

## MISSION AS LIBERATION

### 3. RECONCILIATION AT THE HEART OF GOD AND MISSION

Myanmar Institute of Theology, November 2012  
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#### 1. RECONCILIATION: RESTORED RELATIONSHIP

##### a. The Meaning of the Word

The meaning of reconciliation is 'being made friends again', or 'being set in right relationship'. It means making peace or restoring harmony.

##### b. At the Heart of Mission

One of the current trends in missiology is to recognise that reconciliation is at the heart of Christian mission. William Barclay put it well when he said, "The essence of Christianity is the restoration of a lost relationship".<sup>1</sup>

When a marriage breaks down there is a need for reconciliation. When one country offends another there is a need for reconciliation. When two church denominations don't recognise each other's ministry or baptism there is a need for reconciliation. This is very practical. It is part of everyday life. And it's at the very heart of Christian mission.

Let me illustrate from my own life. My father and I struggled to get on in my younger years. He was strict and very conservative. I was a teenager in the turbulent sixties. I wore long hair and a beard and went to the movies. I opposed the war in Vietnam. I left the Salvation Army at the age of nineteen. My father and I clashed all the time. We were usually polite to each other, but we didn't share deeply. It was only when I was thirty-five years old that I felt able to seek reconciliation with him.

I invited my father to a series of lunch-times together. I asked him to tell me his life story. I said I wanted to get to know him man to man and to see life through his eyes. As it turned out these lunches were amazing. He shared with me his life. There were tears and there was laughter. We became close. After that we got on well until he died about eighteen years ago. My grieving at his death was made easier by the fact that we had been reconciled. It was a gift from God.

##### c. Similar Concepts

###### i. Atonement

Atonement once meant the same as reconciliation, that is, being 'at one' after conflict or estrangement.

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<sup>1</sup> William Barclay, *New Testament words* (London: SCM, 1964), 168.

It has taken on a narrower and more technical meaning, however. Because of the way the word is used in the Hebrew Bible it is closely linked to sacrifice. The Israelites usually sacrificed an animal and performed a ritual to please God. The Hebrew word *kaphar*, atonement, occurs seventy-eight times in the Hebrew Bible, so it's a central theme in Old Testament theology.

**ii. Shalom (Well-being, Peace)**

Shalom is another word which means much the same as reconciliation. Shalom, however, refers to a *state* of well-being or harmony or wholeness, whereas reconciliation can include the *process* of setting relationships right. Shalom covers more than just relationships, too. It includes prosperity, security and good health. It is also firmly grounded in this world, and in ordinary communities here and now.

I love this word. Shalom is one of the richest words in the Hebrew Bible. We translate it as peace but it refers to the well-being or wholeness of a community. It comes from a root verb that means making something complete or whole or holistic.<sup>2</sup>

It is not always the opposite of war in the Hebrew Bible, but speaks of a healthy community. War just happens to be one way in which a community can lack well-being and security. Shalom most often refers to well-being right here and now in all dimensions of social life.<sup>3</sup> It includes physical well-being (not being sick) and material well-being (prosperity).<sup>4</sup> In the Hebrew Bible we find it most often as a greeting and in the context of a covenant between people or groups.<sup>5</sup> It is still the standard greeting in the Middle East.

Shalom includes the idea of justice. In English and Latin we can talk of peace without justice. We can have an unjust peace. The Roman idea of peace (in Latin *Pax Romana*) was certainly a peace without justice. It was a peace secured at the cost of a mighty army, numbering as many as 170,000 in the time of the Emperor Augustus. Peace meant using force in every part of the Roman Empire.<sup>6</sup> The Hebrew concept of peace, however, involves a right ordering of relationships. Take Psalm 85:10:

Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;  
Righteousness [justice] and peace will kiss each other.

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<sup>2</sup> Claus Westermann, 'Peace (Shalom) in the Old Testament', in *The meaning of peace: Biblical studies*, eds. Perry B Yoder and Willard M Swartley (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 16-48.

<sup>3</sup> Westermann, 'Peace (Shalom) in the Old Testament', 21.

<sup>4</sup> Perry Yoder, *Shalom: The Bible's word for salvation, justice and peace* (London: Spire, 1989), 11.

<sup>5</sup> Westermann, 'Peace (Shalom) in the Old Testament', 23.

<sup>6</sup> Luise Schottroff, 'The dual concept of peace', in *The meaning of peace: Biblical studies*, eds. Perry B Yoder and Willard M Swartley (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 156.

