

Session Three: Practical and Social Theology I
 BREAKING BOUNDARIES: EMBRACING THE 'OTHER'
 WHILE HOLDING FAST TO OUR 'IN CHRIST' IDENTITY
 Prakash Nemade
 South Asia Nazarene Bible College

Introduction

In recent years we have witnessed severe conflicts between nations, religious groups, and tribes. These are due to political and religious intolerance, religious fundamentalism and terrorism, which have created fear and insecurity for everyone. All these have resulted in the killing of masses. It has further resulted in migrations of millions of people from one country to another. Those who want to adhere to their faith are facing torture, abuse and even death. Millions of innocent people are going through this every day.

In this situation, few countries are looked upon for shelter, food and freedom. They are forced to accept and accommodate the migrants from the neighbouring countries. Churches are being challenged to accommodate the refugees and immigrants. In recent events of refugees fleeing to European countries, even Church of the Nazarene has been challenged by the leaders to accommodate the refugees. This is yet another appeal from the Board of General Superintendents that reflects the appeal made in such crisis in 1998: "We urge Nazarene people around the world to treat refugees and immigrants with Christian love and respect as children of God, avoiding degrading or demeaning descriptions such as 'illegal aliens.' We especially encourage our churches to share God's love and grace and provide support for those who, because of their refugee or immigrant status, are destitute."¹

In the light of the migrations/immigrations, church's response by 'embracing' would be the right fit, to accept, accommodate and love unconditionally the strangers and the needy. Breaking barriers of race, religion, culture and colour sets the perfect platform for the ministry of reconciliation. 'Embracing' demonstrates the unconditional acceptance of the other. It brings warmth, the sense of belonging, acceptance, and of being loved unconditionally. Once you embrace a person, you are no longer strangers but belong to each other as a family. This relationship of belonging to each other needs to be experienced and reflected in our daily living.

Since reconciliation is a vast subject, and due to the limitations of this paper, discussions here are focused from the practical point of view to establish the foundations for breaking barriers to embrace others as a gesture of reconciliation.

God's Big Agenda -- Reconciliation

The Creation account clearly expresses God's agenda for a harmonious relationship between Him and His creation. Adam's rebellion affected the human race as it inherited the same rebellion. Adam's Fall grieved God. This grieving of God expresses His concern for

¹ "Statement in Support of Refugees and Immigrants", The Board of General Superintendents, *Herald of Holiness* (November 1998): 2.

reconciliation with the human race.² Bob Moffitt rightly observes, “No wonder God’s response to Adam’s disobedience was so great—God was protecting His agenda from the consequences of Adam’s selfishness!”³ God wanted His image to be restored in Adam through reconciliation. This shows that reconciliation with humanity and the creation is the ultimate agenda of God. He took the initiative for reconciliation and made covenants with His people and all nations (Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 2 Chron. 7:14). The atonement on the cross is a demonstration of God embracing humanity for reconciliation.

Reconciliation is a God-activity and not a human activity. God, the offended, takes the initiative of forgiving and reconciling. The holy God desires to embrace the sinful humanity in order to restore the relationship with humanity. He demonstrated this through His incarnation in Jesus Christ (Col. 1:15-20; Jn.3:16; Matt.28:19-20; Rom 8:18-39; Rev. 7:9-17; 21-22:5). Through his sacrifice, Jesus created a new community of a reconciled and reconciling people.

Reconciliation is a divine activity in that the initiative is motivated by the Holy Spirit. It is not common to humans to take initiative in offering forgiveness to the offender. Differing from forgiveness, reconciliation is often conditional on the attitude and actions of the offender. However, through the divine initiative, the offended, continues to offer forgiveness, in order to embrace the offender. The offender may not realise the hurt he has inflicted on the victim. However, the victim and the offender need to understand that reconciliation is a process and that it may not happen instantaneously.

Barriers to God’s Agenda

Through rebellion, humans continue to hinder God’s agenda of reconciliation. Sin is the primary barrier to God’s agenda. It continues to be the cause for the broken relationship between God and His people. Conflicts have divided and destroyed the communities. Communal conflicts, racism, ethnic cleansing, violence, terrorism, genocide, sectarianism, nationalism, regionalism, class and caste system have devastated our communities both in the church and outside the church. Families have been broken with divorce and divisions. The broken trust between the family members is taking its toll. We cannot deny the existence of both open conflicts and a ‘quieter’ condition of persistent injustice, division, and separation in and outside the church. The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization states, “All the agents of brokenness must be discerned and confronted—personal, social and spiritual.”⁴ Conflicts result in resentment, hatred, revenge, envy, and a tendency to degrade others.⁵ The Lausanne Committee observes, “in the face of oppression, to reject vengeance is a double injustice – to the afflicted and to God’s wrath against evil.”⁶ In administrative structures, revenge is a dominant barrier to God’s agenda. It results in an unforgiving spirit. Our prayer,

² Genesis 6:6 “The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain.”

