relationship of marriage. If a father loves his daughter in the same way he loves his wife

that will certainly not count as an act of righteousness. He does not measure up to the particular claims of the relationship between father and daughter. An employer must make sure that his or her relationship with employees is of such a kind that it will measure up to the claims a relationship between employer and employee. Likewise, to be an employee also means to be in a relationship with an employer. From the side of the employee there must also be a relationship that meets with the demands of righteousness.

To act righteous means to show a certain degree of kindness, faithfulness and helpful compassion for people in suffering or need. How does one know how to act in such a way? There is only one answer to this question: by keeping the commands of the Lord.

3. RECONCILIATION RESTORES RIGHTEOUSNESS

Unfortunately we do not live in a world where righteousness prevails. Rather to the contrary, many people suffer from injustice. Reconciliation aims at restoring a relationship to righteousness. If there were no injustices there would have been no need for reconciliation. Reconciliation is necessary between two parties when something has occurred to disrupt fellowship and to cause one or both parties to be hostile to each other (Ladd 1975:450).

Reconciliation lies right at the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In especially the Pauline letters reconciliation is one of the key concepts to explain the Gospel. The concept of reconciliation is very much related to man's relationship with God and God's relationship with man. Man is in need of a reconciled relationship with God. Reconciliation was accomplished for man by the death of Christ at the initiative of God (Ladd 1975: 452-453). Because humanity can be reconciled with God, it opens up the possibility of reconciliation with fellow human beings.

In the Old Testament there are several measures taken to ensure that people can be reconciled with each other. Reconciliation between human beings means that the injured party will not demand full restitution of what is lost. On the side of the party that inflicted injury or harm there must be a willingness to restore what is lost. Both parties must therefore be prepared to meet each other. From the one side there must be an active willingness to restore what has been lost by the injured party. From the other side there must also be a willingness not to demand full restitution for what has been lost. Reconciliation must be carried out in such a way that both parties can

be satisfied with the outcome and final agreement. Reconciliation is not only directed to the guilty party to repay what has been lost, what is primarily aimed at is the restoring of a broken relationship (Schenker 1982:48).

4. PEACE FOLLOWS RECONCILIATION

It is clear from the argumentation presented thus far that there can be no peace without reconciliation. Peace follows reconciliation where righteousness is restored. Peace can only dawn in a situation of righteousness and reconciliation. The very close relation between righteousness and peace is put aptly in Ps 85:10: "*righteousness and peace kiss each other*". In Is 32:17 one reads: "*Because every one will do what is right, there will be peace and security forever*". In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus mentioned those who hunger and thirst for righteousness first and later he mentioned the peacemakers. Peacemakers are those people who actively create conditions of peace by transcending narrow nationalistic borders (Guthrie 1981: 902).

One of the first results of reconciliation is peace with God. This is stated very clearly in Rom 5:1

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, (NIV)

Reconciliation with God results in peace with God. At the same time it also opens up the possibility of peace between people. This is particularly illustrated in the letter to the Ephesians, chapter 2. Jew and Gentile have been separated from each other by a hostility that existed between them. That has changed now. Ephesians 2:14-16 stated:

*14 For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,
15 by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace,
16 and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. (NIV)*

The reconciliation of the hostility between Jew and Greek may be taken as representative of every sort of interpersonal hostility (Ladd 1975:456). In the New Testament reconciliation has as its aim the establishment and maintenance of peace (Guthrie 1981:491).

The concept of peace (or shalom) in the Old Testament is a multi-faceted one. To quote the great Old Testament scholar von Rad once again:

...shalom designates the unimpairedness, the wholeness, of a relationship of communion, and so a state of harmonious equilibrium, the balancing of all claims and needs between two parties (von Rad 1975:130).

5. CONCLUSION

It is my firm conviction that we in South Africa have made considerable progress towards righteousness, reconciliation and peace, but I am sure you will agree, there is still a long way ahead of us. We, as church people, have the responsibility upon us to communicate the Biblical content of terms filled with a political content to our society and to make our society conform to Biblical standards for human relations. To promote and create conditions for peace is the task of each individual Christian as well as that of the church as the body of Christ.

I want to conclude with an Old Testament vision for peace:

Micah 4:1-4

- 1 *In the last days
the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established
as chief among the mountains;
it will be raised above the hills,
and peoples will stream to it.*
- 2 *Many nations will come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob.
He will teach us his ways,*

- so that we may walk in his paths."*
The law will go out from Zion,
the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
- 3 *He will judge between many peoples*
and will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide.
They will beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war anymore.
- 4 *Every man will sit under his own vine*
and under his own fig tree,
and no one will make them afraid,
for the LORD Almighty has spoken. (NIV)

May we all share this vision for real and lasting peace in our beloved country!

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