As the Israelites came to look for the coming Messiah, shalom also began to refer to future salvation, salvation as 'well-being'. Take Isaiah 53:5:

Upon him was the punishment that made us whole [*shalom*].

Here is a hint of what we will find in the New Testament: Through an action of God, the sin of us all will be carried in one person and reconciliation will occur, resulting in us being made whole, or experiencing shalom.

**iii. Peacemaking**

'Peacemaking' is like reconciliation. Peacemaking emphasises the process, the journey, the fact that we are always on the way. Christian peacemaking also usually includes ideas of justice, well-being and God's gift of a new creation.

**iv. Justice**

Justice is like reconciliation, because it is concerned with right relationships as well. But I would see reconciliation as going beyond justice, because it involves friendship. Justice is done when a criminal is sentenced, but there may be no reconciliation; both the victim and the offender may hate each other to the day they die. Reconciliation only occurs when all parties feel OK about how the conflict is resolved.

There is no true reconciliation without justice. For example, it would be wrong in Australia to ask for reconciliation with the Indigenous people without returning land or working to overcome their disadvantage.

I'm sorry to say that sometimes Christians have urged reconciliation without urging justice. This has happened in South Africa during apartheid and in Latin America where the gap between rich and poor is great. But this is only seeking peace by smoothing things over. This is a hasty peace.<sup>7</sup> It won't deal with the causes of oppression. You can tell when reconciliation is false reconciliation by seeing who is calling for it. It will be the oppressors. Missiologist Robert Schreiter asks whether the Latin American bishops were right to ask for reconciliation instead of liberation and says No. 'Rather, no reconciliation without liberation.'<sup>8</sup>

**2. THE MISSION OF GOD IS FOR RECONCILIATION IN ALL DIMENSIONS**

This is a big theological claim. I'm going to argue that reconciliation is a good way to describe the mission of God, whether seen spiritually, socially, ecologically or cosmically.

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<sup>7</sup> Robert J Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and ministry in a changing social order* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992), 18.

<sup>8</sup> Schreiter, *Reconciliation*, 22.

### a. **In Rebuilding a Relationship with Humanity through Jesus Christ, Our Peace**

God is known as the 'God of peace' in the New Testament (Rom 15:33, 16:20, 2 Cor 13:11, 1 Thess 5:23, 2 Thess 3:16, Heb 13:20). Why? Because God's Good News is the power to bring peace. This peace is called 'the peace of God' (Jn 14:27, Phil 4:7, Col 3:15), a phrase not known in the Hebrew Bible, but specifically applied to the peace of the gospel, which is the gospel of peace (Eph 6:15, 2:17, Acts 10:36).

The classic passage, among many, is Romans 5:1–11:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace [*eirene*] with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand. ... If while we were enemies, we were reconciled [*katallassein*] to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled [*katallassein*], will we be saved by his life.

The central message of the gospel is reconciliation to God through Jesus Christ. We are alienated, which means separated. Our alienation from God is overcome when we turn in faith to God through Christ (1 Tim 2:5, Heb 8:6). The term used here for reconciliation (*katallage*) is used four times in the New Testament (Rom 5:11, 11:15, 2 Cor 5: 18, 5:19).

We saw before that in the Hebrew Bible atonement through sacrifice was very important. In the New Testament, the idea of atonement is used a few times as well, drawing on the Jewish framework of sacrifice (Jn 1:29, Rom 3:25, 1 Cor 5:7, Heb 2:17, 9:5, , 1 Jn 2:2, 4:10).

What do we make of this talk of sacrifice? In the eleventh century St Anselm suggested that sin offends the majesty and holiness of God. So God needed a sacrifice, or a person to take our place in receiving the full force of God's judgement. But many people today find difficulties with this. How can God judge Jesus Christ, who is a part of God? How can Jesus actually take our sin? Isn't the whole system of sacrifice questioned in the prophets anyway when they call for justice and faithfulness rather than burnt offerings?

I find it helpful to see Jesus dying in our place as only one metaphor of the reconciling work of Jesus, and not the main one either. It made sense to the Jews at the time, but sacrifice may not mean much to us.

Another way of viewing the atonement is to see it simply as reconciliation, the restoring of friendship. The New Testament use of atonement is more a bringing together than an offering of sacrifice. In other words, the substituting element is less important than the reconciling element.<sup>9</sup> Another way to put it is to say that in the life and death of Jesus we see embodied the outgoing and

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<sup>9</sup> John Driver, *Understanding the atonement for the mission of the church* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1986), 177-178.

bridging love of God, offering a new creation in which we relate in a new way to God. William Barclay puts it this way: 'It was not God who needed to be pacified, but [humanity] who needed to be moved to surrender and to penitence and to love.'<sup>10</sup>

For me how the atonement actually works is, in the end, a mystery.

