

Perspectives

explorations in theology and practice

Reconciliation in four directions

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Perspectives: explorations in theology and practice continue in the theme of the ‘explorations’ series of books. On a given subject they are designed to provoke thought as well as presenting a perspective.

This seventh volume is an exploration that places ‘reconciliation’ central to the good news message, and then explores that in four directions - reconciliation to God, to self, to others and to creation.

Biblical texts quoted are from The New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition, unless noted otherwise.

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Reconciliation: the Good News

There are many ways in which people approach God's redemptive work and probably when it is reduced to a single lens we run the risk of losing aspects in that process. One very common way is to emphasise God's holiness in contrast to humanity's sin and guilt, thus with some measure of payment introduced to enable redemption to take place. This approach, at worst, can present a divide in the Trinity (God, the Father demanding justice and the Son sacrificially taking the consequences so that justice is met)¹; at best 'payment theories' can be presented using an analogy such as when someone breaks something of value that belongs to someone else and thus to repair it there will be a cost that has to be borne by someone. Such theologies then say that the 'payment' is not met by the one who broke the valued item but the generous God of creation undertakes the repair at his / her cost. This view undergirds Anselm's satisfaction theory of satisfying God's honour and the predominant view from the Reformation of restoring justice - restored, we note, through punishment. The inadequacy of the illustration, though, is that what needs to be repaired is something external **whereas the repair in the biblical story is a relational repair**. In that sense the cost of repair is not something that has to

¹ Under such a view the two principal characters are the Father and the Son and perhaps this contributes to the marginalisation of the Spirit?

be weighed up for a God who **so** loved the world but does everything to bring about the healing that is needed relationally. Did Jesus pay a price? Yes indeed, but also we need to marvel at ‘for the joy set before him’, the utter commitment to bring about restoration. We might suggest that the pleasure of seeing humanity healed and thus able to fulfil their destiny is what motivates the journey of Incarnation through to the cross.

God was in Christ reconciling

A relational framework is central to Scripture. The God of Scripture is not some great unmoved mover, but an intensely motivated ‘Person’. Rather than focus on guilt and falling short of a standard it is better to focus on **relational alienation**. Disobedience is present in the first chapters of the Bible and subsequently throughout but the desired response is not for humanity to come back to obeying a set of laws but back into relationship, to be reconciled to God. Sin is to fall short, to fall short of the glory of God as humans (Rom. 3:23). Paul has already in the first chapter of Romans contrasted the glory that is ours (made in the image of God) with the choice made:

and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles (Rom. 1: 23).

Sin then is deeper than a ‘not doing what we were told’ and is centred in ‘**not being** who we were created’. Created to bear / carry the image of God, to be God-like, to be relational and to be agents of reconciliation where relationships are damaged. Sin is best understood as falling short of bearing the name of God as image-bearers, of falling short of displaying the wonderful God-glory

so that it can be visible. The words we read in John's Gospel of Jesus that, 'We beheld his glory full of grace and truth' reveal what true humanity looks like, Jesus being the express image of the invisible God.

True humanity

Alienation and reconciliation might be a reductive approach but it is one I consider is sufficiently representative of the biblical narrative as it focuses on the broken relationships and the redemptive process in bringing about healing. Alienation is expressed in multiple ways in the aftermath of 'eating the forbidden fruit'. Divides and distancing are expressed in so many areas in that chapter and the subsequent ones.

- God / human
- male / female
- self alienation
- human / creation
- familial divides
- angelic / human.

Such tensions and divides are throughout the biblical narrative; alienation, being a relational word, is at the heart of the problem, thus reconciliation is at the heart of the solution.

In this extended article I will follow the theme of reconciliation and how that outworks in four directions.

- Reconciliation to God
- Reconciliation to fellow-humans (and this has to include the 'other', even the person(s) that might be termed the 'enemy')

- Reconciliation to oneself, or as commonly termed 'self-acceptance'
- Reconciliation to creation, involving care for, stewardship of and harmony with the planet on which we live.

I am not suggesting that the above four are of equal status, but neither am I suggesting that any one aspect can eliminate one or more of the other three. All four aspects are essential as we hold out for 'the reconciliation of all things'.

We might wish to argue that the first aspect I outlined (reconciliation to God) has to come first in a temporal sense and without that taking place the others have no 'kingdom' value. I prioritise the first as of greatest value, but am not prepared to denigrate the others as having no value; indeed the other three should critique the claim that we have been reconciled to God.

