

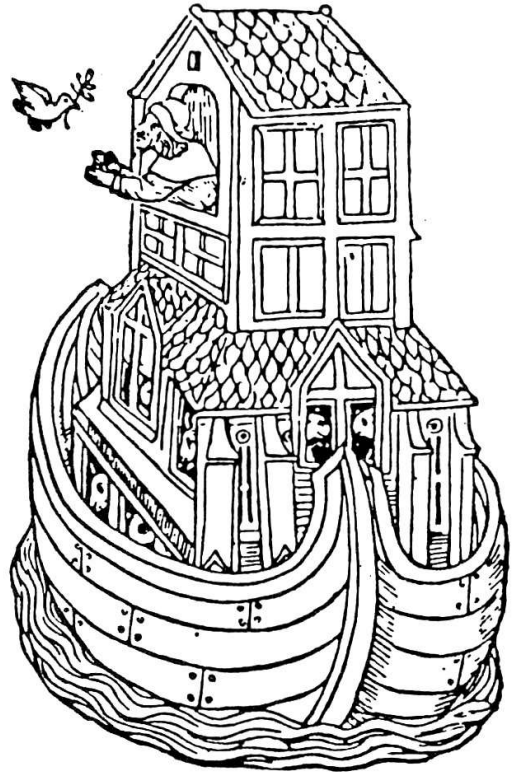
Reconciliation:

Highpoints of

Biblical Revelation

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Noah's Ark

Reconciliation is a word rich in its many meanings, but all of them imply a process, a somewhat winding and often tortuous course to be travelled before the destination is reached. It is the restoration of a state of harmony, order and balance that has been somehow disrupted or destroyed, a process of healing divisions and overcoming obstacles that lie in the path of harmonious relations. Nor is reconciliation to be understood merely as a matter between individuals and groups, or families and nations, but rather as involving the world, the universe and God Himself. It is, then, well worth the effort to look into the meaning of reconciliation as it may be found in the Bible, the word of God.

HARMONY AND RECONCILIATION

Traditional Chinese philosophy holds that Nature exists in a state of harmony, with the two forces, the yin and the yang, not in contradiction with each other but mutually supportive and complementary. "Let us take the four seasons as an example. In the spring, the yang becomes stronger

as the yin weakens; in the summer the yang is strong and the yin is weak. In the fall the yin gradually gets stronger while the yang is on the wane; in winter the yin is strong and the yang is weak. Each season has yin and yang, mutually complementing each other."¹ The Bible, too, reflects this original harmony of Nature in the Genesis account of God creating the world in six days and placing man in the Garden of Paradise. Man sins and harmony is broken. His sins lead to the disaster of the great flood and the world's state of harmony is destroyed. However, after the flood, harmony is again restored to the world of Nature: "As long as the earth lasts, sowing and reaping, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall cease no more" (Genesis 8:22).

Man is a part of Nature, and yet in the exercise of his free will, he is able to surpass it. He is capable of effecting harmony, preserving order, and maintaining peace; but he is also capable of evil, of entertaining "nothing but thoughts of wickedness all day long", so that "the earth would grow corrupt in God's sight, becoming filled with violence" (Genesis 6:5, 11). Moreover, man's inner conflicts and the loss of harmony and balance not only is the result of his sin, but also can arise from his experience of his own consciousness. Here, at one and the same time, he experiences the limitation of his being and its unlimited potential. Life's difficulties prevent the full realization of



Man sins and harmony is broken.

his potential, and frustrate his efforts to achieve total satisfaction.² Philosophers have grappled with this problem for centuries, and the inspired biblical writers have responded to its challenge as well.

