

## 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*<sup>1</sup> 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'.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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

of the earth for 'in him we all live and move and have our being' (Acts 17.28).

Universal holocaust was the occasion of the first covenant; the cataclysm of Babel provides the trigger for a second particular covenant. This is the moment when primeval history breaks off in shrill dissonance, producing fragmented communities and migrating travellers. To bring clarity to a confused situation, the one God who is at work in separate histories now invites us to look at the way in which he operates in 'one' history. As a team of eleven football players are selected by the manager to delight a crowd of thousands, so Israel is elected to bring glory to the world.

God, the creator of humanity, having made a covenant with all humanity, then turns to one people and commands it to be different in order to teach humanity the dignity of difference...Biblical monotheism is not the idea that there is one God and therefore one truth, one faith, one way of life..., it is the idea that unity creates diversity.<sup>4</sup>

God's special relationship with Israel is important because she was called to be a symbol of how God would deal redemptively with every nation. In the light of the experience unique to Israel, other nations can learn how their own histories can be interpreted redemptively.

The Western missionary enterprise has traditionally begun with Abraham. It has been argued that Israel's relationship with the other nations is centripetal; it pulls them in, Jerusalem being the focus (Isa. 2.2; Zech. 8.23).<sup>5</sup> This movement is assumed in the New Testament (Matt. 8.11f). However with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the movement reverses itself going outwards to the ends of the earth. But there is a theological problem with this. In starting with one selected chosen 'people of God', other races become 'objects' rather than 'subjects' of history. This ethnological approach feeds racism. 'History', writes the Asian theologian Choan-Seng Song, 'cannot be explained by the centrism of Israel.'<sup>6</sup> Walter Brueggemann in his reflections on Amos 9.7 says that the prophet seeks to deny Israel's monopolistic claim that she is 'the only exodus subject of the only exodus event by the only exodus God'.<sup>7</sup> The exodus event of Israel, he says, was set in motion not because they are believers but 'because they hurt'.<sup>8</sup> The God of grace chooses people not because they are 'winners' but because they are 'losers'.

### Living with the tension

The children of Israel are promised a new land of their own. This poses a difficulty. There are already people living in the space Israel seeks to occupy. Should these former slaves of Egypt understand their mission in terms of a military crusade so that their uniqueness and security is guaranteed or should they be accommodating and maybe lose that uniqueness? The choice seems to be between ethnic nationalism or liberative universalism, between conquest or suffering, of becoming either an oppressor or a victim. Israel's dilemma has a contemporary ring.

The presence of people already dwelling in the promised land, also raises a theological problem since they too are chosen by God and live under the inclusive rainbow sign of the first covenant. Surely God is pledged to preserve and give them space, not annihilate them? There seems to be a dialectical tension between the first universal covenant and this second particular covenant? Should Israel launch a pre-emptive strike (Josh. 8, 25) or should the option of a peaceful mission of co-existence be tried (Jud 1.29)? The acuteness of this moral dilemma is brought out by the Jewish scholar Samuel Sandmel:

It is clear that the promised land had once belonged to others...yet they were to lose the land and the Hebrews to gain it. Is there not a certain uneasiness reflected in some of the overtones of Scripture about one people taking a land which had not been theirs?<sup>9</sup>

When the promised land is first mentioned in Genesis 12.1-3, we are told that the Canaanites dwelt there (v.6). The description 'Canaanite' is a pejorative word for 'anti-covenantal' or as we would say 'anti-neighbourly'. Walter Brueggemann suggests that the book of Deuteronomy sets out a covenantal alternative to the Canaanite way of living.<sup>10</sup> Whilst the writer, speaking through the mouth of Moses, regards the Canaanite life-style as a threat he also wants us to believe that their exploitive social order can be transformed from within. The sacrificial laws of the Old Testament were designed to ensure that God is acknowledged as the gracious giver of everything to everyone. This is most vividly expressed in the law code of Deuteronomy. The offering of sacrifices often occurs in the context of feasting. To those feasts were invited not only the immediate family but also 'the stranger, the orphan and the widow' (Deut.12.11f; 14.28f). Deuteronomy proposes the soft option of compassion so that the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' can share a common destiny. The vision is one of peaceful co-existence in which poverty is eradicated and where, even in times of war, little damage is done to the natural environment (20.19-20). Is this approach attempting to overcome the tension between the universal rainbow covenant and the particular covenant with Israel? Israel fails to realize this vision and becomes an oppressor just like Egypt but then in turn falls victim to a stronger power. Yet because of God's particular covenant promise, exile is not the end. She has to learn that pain and vulnerability are not only at the centre of covenant but are to be found in the very heart of the covenant God.