One of the core verses that centres in on the divine work of reconciliation in Paul is,

In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us (2 Cor.5:19).

What aspects of the world was God reconciling? Paul centres in on 'us' as we are the core of the problem. If we are out of sync everything else follows suit, such as we read in Genesis that the ground was cursed because of us. Reconciliation with the great hope being that of the reconciliation of 'all things'. This reconciliation, Paul insists is to take place through the cross:

and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself **all things**, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has **now** reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him, provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed **to every creature** [to the whole creation] under heaven. I, Paul, became a minister of this gospel (Col. 1:20-23, emphases added).

The reconciliation is already 'ours', but the message goes beyond us - to all creation (NRSV translating *ktisis* (creation) as creature).

Paul's vision of salvation / restoration is as big as to solve all issues, thus the universal statement of 'all things, whether on earth or in heaven'. The apostolic gospel is cosmic in its message and the apostolic commission is to partner for the fulfilment of that message.

There is a small statement in Mark (short Gospel but with a number of small statements that can easily be missed) with regard to the temptation of Jesus, that illustrates a heavenly and an earthly reconciliation:

He was in the wilderness forty days, tested by Satan, and he was with **the wild beasts**, and **the angels** waited on him (Mk. 1:13).

The angelic and human together, and... the wild beasts with the true human thus bringing a major aspect of the 'all things' of creation into

harmony as expressed in the Isaianic vision of ultimate transformation (e.g. Is. 1:6-9). The true human who, unlike the first Adam does not submit to the 'god of this world', exhibits in the wilderness of all places (the supposed domain of the demonic) something of the reconciliation of all things.

Reconciliation to God is central, but the theme of reconciliation does not find its completion with some spiritual state for the redeemed elite. Hence the exploration of reconciliation in these four dimensions.

Presuppositions

We all approach theology with presuppositions and I consider what follows are some of mine that undergird my views. To acknowledge them is important.

Scripture

Scripture is of paramount importance, but it is an 'unfinished' book. Not unfinished in the sense that I can break the pages open and insert some fresh text, but unfinished in the sense that it does not bring us to a conclusion on every aspect. There is, for example, no text that outright condemns slavery, nor even one that indicates a dream that slavery will disappear prior to the *parousia*; likewise there are no unequivocal passages that speak of the abolition of patriarchy. This makes the task of progressive theology deeply challenging to those of an evangelical persuasion, and I appreciate that what I write in this article might indeed be challenging.

We do not add to Scripture in the sense that we make any idea carry biblical weight. However, we seek to understand the trajectory

of the biblical narrative and continue on that trajectory.

Thus **we do not stop where Scripture stops** - it gives us a thrust and a momentum beyond the pages **but in the same direction as we found in the pages**. It is often said that the book of Acts is unfinished and we are living (or should be!) in Acts 29. The final word of Acts is the word (without hindrance - *akōlutōs*)... without a command to 'stop there and go no further'. The direction that the Spirit empowers is toward the fullness that will be revealed in the *parousia* (commonly translated as 'return' of Christ, but with the word essentially meaning 'presence' a test as to how faithful we are to the trajectory will be the presence of Jesus - and not a Jesus simply of our theology).

We are not to determine the line of 'in' and 'out'

A focus on 'eternal' things, commonly thought of as 'eternal destiny' and who is 'saved' is probably not where the Pauline Gospel is centred. There are distinctions in Scripture, such as 'do good to all, especially those of the household of faith'; there is the recognition of those whose faith is centred on the God of Israel. God is said to be the 'Saviour of all, especially those who believe'. In what sense is he also the Saviour of those who do not believe (the 'all' of the opening phrase)? The same terminology is used in the Pauline text where he instructs Timothy to bring 'the books **especially** the scrolls' (2 Tim. 4:13). He does not mean bring only the scrolls but make sure they are brought and then bring as many books as you can also. Texts such as those indicate there is a 'wideness in the mercy of God' and that we are not to be those who declare who is in and who is out. Paul might have been pleasantly

surprised when finally Timothy came with all the books as well as the parchments. Perhaps we will be likewise surprised. (I often say I am not a Universalist, but have a sneaky suspicion that God just might be!)

If we focus too tightly and insist that we know who is in and who is out we will be replacing God with our knowledge (maybe a kick back to Genesis 3?) and we will probably see no value in any act that contributes toward a better future.