What is clear, however, is that the cross is central. The birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus are the means of this reconciliation. Somehow the love of Christ becomes a compelling force in turning us around and empowering us for our mission.<sup>11</sup>

### **b. In Restoring Shalom amongst Humans, Breaking down Barriers**

The outworking of reconciliation between us and God includes reconciliation between humans. It is especially meant to be seen within the church, which is meant to be one in Christ, living in unity and peace. This is the vision of Christian peace between us.

This is a central theme in Paul's theology.<sup>12</sup> Paul applies it mainly to the division between Jews and Gentiles. Ephesians 2 is the classic passage.

For he is our peace; in his flesh [Jesus] has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility, between us. (Eph 2:14)

### **c. In Desiring a Proper Ecology in God's Creation**

The setting right of relationships which is at the heart of God's mission includes our relationship to the environment. The classic passage is in Romans 8 where Paul says that God's creation waits with eager longing for God's salvation, because it will include creation. It groans in labour pains, hoping to be set free from the bondage of decay (Rom 8:18–25). The passage suggests that as humans are restored in their relationship to God, so also will we find our restored relationship with creation.

### **d. In Ultimately Promising Cosmic Reconciliation**

We find in Colossians 1 and Ephesians 1 a sweeping vision of reconciliation which includes the heavens and the earth, using the phrase 'all things' (*ta panta*).

[God] has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. (Eph 2:9–10)

<sup>10</sup> 'Katallassin: The word of reconciliation', in Barclay, *New Testament words*, 167.

<sup>11</sup> Driver, *Understanding the atonement for the mission of the church*, 180.

<sup>12</sup> Ralph P Martin, *Reconciliation: A study of Paul's theology*, Rev. ed. (Atlanta: John Knox, 1989).

This vision of reconciling all things includes the whole cosmology of the New Testament: humans, the earth, the heavens, angels, demons, powers, principalities and spirits. In this context reconciliation will end the conflict between spiritual powers and God.

### 3. THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION

If God's mission is to reconcile the world to Godself, then clearly our mission is to be reconcilers, peacemakers, too.

#### a. Blessed Are the Peacemakers

Let's begin with Jesus and his blessing on those who make peace. Matthew 5:9 says:

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

In other words, "Those who make peace between warring parties reproduce the character of God."<sup>13</sup> In these simple words we find our call.

What does it mean to be peacemakers? Peacemaking can occur between individuals, as we persuade them to talk together and sort things out. Or it can be between groups. Or even nations.

Right now in world affairs, Christians are generally a voice for peace. There is a war between America and Iraq. Christians generally are taking one of two positions on Iraq.

The first is called the Just War position. It says that war should always be a last resort, something to be avoided as long as possible. It must be just. It must not kill civilians. It must be likely to succeed. America should not go to war alone, but only if the United Nations agrees. And so on. My guess is that most Christians take this position of only fighting wars that are just, an argument that goes back as far as Augustine in the fourth century. (Even if we support a Just War, it is clear to me that the war in Iraq is not just, because of the number of civilians being killed and the fact that it is very unlikely to be clearly won.)

The other position is that of pacifism, or non-violent resistance. Peace churches such as the Mennonites and the Quakers argue that when Jesus said to love our enemies he meant it. We can't love the enemy and also kill them. The non-violent option has always been a minority in the church, but I am convinced that it is more relevant now than it ever has been. This is because modern weapons are so destructive that I don't believe a just war can be fought any longer. The choices other than war are not easy, but then war was never easy either.

Whatever stance we take, the call to be peacemakers, working to bring warring parties to the peace table, is more relevant than ever.

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<sup>13</sup> C F Evans, 'Peace', in *A theological word book of the Bible*, ed. Alan Richardson (London: SCM, 1950), 166.

*Question:*

*Is it ever justifiable for Christians to go to war? How can we love our enemies if we kill them?*

**b. 'Peace Be with You!': Passing on Jesus' Gift of Shalom**

When we look at the use of 'peace' in the Gospels it is striking how often it occurs when Jesus uses it as a greeting or divine gift.

For example, to the sinful woman who took a great risk and broke rules in anointing Jesus with oil, in Luke 7:50, Jesus said

'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.'