A reconciling covenant partnership is created when an oppressed people lament and turn in repentance to the 'crucified God'. Israel's long settlement in the promised land warped her understanding of covenant. She has to return to the place of brokenness and 'hurt' where God first rescued her in love.

#### New Testament covenant of Spirit

The Holy Spirit is God's 'go-between'. As the Word gives order and direction, the Spirit gives energy and inspiration. God's Spirit has been at work from the beginning, at home in the chaos and mess out of which beauty and wonder are shaped. The Spirit bestows blessing in brokenness, unity in diversity and diversity in unity. The Spirit brings together the music of death and resurrection to compose a Pentecost. This new covenant in Jesus Christ makes reconciliation possible.

Paul believed that God had broken down the wall of partition between insiders and outsiders to create one new humanity (Eph.2.14-18). Although he rejoiced in his ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor.5.18) he was personally hurt because of it. In chapter 6 of this letter to the Corinthians he describes his hardships, distress, beatings, trials and imprisonments. He invariably became the target of vitriolic anger as opposing parties vent their violence on him. His hope of 'one new humanity' was neither realized in his own life-time nor has the dream found lasting fulfillment in any subsequent period of history. The hope remains but cycles of violence keep erupting.

The theologian and anthropologist Rene Girard says the violence which triggered the holocaust of the flood (Gen.6.6) had its beginning in Cain. Cain was not only the first murderer, he was also the founder of a culture.<sup>11</sup> Thereafter the thread of murder runs through the story of humanity, for violence is mimetic; it imitates itself. We saw it in the crusades of the eleventh century, we have seen it recently in the pre-emptive strike on Iraq by Great Britain and the US following the 9/11 attack in Manhattan. Philip Jenkins in his chilling book *The Next Christendom*, suggests that the very expansion of Christianity and Islam across countries today may provoke future civil wars and fuel fanatical religious conflicts. He holds that the day of the

crusade is not over. Indeed he thinks we stand on the threshold of ‘the next crusade’.<sup>12</sup>

Mention of Cain and his brother Abel reminds us of a new covenant story of brothers. Jesus, in a parable, tells of a loving father who allows his younger son to leave home and go into a far country. Although the father stays at home, his love seems to reach out to his lost son who gets into increasing difficulty. It is the son’s memory of a generous father which finally lures him home. In this new covenant inclusive relationships take precedent over contractual rules. Neither son understands this. The younger regards himself as ‘no longer worthy’ and therefore seeks to be welcomed back as a ‘hired hand’. The older dutiful son might have been prepared to accept his brother on these terms. The father will have none of this. His embrace, the gifts of robe, ring and feast transform the lost son. Because grace is unconditional, no confession was necessary before the embrace. This parable seems to negate the possibility of ultimate exclusion. Although the story ends with the elder brother ‘outside’, he is outside ‘with’ the Father who joins him there.

The steps taken by the father to get to this point of possible reconciliation are fascinating. Although relationships are placed before rules, justice does not disappear in the face of mercy. The father does not destroy law, or overturn the structures of society, instead he ‘re-orders’ the order by setting inclusion before exclusion.<sup>13</sup> Both sons are therefore treated justly. The father does not reinstate the younger son to all the former privileges since he gets no second inheritance. Neither does the elder son miss out for all that the father has is now his (v.31). Justice is done, but in the context of grace. Both are sons of the father, and both are always ‘with him’ even when they lock themselves outside in their own respective ‘far countries’. The younger is ‘my son who was lost and is found’ and the elder is ‘my son’ who has yet to embrace his brother. Will a reconciliation take place between them? The father has done his best to embrace them both. How long will it take for the sons to embrace each other?

Professor John De Gruchy from his experience of Apartheid in South Africa states in his book *Reconciliation* that we should covenant together to restore justice.<sup>14</sup> He tells a story about one of his students. Ginn Fourie was a middle aged woman working in sociology and engaged in research around the so-called ‘Heidelberg Tavern Massacre’. This event had taken place some six months before the first democratic elections. The Tavern, located not far from the University of Cape Town, attracted many students and young people. On New Year’s Eve 1993 four masked men burst in and fired several rounds of AK47 bullets into the dense crowd. Many were injured and a number killed. Later four young black men were arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment. Ginn Fourie’s research centred on these four men and her seminar presentation to the tutor and student group was academic and lively. John De Gruchy says they had no idea what had led her to undertake this study. Almost as an afterthought she said, ‘My daughter Lyndi was killed in the massacre and I want to find out whether or not we can become reconciled to each other!’ There was a deathly silence in the seminar room, a silence which lasted for what seemed a long time. When conversation re-started it was no longer theoretical. They were standing on holy ground.

## References

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  14. John De Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice*, London, SCM Press, 2002, pp.165-166