Good works are good!

All have sinned; all fall short; all need salvation; but this does not mean there is no value in what we can term 'good works'. The 'righteousness that is as filthy rags' was a verdict given to the outward obedience to a set of religious practices (ones that seemed to be ordained by God), the phraseology was not given as a blanket statement to describe anything good that people do.

Evangelicals have been fearful about 'salvation by works' and this is indeed something that the Reformers helped us steer away from. A belief in 'salvation by works' falls short primarily because it presents a faulty image of God, that we can earn salvation. We do not earn with the God who has always taken the initiative to bring us to our future.

The concept of the law court acquittal also falls short. James exposes this when he says faith without works is dead. There is a false over-divide between 'justification' and 'sanctification'. We dissect something in life to see the inner working, but life does not exist with the divides we make. And perhaps we should also lose the

temporal succession that justification (always) comes first and then comes sanctification; perhaps the process can be reversed at times! What if someone is on the road to a greater level of sanctification and has not yet arrived at the place of knowing they are justified!

Perhaps it is uncomfortable but there are numerous mentions in the New Testament about a judgement according to works. Jesus told the story of the sheep and the goats being separated out on the basis of how they treated others. Both groups respond with the same words - 'when did we...?' Those who were told to enjoy the kingdom were evidently not seeking to prove how righteous they were, they never pleaded justification through their works. The over-emphasis on 'by faith alone' for salvation left Luther struggling with the letter written by James, terming it an 'epistle of straw'. If faith in the Pauline corpus is reduced to 'belief' then we do have a major tension when we come to the book of James. However, James makes clear it is not a question of an either / or but that genuine faith has an outworking. 'Faith without works is dead' and he claimed that he would show his faith by his works, insisting that even the devil has faith! Faith alone he claims is devilish.

In Romans Paul said his goal was to bring about the 'obedience of faith' among the Gentiles; not an obedience to the law but an obedience to the God who raised Jesus from the dead.

The over-emphasis on 'salvation' in the sense of being 'safe' with a ticket to enter heaven has caused a divide between the 'evangelical gospel' and the 'social gospel'. 'Do good to all' is a continuing requirement, and I suggest that given the strongly political words that consistently appear in Paul's writings that we have to rethink

‘salvation’ as far more for a purpose than as a status. Surely it was when Israel lost sight of her election **for** the world that we can track from that point her increased captivity.

For those who see their calling as leading people to faith in Jesus in a more classic evangelical sense my plea is that we do not treat people as objects to be witnessed to. By all means share our faith in the context of respect for the person and by no means are we to reject them as friends if they do not respond. Friendship evangelism that treats people as objects is neither friendship nor evangelism.

And for those who see their calling as ‘doing good to all’ I ask that we do not replace Jesus with our activity. Scripture exhorts us ‘to be ready to give an answer to the hope that lies within us’ and that answer is not merely about a set of values, nor simply of a philosophy of life but is firmly centred on the person of Jesus.

The calling of the *ekklesia*

A final presupposition is **with regard to the word (*ekklesia*)** that we translate as ‘church’. It certainly, and not surprisingly, carries meaning from the Hebrew Scriptures where it was used for the people of covenant when they were called to listen to the voice of God or were being sent on ‘mission’. It was used when there was action connected to who they were. In the wider world of Paul’s day it was used to describe the officially appointed deciding body of a city or region. The New Testament uses many words to describe those who are within the covenant people, but *ekklesia* is the central word. This indicates that there was a strong sense that the *ekklesia* of Jesus Christ was **to take responsibility for their appointed setting**. This would involve an authority to create space where

certain things could flourish and others not. Like the salt of that time which was used as fertiliser to promote growth in the field and as a disinfectant with regard to the 'dung heap'.

The body of Christ (another term common in Paul) is not simply about activity, so I am not suggesting reconciliation promotes human 'doing', after all **before** Jesus sent the 12 out as apostles to heal the sick, cast out demons and proclaim the kingdom, he chose them to be 'with him' (Mark 3:14). The 'doing' came from a place of well-'being'.