³ Bob Moffitt and Karla Tesch, *If Jesus Were Mayor: How Your Local Church Can Transform Your Community* (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2006), 54.

⁴ “Reconciliation as the Mission of God: Faithful Christian Witness in a World of Destructive Conflicts and Divisions”, *Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization*, Paper No.51, Pattaya, Thailand, Sept-Oct, 2004. 2.

⁵ R. Duane Thompson, “The Wesleyan and the Struggle to Forgive”, *WTJ*, vol. 18 no. 2 (Spring 1983): 81-82.

⁶ *Lausanne Committee*, 6.

“forgive our debts as we have also forgiven our debtors” becomes meaningless. Hypocrisy is the strongest and common barrier to God’s agenda. Whether we accept it or not, we all are victims of hypocrisy, knowing that God knows our hearts (1 Sam. 16:7).

Religious fanaticism and self-righteousness become barriers between the church and the outside community. Believers want to protect themselves by creating strong walls around them that the outsiders would not possibly enter. They are too busy with holy activities within the four walls. These four walls are without windows, that they are not able to see the outside world. In the face of opposition and persecution, church considers the outside community as enemy. The Lausanne Committee states this as one of the barriers to reconciliation, “the residue of unresolved bitterness toward people and groups who have offended us”⁷ And so the church wants to live an isolated holy life.

Church as a Window

The Church is called to the ministry of reconciliation as Paul affirms in 2 Cor 5:14-19. However, the church needs to experience the breaking of barriers within the church itself. Only then does the embracing of the outside community become possible.

John Wesley uses “Perfect Love” to describe the biblical concept of reconciliation as the right relationship between God and humans and the harmonious relationship between people.⁸ For Wesley, “Perfect Love” is holiness. Kenton M. Stiles observe, “In the Wesleyan theological idiom, reconciliation is holiness in action as mutualistic love: God loving others, humans loving God, and humans loving each other and their world.”⁹ Thus, the more rooted in the love for God, the stronger holy affections would be toward fellow human beings.

It is only by breaking the barriers that are within, the church can go beyond its boundaries and embrace the outside community. Church is ‘God’s holy people’ (Phil 1:1). Describing this, Kent Brower observes, “This is the language of belonging, of full identification with God’s purposes. All who are in Christ have this new identity.”¹⁰ However, this identity is not to be maintained within four walls of the church community. This identity becomes more effective when the church has transforming influence on the outside community. This is possible only if the church continues to embrace the cross.¹¹

The identity of the redeemed continues to influence the community for its redemption that is already offered by Christ on the cross. Bob Moffitt says, “The church is the window through which the people of your community see God and His concerns for all areas of their lives!”¹² The redeeming work of Christ was not only the spiritual activity, rightly understood a holistic activity. Moffitt further observes, “Each section of the window represents one of the four areas

⁷ *Lausanne Committee*, 8.

⁸ John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1993), 117.

⁹ Kenton M. Stiles, “Disfiguring Harmony: Reconciliation, Mark C. Taylor, and Postmodern Theological Aesthetics”, *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, vol. 37, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 136.

¹⁰ Kent Brower, “Living as God’s Holy People: Holiness and Community in Paul” *The 2008 Didsbury Lectures* (Manchester: Nazarene Theological College, 2008), 123.

¹¹ Ronald J. Sider, *God’s People Reconciling*, (Chicago: Christian Peacemaker Teams, 1986), 1.

¹² Moffitt and Tesch, *If Jesus Were Mayor*, 312.

of God's concern expressed in Luke 2:52."¹³ These four areas are spiritual, physical, social and intellectual. The holistic¹⁴ gospel responds to people as whole people. The church is God's people who are transformed by the love of God, who then respond to God's call to share the gospel with others through evangelism, social action, economic development, and justice.

As the 'spiritual community,' driven by the Holy Spirit, the church becomes a "transforming community."¹⁵ For Wesley, there was no religion but social religion, no holiness but social holiness.¹⁶ For him, faith always included a social dimension. Wesley says, "It is your very nature to season whatever is round about you... Thus is the great reason why the providence of God has so mingled you together with other men, that whatever grace you have received of God may be communicated to others."¹⁷ Thus the church needs to adopt an incarnational model to minister to the communities around it.