It seems to me that we could recover this depth and yet warmth in our Christian greetings.

I can remember vividly a church service in which a friend of mine preached on what the Australian equivalent might be for Jesus' transformative greeting, 'Peace'. He suggested that the nearest we came was the saying of 'Giddyay', said with a firm handshake, good eye contact and overflowing goodwill. So we were invited to pass the peace in the service saying 'Giddyay', looking each other in the eye and praying shalom upon each other. It was powerful. Let's not underestimate the importance of greetings, whether in passing peace at a church service, or in seizing the opportunity of our first encounters with people we meet. It is part of the mission of the church to be peace-givers as well as peace-makers.

The significance of giving peace becomes stark when we think of those who are in deep conflict and find themselves incapable of shaking hands or speaking civilly. Miroslav Volf has written a fine theological book on reconciliation called *Exclusion and embrace*, and the introduction contains this:

After I had finished my lecture Professor Jürgen Moltmann stood up and asked one of his typical questions, both concrete and penetrating: 'But can you embrace a *cetnik*?' It was the winter of 1993. For months now the notorious Serbian fighters called '*cetnik*' had been sowing desolation in my native country, herding people into concentration camps, raping women, burning down churches, and destroying cities. I had just argued that we ought to embrace our enemies as God has embraced us in Christ. Can I embrace a *cetnik*—the ultimate other, so to speak, the evil other? What would justify the embrace? Where would I draw the strength for it? What would it do to my identity as a human being and as a Croat? It took me a while to answer, though I immediately knew what I wanted to say. 'No, I cannot—but as a follower of Christ I think I should

be able to.' In a sense this book is the product of the struggle between the truth of my argument and the force of Moltmann's objection.<sup>14</sup>

### c. **Called to the Ministry of Reconciliation**

The clearest passage on reconciliation in the whole of the New Testament is in 2 Corinthians 5, where Paul connects God reconciling the world in Christ with our Christian response. Here is our call to the mission of reconciliation.

It is said twice. In the light of us being made as a new creation, God has given us the *ministry* of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18). And, as part of Christ's reconciling role, he has entrusted to us the *message* of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:19). First we are to be peacemakers in our very lives, serving others. And, second, we are to bear the message as well, telling the world of the source of true reconciliation.

This is the calling of the church, in Paul's eyes. He continually refers to the breaking down of barriers between God and us, which is worked out in the breaking down of barriers between us and others, whether Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free (Gal 3:28). God is leading us into a new society which is one body, unified by Christ.

*Question:*

*Is your church involved in any way in peacemaking? This might include negotiating between parties in conflict, or bringing two groups together.*

### d. **Called to Christian Unity**

The theme of Christian unity saturates Paul's writing. Perhaps the best known passage is Ephesians 4:

Make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph 4:3)

Paul hammers home that there is one body, one Spirit, one Lord and one faith, and so on (4:5). Yes, there is diversity, and there are different gifts. But Paul argues that we are to grow into unity. The essence of Christian growth is the maturity of living in harmony together (4:13). We are to be united in love (Col 2:2). This is one of the central meanings of reconciliation.

In the words of John's Gospel, Jesus pleads to God for unity among his followers. Unity between Christians is important for the sake of mission. Jesus prays:

The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me. (Jn 17:22–23)

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<sup>14</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and embrace: A theological exploration of identity, otherness, and reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 9.



#### 4. THE DYNAMICS OF RECONCILIATION

In this section I'm going to concentrate on one aspect of reconciliation, the restoring of relationships between individual people or between groups. To help you ground these comments, think about your own country gradually entering a new era of democracy (I realise there is still a long way to go). What reconciliation needs to take place to heal the nation? How does it all work?

##### a. It Is a Spirituality More than a Strategy

Reconciliation is a way of life, a response to God's work in our lives, not a managed process of fixing things up. 'Reconciliation is largely discovered rather than achieved'.<sup>15</sup> This flows from the biblical and theological insights we have explored so far.

##### b. The Process More Often Begins with the Victim

This is not how it has to be, but how it seems usually to be.<sup>16</sup> Usually the victim takes the first step. Why? It seems that the victim is often partially healed or restored to fuller humanity; this is a result of God's special care for the poorest and most broken. Often victims want to set relationships right or even to forgive. Victims often want to see the oppressor as a human being. If dignity and mercy are shown by the victim, the process of reconciliation has begun.