I grew up with George Eldon Ladd's 'A Theology of the New Testament' which helpfully centred so much on 'the kingdom of God'. He stated there, and I have repeated many times, that the church is not the kingdom but is 'the agent of the kingdom'. Incredibly helpful to distinguish the two, but I suggest that it did not go far enough. I would propose that the church is the body that is to take responsibility for agents of the kingdom to rise. And by pushing it to that point the implication is that not all 'agents' (individual or corporate) will be those affirming a biblical statement of faith!²

I consider that the above presuppositions will explain why I explore what follows as I do. The centrality of Jesus as the person through whom God has been present to initiate the reconciliation process and as the person through whom the process will be completed is a given for me; likewise Scripture as laying down the parameters and the trajectory for our journey is essential. Those two, under the power of the Spirit, invite us all to be involved in the 'ministry' (service) of reconciliation.

² I will expand on this part in an excursus at the end of this article.

Is that work limited to ‘reconciliation to God’? I think not. And is that work limited to those who are committed to a Jesus-centred faith? Well Paul seemed to have space for others beyond simply the members of the ‘household of faith’ and maybe as important was that they had space for him (Acts 19:31)³.

The great eschatological goal

Personal reconciliation to God is clearly within Scripture and this was the central part of Paul’s message but it did not contain the whole of his message. The eschatological goal was always of God’s presence permeating everything, expressed in such texts as ‘the knowledge of the glory of God covering the earth as the waters cover the seas’ (Hab. 2:14; Is. 11:9). Equally expressed in the future vision of John:

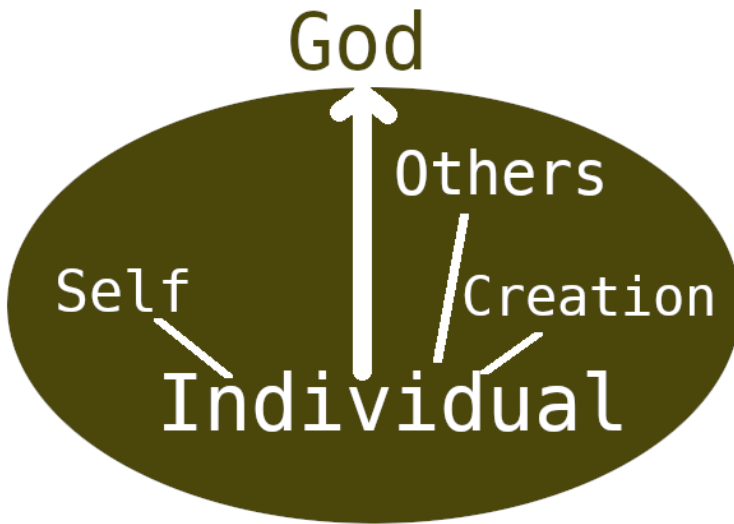
See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them and be their God...
And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for
the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The
nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will
bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by
day—and there will be no night there (Rev. 21:3, 23-25).

³ The ‘Asiarchs’ are distinguished from the disciples yet are ‘friends of Paul’. Their task is to ensure that Ephesus faithfully represents the Empire and is therefore in allegiance to Caesar as lord. Paul’s message is contra the Imperial rule. It seems that these leaders for the city had not (yet) responded to the evangelical gospel (an anachronistic term!) but were understanding the importance of the gospel message for the future of the city - hence they were seeking to hold the space for Paul.

Reconciliation of all things, not just people, but the entire creation 'project', the restoration of all things, on earth and in heaven. The future is not a non-physical celestial existence but the fulfilment of the reconciliation that was accomplished at the cross. The biblical hope is therefore for the knowledge of God to permeate all things (reconciliation to God), a liberation for creation (reconciliation to creation), and the very real intimate (but not sexual) embrace between all those who express the image of God (reconciliation to others and self)⁴.

⁴ There will be no marriage in the age to come is not indicating that marriage is not important, but that marriage, as covenant, is a sign of the depth of relationship to come in that age. Covenant in this age is what marriage consists of, and any other covenant should be entered into with utmost caution. I am not an advocate of (for example) seeking to replicate the David / Jonathan covenant - one only has to track the marriage fiascos that followed in David's life and line to see that it could well be that covenant that was the root of causing subsequent issues. Marriage is exclusive: the future age and depth of relationship will transcend even that.

Reconciled to God



In the above illustration I am prioritising (as Paul does) reconciliation to God and illustrating that If I am truly reconciled to God then God's Spirit is within me and there will be an outworking of that reconciliation into the other areas. Paul speaks of being reconciled to God and receiving the ministry of reconciliation; reconciliation has an outworking. And what if there is no outworking? Again let me re-iterate that we are all a work in progress and any 'final' outworking awaits the future, but Scripture is clear that,

How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses

help? (1 John 3:17).

Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love (1 John 4:8).

Those who say, "I love God," and hate a brother or sister are liars, for those who do not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen (1 John 4:20).

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, 15 but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Matt. 6:14).

Those scriptures are unequivocal - if there is no outworking in a loving / forgiving way on the horizontal level then any claim for forgiveness at a vertical level is deceptive. It might be argued that John and Jesus are restricting this to our responses within the 'household of faith' but when we add Jesus' command to love our enemy (Matt. 5:44) I suggest we have to embrace that any outworking of being reconciled to God means we embrace all others, including those who oppose or persecute us.

A claim of being reconciled to God only has integrity if there is at some level a level of reconciliation to those who have been created in God's image.⁵

So far then I suggest that any reconciliation to God has an

⁵ There are NO biblical texts that suggest that 'the image of God' is lost post-the fall. That image continues and those who are in Christ are being transformed into HIS image - the image of the eschatological human, the image of created humans but brought to fullness. We are not being conformed to Adam's image but to the image of the eschatological Adam.

outworking of developing genuine, right relationships at a horizontal level (and with that I include creation, from which we came, and 'self'). If there is absolutely no outworking in those directions scripture challenges the legitimacy of our claim to having been reconciled to God.

The next step in our exploration might prove to be a step too far for some, but I now want to explore the possibility of being (in some real measure) reconciled to others / self / creation but not even believing in a Personal God, and that in doing so such a person might be participating in and expressing the reconciling work of Jesus.

A few notes first

In taking this approach I am not making any comment on the 'eternal salvation' of such a person. I am not seeking to make a judgement in either direction; one direction being 'they are saved' and the other direction being 'they are damned'. I do have an underlying commitment to the image of God being present in everyone regardless of their creed, and that 'good works' are good. A belief that I can earn salvation is wrong because it is essentially a wrong belief in God. God is gracious (giving us what we do not deserve) and merciful (not giving us what we do deserve); God is for us, the Saviour of all, **especially** of those who believe. I remain therefore optimistic about the redemptive activity of God.

I find no biblical evidence for eternal punishing (the language 'eternal punishment' when taken to be about final judgement is exactly that - nothing ongoing, but something irreversible); if we, through behaviour particularly toward others, have become less than human I am not convinced that the call to 'enter into My kingdom'

will be given, as the very nature of being reconciled to others / self / creation is to act humanly.

As I explore this possibility that in some way, and at some level, there is an 'unknown' reconciliation to God taking place, I am bearing in mind that to claim a reconciliation to God without outworking is false, so perhaps there is room to suggest that if someone engages with the 'outworking' there might be a 'filling in' of the area that is central to Scripture, that of being reconciled to the One and only true God.

And a final comment in response to the emotive question of 'why then should I be a committed believer? / what is the point in being saved?'. Those kind of questions reveal so much. The point of being saved is not to be 'safe' but to be overwhelmed by the goodness of God, to know this God at a personal level and to participate in the 'ministry of reconciliation'.

The possibility of sharing the age to come with those whose path in life was to pursue what it is to be as human as possible is not at any level to shy away from sharing the reason for the hope that is within us. We should be ready to do so at any appropriate time, indeed to do so with those who proclaim faith in other gods, or who proclaim that they have no faith at all... **and** with those who proclaim they have been reconciled to God - particularly those who are so sure of their eternal destiny as they have prayed the sinner's prayer. Paul was intent on coming to Rome, the capital that was the centre for the imperial gospel (*euangelion*), in order to proclaim there to the believers the gospel - the reason for the hope that he had.

Reconciliation to others

Reconciliation is to come into a harmonious relationship, where any former barrier has gone and an open to the other relationship can grow. In relationship to God those barriers are exactly what the cross removes. The ultimate revelation of the glory of God takes place at the cross for it is there that we see our God is a crucified God, a God who is for us, whose prayer is that 'we are forgiven'. All internal barriers are removed (and we have to stay clear of suggesting that there were barriers on God's side as that so easily sides into appeasement and a pagan view); not only the internal barriers of guilt and shame, but the external enslavement that Paul sums up as 'sin and death' or in other passages as 'principalities and powers'.