It was in a treatise on the role of nations that Hegel (1770-1831) first posited the principle of harmony between man and the transcendental as the basis for the final synthesis of world history. He described this principle as the harmonious union between objective truth (as experienced through man's consciousness) and free will.³ Later, Karl Marx (1818-1883) disputed this. Being of the opinion that Hegel was referring to a harmony of idea only, Marx saw separation and conflict still existing between the perfect idea and the reality of man's wretched condition. Marx saw in the rise of the nation-states, after the French Revolution, that not only nations but individuals within nations became separated, independent units within society. The kind of individualism that resulted was based on the right of private property. Actually, Hegel, himself, was not unaware of this condition, but he felt that in a nation authentically pursuing a condition of freedom, this kind of selfishness would gradually decrease. Marx felt that for man to obtain his complete liberation, he must first dissolve the abstract national identity, then, allow man, through his life, his work, and his associations, to become a category unto himself (i.e. common man) and use his energy to organize social power, which need not be separated from political power.⁴

Marx suggested further that the right of private property espoused by capitalism is the cause of man's alienation from self, from his own human nature. In the proletarian revolution man begins to reclaim his human nature, and once communism achieves its objective with the abolition of private property, the source of his alienation will be removed and man will return to his original harmonious state. All conflicts will then be resolved, those between man and nature, man and man, essence and existence, production and self-affirmation, freedom and necessity, and between the individual and the species. Thus the riddles of history are finally solved.⁵

The above can be seen as a kind of prophecy of reconciliation, a prophecy made by the young Marx (and unpublished

to this day). This view was to influence all his later writings on politics and economics, and even his major work, Capitalism. After one hundred years, it appears that the prophecy still awaits its fulfillment. On the contrary, it becomes more apparent with each passing day that the actual historical reality is quite different from that envisaged by the young Marx. Why then has Marxism had such a great influence on Chinese soil? Two reasons stand out among the others: first, Marx's description of man's wretched condition certainly fits the majority of the Chinese encountered throughout China's history: "man, who has experienced humiliation, slavery, abandonment and contempt"; second, Marx proposed a meaning and purpose to all of world history.

Aside from the failure of Marx's prophecy to reach fulfillment, there still remains a more fundamental question: Is man really the creator of his own future? Is he not a victim of his own excessive idealism, which continues to plunge him into difficult situations from which he cannot extricate himself: tyranny, totalitarianism, a life devoid of happiness, his only response a complaint to heaven about the bitterness of his fate? The Bible is a book that addresses these problems. It does not offer an ideology, but, perhaps, it offers something more reliable: a response and a path that can lead to the curing of man's ills and bring meaning and purpose to life. It is the way of reconciliation.

THE WAY OF RECONCILIATION: BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES

One of the main themes of the Bible is reconciliation, and the words of the Apostle Paul concerning reconciliation are among the most profound and moving texts to be found in all his epistles. Paul sees himself as an "instrument of God" (Acts 9:16), chosen to embrace the "task of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18), and "entrusted with the news" of reconciliation "as an ambassador for Christ". Paul's teaching can be summed up in four passages from his epistles that highlight reconciliation between God and man (II Corinthians 5:14-21), reconciliation and joy as the fruits of justification (Romans 5:1-11), reconciliation as a cosmic reality (Roman 8:18-28), and reconciliation among nations and peoples as an escatological reality (Ephesians 2:11-22). Let us now study each of these key texts in some detail.

RECONCILIATION BETWEEN GOD AND MAN

In II Corinthians 5:14-21, Paul speaks first of life and death, the new and the old, reasons for living and the way of Christian dying, the vision of man and the vision of God, as a prelude to what he has to say about reconciliation with God. Verses 14 to 17 are summed up in the final verse: "For anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation: the old creation has gone and now the new one is here". In the following four verses, the word "reconciliation" is used no less than five times. Paul states that God is the initiator of reconciliation, Christ is its mediator, the locus for reconciliation is Christ's church, that the beneficiaries of this reconciliation are we, ourselves, and that the world is already in a process of achieving the fulness of reconciliation which will take place at some future time.

There are two points worth noting in the above: first, that while enmity and alienation is a condition existing between men, reconciliation is brought about by God alone. Reconciliation is God's work; we have only to accept it and share this good news with others; second, reconciliation is seen both as something that has "already taken place" and a condition that has "not yet" been achieved. Verses 18 and 19 speak about the "already", and verse 20 the "not yet". It is in verse 21 that this seeming contradiction is resolved as Paul points out that what God has already done, man will do. "We" who have acknowledged the work of God's reconciliation within ourselves, announce this good news to a world which has yet to achieve reconciliation. In Paul's later epistles, he does away with this distinction and in his epistle to the Colossians he states that it is God's will "for all things to be reconciled through Him (Christ) and for Him, everything in heaven and everything on earth, when He made peace by His death on the cross". (Col. 1:20).

