

COVENANT AND RECONCILIATION

Tom Stuckey

There is a tension running through the Bible between the universal hope of one all-inclusive humanity and the unique destiny of each particular race or nation. Miroslav Volf, the Croatian theologian, in his superb book *Exclusion & Embrace*¹ explores this tension. Reflecting on the ethnic conflict in former Yugoslavia he seeks an appropriate contextual theology of reconciliation. Reconciliation is harder to achieve than we Christians are sometimes prepared to admit. We have only to look at the bitter legacy of violence between Catholics and Protestants in parts of Ireland, Christians and Muslims in Croatia and the ethnic conflict between Tamils and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka. Here are putrefying sores which refuse to heal. The problem, as Volf points out (p.124), is that both victims and perpetrators are 'imprisoned in the automatism of mutual exclusion'.²

I once attended a meeting between Christians and Jews on the subject of 'forgiving and forgetting'. I was startled by one Jewish man who said 'we must not forget otherwise those who died will have died in vain'. Behind this statement was no simplistic notion of an 'eye for an eye' or 'tooth for a tooth'. Neither were we dealing with a Mafia-type revenge feeding a cycle of vengeance. Here is something much more profound which touches upon ones very identity before God and the determination to be faithful to ones own history.

In this paper I want to suggest that the tension between exclusion and inclusion, victims and oppressors, has always and will always be with us. Reconciliation is therefore something to strive for but is ultimately a gift found beyond both parties. I have come to this conclusion through my study of Biblical covenants.

In my book *Into the Far Country* I argue that if we are to have a theology of mission which takes the problem of violence seriously we must give renewed attention to three Biblical covenants.³ The first is the covenant of creation and recreation reestablished with Noah (Gen.9.8-17). This covenant is inclusive and all embracing. Second, there is the particular covenant made with Abraham (Gen.17.1-14), which gives the Jewish people (and also Muslims) their unique destiny and purpose. Third, there is the new covenant in the Holy Spirit established through Jesus Christ which, transcending previous covenants, overcomes the tension between them so allowing us to celebrate diversity in unity and unity in diversity.

Two Old Testament covenants

The covenant with Noah is a covenant of grace expressing the free and utterly unmerited self-obligation of God to the whole human race. God promises to both preserve and save all the inhabitants of the planet from the 'waters of destruction'. The 'rainbow sign' tells us that all are included in God's redemptive activity. Although the Bible concentrates on the faith-story of Jews and Christians, it also sets out a parallel tradition showing God at work in and through people other than Israelites, people like Melkizedek (Gen.14.19), Jethro (Ex.18), Job, Ruth and Daniel. In the New Testament, Jesus refers in an inclusive way to the Queen of Sheba (Matt. 12.42), the people of Nineveh (Lk.11.29-32), the widow of Zarephath, Naaman the Syrian (Lk. 4.25-26) and the Canaanite woman (Matt. 15.21-28). Jesus speaks of a gracious God who as Father of the human race makes the sun rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous (Matt. 5.45). In the rain and sun, rainbows circle the earth. This covenant is an ecological covenant whereby God calls us to be co-creators with himself in renewing the earth and its communities. God's Spirit has always been at work among the peoples