Reconciliation to others is to love them, to desire that they might indeed become who they were born to be, to seek to be a support to them on their journey of integrity. It is **first** to humanise them, and that starts by no longer seeing them classified by any human-devised category.

Sometimes it is not possible to be in complete reconciliation and Paul was very pragmatic over that. He qualified his instruction to live at peace with all with a 'as far as is possible' proviso,

If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all (Rom. 12:18).

Scripture is not idealistic, but in its eschatological thrust it calls us to go further and deeper at every point. Progress, not perfection, being the measure.

Reconciliation to self

Jesus commanded us to love others (even those who oppose us) **as** we love ourselves. It is claimed that we live in an epidemic of narcissistic culture and there is much to suggest that to be the case. A heavily 'me' centred world with an obsession to have ever more social-(media) friends, to be liked etc. points in that direction. Self-acceptance and a seeking to be the best possible 'me' that will have a positive outworking for others seems to be what the gospel advocates. 'Me' at the centre? Not in that narcissistic sense but only in the sense of giving attention to oneself. The rub of Narcissus is that what motivated him was not self-love but the love of the image of himself. The gospel comes to help me discover the real me, not the image that I have been given or created. Part of that might involve areas of painful awareness, but the greater part is the discovery of who I can become (and ultimately defined by the image of Jesus). The gospel re-defines all values including what 'success' means. No longer measured by social status or economic prosperity but by how true I am being to myself and how much of a life-giving source I am to others.

Some aspects of 'self-help' or even therapy might fall short given the narcissistic culture but where there is genuine help to enable self-reconciliation we have to affirm that this is part of the work toward 'the reconciliation of all things'.

Reconciliation to creation

It can be argued that Roman 8 is the centre of that great piece of theological writing and there pre-eminently we have the close

relationship of the human race and creation laid out. Such an understanding is present from the beginning of the Hebrew Scriptures. We are formed from the ground ('mother earth' might be a term we consider opens a number of quasi-spiritual doors, but cannot be viewed as totally wrong!) and the ground is in bondage (cursed) because of humanity. Paul virtually gives the creation personal identity with a voice that longs to follow where we are and are going. The voice of those who have received the Spirit is one of reconciliation to God - crying 'Abba, Father', and that voice is within creation also, expressed as a longing for liberation.

Theologies that have over-focused on spiritual transformation owe much more to Hellenistic philosophy than they do to a Hebraic understanding. The transformation that the cross was central to is the transformation of 'all things'. Creation has a future, one that Jesus described as the 'rebirth of all things' (Matt. 19:28).

Reconciled to God and...

To be able to articulate the equivalent of 'Abba, Father' is a deep privilege and a joyous expression of being free from slavery, with the language that Paul is using (Rom. 8) surely recalling the freedom from Egypt, a freedom from slavery and the task masters that afflicted them. Paul moves from our freedom to the cry of creation that is in slavery (and I consider that there is an underlying thought here that just as Israel was subject to taskmasters in Egypt, so the creation has been subjected to taskmasters - the human race no longer imaging God), and alongside the groan of creation is the voice of the saints within whom the Spirit comes to their aid with 'inarticulate sounds' (*alaletos*, translated as 'groanings too deep for words',). Reconciled to God **and** agents pulling to the future, and the

future glory is to pull all things in that direction. This explains the 'glory' and the 'suffering' that are present now. We suffer in the process and we reveal the glory of being conformed to the image of God.

One of the drawbacks of religion is to affirm that we are in the right and the diverse forms of the Christian faith are not exempted from that drawback. We might wonder how Paul can claim to be blameless according to the law and yet a persecutor, even a murderer, of others. He was convinced he was in the right and he was certainly not without biblical precedence, with the origin of the Levitical becoming the priestly tribe being rooted in a similar response. There was (prior to his call to follow Jesus) no conflict in his mind. Jesus makes all the difference and transcends all religious manifestations. If I claim to be reconciled to God and there is no ongoing evidence that I am involved in the 'ministry of reconciliation' I am either deceived (probably) or at best have stopped on the journey toward the future. I am encouraged (required?) to be pulling myself, others and creation to that future.