RECONCILIATION AND JOY AS THE FRUIT OF JUSTIFICATION

In his letter to the Roman's, chapter 5, verses 1 to 11, Paul speaks of reconciliation and joy as the fruits of justification with God. Man's righteousness (justification) is due to faith (v.1), and the sacrificial death of Christ

("blood" of v.9).⁷ Thus, because of the grace of God man is raised to life, and his new happiness is in the hope of sharing God's future glory. Reconciliation through justification not only brings peace to the restless heart and the troubled conscience, but it also allows believers to participate in the changing course of human history as it moves into the future.

The love spoken of in verse 5 is the love that God bestows on man. This love is poured into our hearts with the Holy Spirit. In the whole of the New Testament, no other verse describes in so intimate a way the close relationship between the Holy Spirit and the love that God bestows on man. The demonstration of this love is to be found in Jesus: "What gives proof that God loves us is that Christ died for us while we were still sinners". (v.8). Verses 9 through 11 echo verse 2 and chapter 5 verse 11. These texts speak of a salvation that is both eschatological and irreversible, and is the result of reconciliation in this world. Being made righteous by Christ's blood, we escape the wrath of the Last Day (v.9); reconciliation in Christ now means eternal happiness with God in the future.

RECONCILIATION AS A COSMIC REALITY

"For all creation waits with eager longing for the revelation of the sons of God". "From the beginning till now the entire creation, as we know, has been groaning in one great act of giving birth". These two verses are taken from Paul's letter to the Romans where he speaks of the reconciliation of the whole universe (Romans 8:18-28). They address the threats and dangers faced by all created things. They have a contemporary ring to them in that they share the same concerns of modern ecologists who, with ever increasing alarm, have been drawing our attention to our pollution of the air and water, the senseless destruction of our forests and other natural resources. We are asked to pause and reflect on whether or not we have misinterpreted the mission God has given to man to "Increase and multiply, control the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28) as a licence for the ruthless exploitation of nature. Paul uses a set metaphor (the pangs of birth) found in other parts of the Old Testament, notably in Jeremiah 13:21 and Isaiah 66:6-8, which refers simultaneously to the distressful situation

of the present and the expectation of an exalted stage in the future.

In verses 20 and 21 of this passage, Paul describes the relationship between nature and sinful man as ambivalent and tangled: who is free? who is in bondage? Man has become the slave of sin in his flesh, and, in turn, seeks to enslave nature. In Paul, the situation is serious but not without hope, for even in the darkness of his fallen state, man discerns a ray of light: he would be saved and nature restored. In verses 19 to 22, Paul goes beyond philosophical speculation to an act of faith that affirms nature's share in man's reconciliation and future glorification in the risen body of Christ. This faith affirmation is stated vividly in Paul's metaphor of birth: all creation groans, in the time between the "already" and the "not yet" man, too, is groaning, and the spirit groans "with sighs too deep for words". And Paul sees in all of this a process and direction leading irreversibly to a salvation which will be obtained through prayer and intercession.

THE RECONCILIATION OF NATIONS AND PEOPLES

Paul's theme of reconciliation turns towards the healing of the divisions between nations and peoples in his letter to the Ephesians, chapter 2, verses 11 to 22. The restoration of peace and harmony both within and among nations



is of particular importance to him, a Jew among Gentiles. No division among peoples was so deep or long lasting as that which the Bible describes as existing between the Jews and the Gentiles. In Ephesians chapter 2 Paul dares to assert the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles in Christ and through Christ. Because Jesus is our peace, he makes peace by bringing both together in communion.

All nations and peoples, no matter how near or far, despite the wounds and scars that have sundered them, can find reconciliation in accepting and believing in Christ. "In his own flesh he has broken down the intervening wall of hostility"(v.14). He has offered his body as a sacrificial offering. He has willingly shed his blood, given his life, by dying on the cross for mankind. "In his own person he has destroyed the hostility, restoring peace through the cross, uniting both in a single body and reconciling them with God (v.16; cf. Jn 11-52). Thus is the creditability of Christ as reconciler par excellence established.