The ministry of reconciliation becomes effective only by experiencing and practicing it in the homes and local churches. The brokenness in the personal lives of Christians, their families, and church needs to be healed first. By seeing this others would be attracted to the message of non-violence and peace.¹⁸ Philip Yancey thinks that the more forgiveness is practiced, the more we are relieved of blame and guilt.¹⁹ Forgiveness is possible only through the strength of the Holy Spirit and grace of God.

While striving for the ministry of reconciliation, the church needs to maintain its identity in Christ as the reconciled community. The Lausanne Committee observes, "Biblical reconciliation also leads Christians beyond church circles to vigorously analyse, engage and influence our local communities, nations and world as witnesses for reconciliation and just community. Without sacrificing our Christian convictions, we should seek to partner creatively with people of good will to promote peace, including with people of other faiths."²⁰ On discussing on the spirit of reform, James E. Hamilton quotes Asa Mahan saying, "Without the true spirit of reform, no man can possibly be a real Christian."²¹

Holy living is not possible in isolation, but needs to be lived in the society in which perfect love is experienced and expressed.²² It is only through the demonstration of the mind of Christ, the church is made visible in the real world. Obedience to the will of God needs to be effected

¹³ Moffitt and Tesch, *If Jesus Were Mayor*, 313.

¹⁴ Moffitt and Tesch, *If Jesus Were Mayor*, 69. In this paper, the term 'holistic' is used with the preferred understanding it as 'wholistic' to indicate the wholeness of the gospel. As Moffitt states "'The whole gospel' for the 'whole' person, for the 'whole' world" (p. 69).

¹⁵ Leon O. Hynson, "The Church and Social Transformation: An Ethics of the Spirit", *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, vol. 11 (Spring 1976): 56.

¹⁶ John Wesley, Sermon 24, "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount: Discourse 4" in *Works [BE]*, I:537.

¹⁷ Wesley, *Works [BE]*, I:537.

¹⁸ Ronald J. Sider, *God's People Reconciling*, 8.

¹⁹ Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing about Grace?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 91.

²⁰ *Lausanne Committee*, 7.

²¹ James E. Hamilton, "The Church as a Universal Reform Society: The Social Vision of Asa Mahan", *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, vol. 25, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 52.

²² H. Ray Dunning, ed., *A Community of Faith* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1997), 49.

in daily life and the holy affections need to be expressed communally.²³ The church is expected to be agent of biblically holistic reconciliation, and offer hope to people.²⁴ For this, the church needs to be engaged in the community life, being the agents of transformation.

Individually, believers can minister to others at homes, schools, colleges, church, community and work places through ‘disciplines of love’ in all four areas of life. Corporately, the local church needs to demonstrate that the love of Christ is culturally relevant in the community. This will bring cultural transformation in the community around the believers.²⁵ The philosophical and theological discussions on ‘reconciliation’ need to go beyond four walls to demonstrate God’s agenda to all people. This could be possible by adopting the holistic worldview, in which, all four areas of human life in the society are addressed.

Conclusion

Reconciliation is a God-activity. To reconcile with people, He became incarnate in a human form, became imminent crossing His boundary of transcendence. Believers are called to reflect His image through their communal life as a church. The church faces many challenges that hinder the work of God. Sin, conflicts, revenge, corruption, compromise with illegal practices, hypocrisy and so on are the biggest barriers in the church itself.

The ministry of reconciliation is not to be understood only in terms of spiritual activities. It needs to be wholistic, in which, all areas of life, physical, social, intellectual and spiritual need to be addressed. The church needs to have windows with these four sections, through which the community can see God’s holistic concerns for life. At the same time, through these windows, the church can see outside, the brokenness of the community and strategically become agents of transformation. There is also a need to have wide open doors through which others can come in and experience the love, care and the grace of God as the church embraces them. The open doors would also challenge the church community to go out and extend the grace of God through the life of Christlikeness.

The church can even breakdown the existing walls of enmity and have transparent communication with those who are not part of the believing community. Embracing the outside community strategically in all areas of life would help in breaking the barriers. The experience of being reconciled within the community of believers need to be demonstrated to the outside community, where peace and harmonious relationships will prevail. Thus, the reconciled individuals become reconciling agents of God. And the reconciled community becomes reconciling community, while holding fast to the ‘in-Christ’ identity (Jn. 17:16-19).

²³ Stephen W. Rankin, “A Perfect Church: Toward A Wesleyan Missional Ecclesiology”, *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, vol. 38, no. (Spring 2003): 97.

²⁴ *Lausanne Committee*, 2.

²⁵ Moffitt and Tesch, *If Jesus Were Mayor*, 255.