##### c. It Involves Truth Telling

There is a saying that we should 'forgive and forget'. But it is shallow and wrong. Forgiveness requires remembering, bringing the truth to the surface so that it can be faced. There may even be reason never to forget. We must remember the Second World War when Hitler massacred the Jews, so that it doesn't happen again. No serious reconciliation is possible until the hidden stories are told in public, especially by the victims, and the underlying source of the alienation is exposed.<sup>17</sup>

This is the key to the success of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which focused on the telling of stories by those who had been oppressed.<sup>18</sup>

One of the difficulties of conflict is that 'different truths' are held by the parties in conflict. Truth is often made up and imposed. The truth of the oppressor often wins.<sup>19</sup> What is needed is a process of uncovering what happened, and reshaping our understanding of what it means in our community memory. It is putting together the past in a way that releases.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Schreiter, *Reconciliation*, 60.

<sup>16</sup> Robert J Schreiter, *The ministry of reconciliation: Spirituality and strategies* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998), 14-15.

<sup>17</sup> Norman C Habel, *Reconciliation: Searching for Australia's soul* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 1999), 34.

<sup>18</sup> Geiko Müller-Fahrenheit, *The art of forgiveness: Theological reflections on healing and reconciliation* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1997), 85-101.

<sup>19</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and embrace*, 248.

<sup>20</sup> Müller-Fahrenheit, *The art of forgiveness*, 37.

**d. It Involves Repentance and Saying Sorry**

There can be no full reconciliation without repentance. In the social context, repentance is one of the hardest acts to perform.<sup>21</sup> Leaders don't want to lose face. But they need to say, 'We were wrong'. They need to see differently now and act differently in the future. This is where reconciliation goes further than justice. Justice doesn't require repentance.

Repentance is closely connected to saying sorry and asking for forgiveness. It is powerful in public reconciliation.

Until recently in Australia, the government refused to say sorry to Indigenous people for separating Aboriginal children from their parents between about 1910 and 1970. Most of the churches have said sorry. Hundreds of thousands of ordinary people have walked across Sydney Harbour Bridge and other bridges around Australia on a Sorry Day Walk. But for years the Prime Minister John Howard refused to say sorry. He said he didn't do anything personally to the Aborigines. The nation waited. The indigenous people waited. Finally, in 2007 a new government was formed. One of the first things the new Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, did was to offer a formal apology. It was very powerful and moving. Of course it was only the beginning, but healing had begun.

**e. It Requires Justice**

True reconciliation, as I have said, does not avoid seeking justice but requires it. It may be that the injustices of the past cannot all be wiped out. Nevertheless, a process of restoring rights, restoring status and restoring the honour of the wronged party is necessary if true reconciliation is to take place.<sup>22</sup>

**f. It Involves Forgiveness**

Forgiveness, like repentance, can be very difficult. It means no longer holding a grudge. Between individuals it may mean actually letting the other off. I may forgive someone their debt. In wider social situations, it doesn't necessarily mean forgoing justice, as I just said, but it means forgoing revenge and giving up on our hostility. Theologically, it is because we are forgiven much that we embark on a journey of forgiveness towards others. It is the deepest aspect of God's transforming love. Forgiveness releases the forgiven person.

Forgiveness is hard because revenge is the natural impulse. Anyone who has argued with their husband or wife knows that. Your partner stings you, so you hit back. Soon you're both calling each other names or trying to hurt the other person with words.

But forgiveness is important. If the victim cannot forgive, then when justice is done and the victim gains power, he or she will become the new oppressor. There is actually a need for both victim and aggressor to repent and forgive.

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<sup>21</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and embrace*, 119.

<sup>22</sup> Habel, *Reconciliation*, 37.

Usually aggression is not only one-way. And what is needed is a new creation, not a reversal of the violence.

**g. Ceremonies of Reconciliation Can Help**

The power of ceremony in symbolic disarmament by the oppressor is immense. It is equally powerful as an expression of forgiveness by the victim. Nelson Mandela, the black South African president after apartheid was dismantled, used symbolic ceremonies. He invited to afternoon tea both the wives of black leaders, many of whom had spent years in jail, and the wives of the former white leaders. He also appeared at an international rugby game in a South African rugby shirt. He helped reconciliation to occur in South Africa.

Let me illustrate this point with a story from Don Richardson's book *Peace child*.<sup>23</sup>

In a culture where trickery and treachery are idealised as highest values, traitors and torturers are venerated as the greatest heroes. So it was with the Sawi people of Irian Jaya, when Don and Carol Richardson came to live among them in 1962.