Christ offered His body in sacrifice, but He was also Son of the Father, who raised Him up to new life. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus bestows this new life on all who accept Him: "Through Christ we have, in the one Spirit, our way to come to the Father and are part of God's household". (vv. 18-19).

In summary then, it can be said that the four Pauline passages cited above are biblical highpoints in reconciliation. Each reveals a special characteristic of reconciliation: it begins with God's initiative, is attained by man's justification, includes the world of nature, and restores, through Christ, peace and harmony among nations.

STEPS IN THE PROCESS OF RECONCILIATION

Although God is the initiator of reconciliation, its proper subject is man, and his role in the process is too abstract or theoretical, a theological ideal that lies beyond our grasp, or so inclusive that one does not know where to begin in putting it into practice. Actually, the daily experience of Christians attests not only to its concrete practicality but also to the ease with which it can be readily attained.....provided one wishes to reach out for it.

For Christians, Christ is at once its inspiration and the source of energy whereby it is attained. And all Christian reconciliation involves the following simple steps.

The first step is to undergo a change of heart, to confess one's sins and be willing to do penance for them. "If we say we have no sin in us, we are deceiving ourselves and refusing to admit the truth; but if we acknowledge our sins, then God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and purify us from everything that is wrong" (1 John 1:8-9). Sin certainly has a part to play in the drama, and John the Evangelist acknowledges it.⁸ But he quickly brings us from the human to the divine dimension for its resolution. God's love can overcome sin. The greatest manifestation of God's love is that He forgives man's sins and reconciles man to Himself.

A further step in the process of turning one's heart to God is repentance. "Although our conscience blames us, we can still be at peace because God is greater than our conscience" (1 John 3:20). God's limitless compassion is able to penetrate to the roots of man's evil, and in the deepest recesses of his heart, arouse a movement towards conversion. At the same time, it comes as a call to man to begin to walk the path of reconciliation.⁹

In Pope Paul VI's first instruction to the Church upon his becoming Pope, he wrote of "salvific dialogue" as part of the process of reconciliation. This active communication between God and man, or among men themselves, is essential in any movement towards reconciliation, and, after reconciliation, essential to preserving it. The Bible itself can be considered as a record of the dialogue between God and man, and the climax of this dialogue being the Incarnation of God's Word.

The Christian hears Christ's call to dialogue, and with a sincere heart and open mind enters into dialogue with his fellowmen, with a special concern for those with whom he needs to be reconciled. While some forms of dialogue deal in deception, and some produce dissatisfaction, or even tragic consequences, a Christian must not be put off by this but rather strive to overcome such obstacles. A strong faith, reliance on truth, a frank and sincere attitude,

go a long way towards eventual success, as is the conviction that only through dialogue can reconciliation become a reality among men.

A word should be said about common obstacles to true dialogue. Where there has been no conversion of heart nor true repentance, there can be no lasting reconciliation, only the submission of one will to another. A refusal to admit one's own sinfulness can lead to a loss of the sense of sin itself and the gradual erosion and blinding of conscience. the biblical imperative "Repent, and believe the good news" (Mark 1:15) is a call to cast aside this obstacle to a dialogue which has as its proper goal genuine reconciliation.

Another hindrance to dialogue is found in the limitations modern secularism would impose on human experience. The desire to establish paradise on earth, and to limit all that man is to this visible world places severe restrictions on dialogue. Such a philosophy concerns itself with work and production, leaving no room for a consideration of the spiritual yearnings and needs hidden deep in man's heart. In fact, one can question whether or not such an existence cut off from a consideration of God or association with believers is worth all the trouble and effort. While man may attempt to set up a world without reference to God, will the world allow itself to be thus contained in such narrow limits? In biblical terms, the world, in the end, will rise up to oppose man, and take its revenge on him.¹⁰

In summary, then, reconciliation, as we see from the Bible, is a process involving definite steps. Man must begin with himself, start from a change of heart and turn back to God (conversion); then, at peace with himself, he can face God with honesty and sincerity (repentance); and, finally, he is able to imitate the all-embracing spirit of tolerance of God, Himself, as he turns to engage in salvific dialogue with his fellowmen who walk the same path with him through life. (*Footnotes see p.35*)