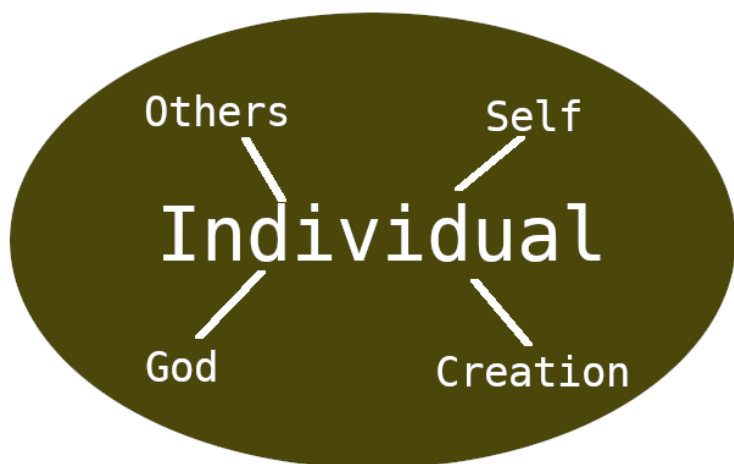
If I claim to tick the box of 'reconciliation to God' but there is no 'filling in' of the other three boxes, biblical language is extremely strong indicating that I am under a deception and indeed am a liar! Strong words indeed.

We are a work in progress and an honesty about where we are at as well as a measure of progression in 'horizontal' areas should be in evidence.

As I move beyond the (understandable) priority of being reconciled to God and look at other possibilities, it becomes clear that there is

not a defined order to the 'four directions'. They act somewhat like a spiral, as something shifts in one area there will be a knock on effect into other areas, but even then we should not think of it as being in a linear fashion. For example, if I were impacted by grief and through that find a greater reconciliation to myself (and circumstances) it might actually draw me back from others. However, over a period of time in advance in one aspect of reconciliation will increase my ability to respond in other areas.

Reconciled to self, creation and others and...



If we allow Scripture to critique our spirituality and do not reduce spirituality to me and my so-called devotional life we can easily see how there should be some evidence of a wider reconciliation, than

simply me and God. (And most 'me and God' scenarios come up with a 'god' of our creation and a 'me' of my desired image. Both aspects deviate from reality.)

Conversely I am ready to bring this article to a conclusion in considering the very real possibility that anyone who is (knowingly or unknowingly) pulling toward the restoration of all things is at some measure being reconciled to God. It is not for me to go on to make statements that would set me up as the judge of all, but I remain deeply optimistic. The future shape of all things depends on the mercy of God and I suspect that a response similar to the one made by Peter at the household of Cornelius will be appropriate. Peter spoke before he had proclaimed the truths concerning Jesus, and before the assembled household received the Spirit just as those in the Upper Room had (Acts 11:15),

I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every people anyone who fears him and practices righteousness is acceptable to him (Acts 10:34, 35).

His journey to that experience was one that was conducted without pre-judgement (Acts 11:12, verb is *diakrino* - to make a judgement). Pre-judgements can determine the outcome; experience can challenge our previously held beliefs. At no point will naivety be our aid, nor the abandonment of what we have known, but if it be true that the body of Christ is to hold space so that agents of the kingdom arise, perhaps we all have to go on a journey, and as we do we might discover people who are stronger advocates and activists in sowing toward the reconciliation of all things than we have been. Surely we belong together and we have much to learn. And in it all

there is One who has the last word, the One who is the ‘first and the last’. From creation to new creation, and just as there were a number who left Egypt with the tribes of Israel, I sincerely hope there are those who are journeying toward that new day.

Excursus 1: meals

Eating meals. That has a long tradition in many settings; meals not merely to satisfy hunger but to indicate our union with the others at the table. The sacrifices in the Old Testament were not primarily a matter of the slaughter of animals but of eating together. Jesus said unless we can eat his flesh, and drink his blood, we will have no part in him.

Putting the ‘Lord’s Supper’ back into the meal context where we eat at his table we are told that when we do this we ‘proclaim his death’ as we ‘remember him’ and that we do this ‘until he comes’ (1 Cor. 11:24-26). I suggest this has been transformed into a focus on ‘remembering his death’ and a soberness has come in that was not present in the original setting. We are to **remember** Jesus, the Jesus of the gospels, the Jesus of today, the Jesus of tomorrow, and to **proclaim** his death - all that was finished at the cross and all that was inaugurated there... and that we do that **until all things** are restored.