There was no gift big enough, no treaty binding enough, to seal a peace agreement between the warring Kamur and Haenam villages except one—the peace child.

'Tomorrow we are going to sprinkle cool water on each other!', said the leading men of both warring villages to Richardson one late evening. What they meant was that they were going to make peace and be reconciled. Despite the disbelief on the part of the missionary, the men meant what they said. They were about to make peace by giving away two children—a peace child from each group.

Kaiyo of Kamur had—despite pleading and anguish of his wife—taken his only son, just six-months old. Holding him close to his chest one last time, he headed toward the people of Haenam. As he stood there, facing the tense crowd of children, women, and the warring men, he saw the man he had chosen to bear his name, and called, 'Mahor!'.

The man leaped forward and faced Kaiyo.

'Mahor!' Kaiyo challenged. 'Will you plead the words of Kamur among your people?'

'Yes', Mahor responded, 'I will plead the words of Kamur among my people!'

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<sup>23</sup> Don Richardson, *Peace child* (Glendale, CA: Regal, 1974), 195-201. This summary is taken from Hans Kasdorf, *Christian conversion in context* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1980), 83-85.

'Then I will give you my son and with him my name!' Kaiyo held forth his little boy, and Mahor received him gently into his arms.

Mahor shouted, 'Eehaa! It is enough! I will surely plead for peace between us!'

People now began calling Mahor by Kaiyo's name.

As the intensity of the atmosphere increased, Mahaen of Haenam held aloft one of his small sons, and called, 'Kaiyo! Will you plead the words of Haenam among your people?'

'Yes!' cried Kaiyo, holding out his hands toward Mahaen.

'Then I give you my son and with him my name!'

As Kaiyo took the little boy from Mahaen, a sudden cry of despair broke out from the back of the throng. Close relatives of the child had just realised what was happening.

As the two babies were being decorated by their adopted villages for an authentic peace celebration, the missionary inquired about the meaning of all this. A young man explained, 'White man, you've been urging us to make peace—don't you know it's impossible to have peace without a peace child?'

This was the key the Richardsons had been praying for. As the ancestors of the Sawi people had passed down the words of a peace child to bring about peace and reconciliation between two warring peoples, so the ancestors of the missionaries had passed down a story of a Peace Child—God's Son—to make peace not only between the warring villages of the Sawi, but also between the Sawi and the God of heaven and earth.

In Christ, the authentic Peace Child, God now reconciles the estranged to [Godself] and to others in relationships.<sup>24</sup>

This is an area where Christians have a great deal to contribute, with our experience in the ritual of worship.

## **h. Rebuilding Relationships May Take a Long Time**

Where conflict and violence has been deep or widespread, there needs to be a longer process of rebuilding. Significant turning points are not enough. A separated couple may have to start again in courting, because the trust has vanished. A split church may have to meet carefully together for some time before they re-unite. A nation may have to rebuild hospitals, schools, courts and parliaments at times. Even more difficult, a society may have to rebuild trust and a culture of non-violence and justice.

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<sup>24</sup> Kasdorf, *Christian conversion in context*, 85.

**i. There Is No Final Reconciliation Until God Comes in Fullness**

Miroslav Volf points out that in the real world, every time we sort out a conflict between nations, 'along with new understandings and peace agreements new conflicts and disagreements are permanently generated'.<sup>25</sup> We shouldn't give up hope for an ultimate and final reconciliation in the fullness of God, but our immediate task becomes one of seeking a 'non-final' reconciliation in the midst of struggle against oppression. It will be a journey of small steps, of achieving partial justice and reconciliation and stumbling over new obstacles. Still, all the way we can be inspired by the vision of ultimate reconciliation based on the transforming forgiveness of Jesus Christ.<sup>26</sup>

These dynamics of reconciliation are useful as a checklist when considering any attempts at reconciliation, either by the church or other bodies or people. At the very least, they should remind us that reconciliation is both complex and difficult, because it goes to the very heart of relationships, which ultimately need to be redeemed by the reconciling love of God in Jesus.

Reconciliation is at the heart of God because God reaches out to reconcile the whole world to Godself. As people who bear this reconciliation to the world, we are called to announce that peace is possible in Christ. We are called to carry peace and share it. We are called to work for peace—including justice—where there is no peace in a broken world.

**Question:**

*Myanmar has experienced conflict—between ethnic groups and between the people and their government. In what ways do you think the church in Myanmar might be able to assist in the process of reconciliation in the future?*

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<sup>25</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and embrace*, 109.

<sup>26</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and embrace* 231.