That meal, and each meal, is an eschatological sign that we are caught up in a movement that believes in the restoration of all things, the reconciliation (putting back together again) of all things, whether in heaven or on earth.⁶

⁶ The banquets in the wider Graeco-Roman culture give an insight into the culture with seats of honour and proclamations (even ‘hymns’) that

Commentary on meals and their setting in the New Testament era is beyond this brief addendum, but I put the above here to suggest that some level of eating together with all who have a belief in the reconciliation of all things, including those who have a different narrative for their hope and activity, should be encouraged.

Excursus 2: ‘Agents of the kingdom’

I referenced earlier the helpful distinction between ‘church’ and ‘kingdom’ and how Ladd related the church to the kingdom as being the agent of the kingdom. My perspective is that in defining the relationship like that we are in danger of indicating that *only* through the church can the kingdom be advanced. Hence I was suggesting that the responsibility of the church⁷ is to seek to hold, protect, guard space so that the space becomes conducive to ‘good works’ that promote something that reflects at some evident level the reconciliation of the coming age. This is not with the idea of a utopia, but, in the words of Martin Luther King, a dream of a different and healthier future becomes a lived experience. The fulfilment of the dream might be accomplished through ‘whoever’ but the responsibility / calling of the *ekklesia* is to seek to ensure that the

proclaimed the Empire. Jesus undercut all of that with his instructions of who to invite. The ‘table’ might have been a table in a wealthier home (by necessity of space) but it was not the table of the ‘owner’ of the house; it was the Lord’s table and all were invited and all were equal. Jesus had meals at many different levels, and the ‘Last Supper’ was one with ‘his own’ (Jn. 13:1) having been rejected at the wider level by ‘his own’ (fellow-Jews, Jn. 1:11). Each table will have a depth set by who is present but Jesus’ own practice was as inviting and as inclusive as possible.

⁷ And maybe I should better use the term *ekklesia*, so that we do not reduce ‘church’ to our experience or preference, but expand it to mean all those who find an alignment with the Lordship of Christ.

fulfilment is possible.

I unashamedly use the term 'agent' for it is personal and indicates that something comes 'through' that person / those persons. In the same way that the kingdom came through the person of Jesus, and through the activity of those sent out so that they could say, 'the kingdom has come near', in the same way the proximity of the 'kingdom of God is at hand' is through the presence of humanity (and conversely any distance is through the activity and choices of humanity). If good works are good and are measured by a mirroring (in some measure) of the eschatological reconciliation of all things we can truly rejoice when we witness that. In OT language 'righteousness exalts a nation'.

In holding space we might have to 'evict' powers that have sought to colonise that space for means other than the blessing of creation and humanity but as that is done who and what can fill the space can become agents (knowingly or unknowingly) of the 'kingdom'.

In all of the above language is a challenge; language of 'agents' or even a biblical term such as 'kingdom' can be deeply provocative. I use the term 'agent' and although we might not be able to (and should not try) to put that term on someone or something I suggest it is helpful as it is intentional language and (for me) flows from the context of the NT where Paul was intent on seeing an *ekklesia* in the cities rise up - in the very cities where there was already an *ekklesia* (the governmental body for change on behalf of Rome, the empire).

We can further note that the word kingdom (*basileia*) was the term used for Rome's empire (kingdom) ruled over by Caesar who was 'king of kings' and 'lord of lords'. The NT usage then is subversive

and so when we use such terms we must not hear 'colonisation' as being contained within those words. Intentionality that flows from 'go', and the commission of 'as the Father sent me so I send you'.

Genuinely good schools, medical practices, care for the margins, for families, and much more, become the agents for the kingdom. The church is not the kingdom; it is not the agent of the kingdom. Good institutions, practices and people who are present for creation and humanity are not the kingdom; but they are agents for the kingdom to draw near. Hence the *ekklesia* is responsible for the agents to flourish and as they find their true calling we (the much wider 'we' of our society) can rejoice that at some level reconciliation can and is being witnessed.

God reconciling...

ALL THINGS... Creation
and creatures

The biblical God took on the responsibility to solve the issue of alienation and set something very concrete in motion with the invitation to those who have received the Spirit of reconciliation to be actively participating in everything that serves that ultimate goal.

That we can be reconciled to the God of creation is truly 'good news', and along that journey we can rejoice at every act carried out that works for the increased manifestation of the healing of alienation. We can, and should, be open to every opportunity to share the reason for the hope we carry while rejoicing with all those who are contributing to the increase of *shalom*.