



Broken relationships



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Reconciliation is the word we use to describe the work of restoring broken relationships. The work of reconciliation assumes that there has been a breakdown in relationships and that there needs to be a change of attitude, with warmth and trust replacing conflict and hostility. Those of us who have tried to be reconciled to others after such a breakdown in relationship know that this is easier said than done. The work of reconciliation is often costly, hard and can be painful.

Part of the story of King David can be a helpful guide for us in our ministry of reconciliation. In 2 Samuel 12–18 we learn how David experienced reconciliation with God but then failed to be reconciled with his son, Absalom, a situation that had tragic consequences.

God is reconciled

With God's help the former shepherd has become king over Israel. David has achieved great victories over his enemies and established himself as king in Jerusalem (2 Samuel 5). Then in chapter 11 David falls into terrible sin, adultery and murder, which breaks his relationship with God. The choices David made and the sinful deeds he committed are obvious. We are reminded of what the apostle Paul writes, 'For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men' (Romans 1.18).¹ Sin breaks our relationship with God. Our sin(s) may not be as obvious as those of David, for us our relationship with God may be broken by our selfishness, our

gossiping or our laziness. This is where the work of reconciliation needs to begin.

In 2 Samuel 12 God sends his prophet Nathan to confront David with his sin, verses 7–9, and the consequences of his sin, verses 10–12, 14. There can be no reconciliation without a recognition of the causes by which a relationship has been broken. When our God reveals to us some sin in our life he does so with a clarity that is seldom achieved when we work for reconciliation between humans. God can make known all the impulses of our human hearts in a way that is beyond us. However, this first step of clarification cannot be omitted or quickly passed by if genuine reconciliation is to be achieved.

David submitted to this clarifying work of God: 'David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD"' (2 Samuel 12.13a). Both here and in Psalm 51 David acknowledges his sin as being against the Lord (see Psalm 51.4). We might have hoped that David would confess his sin against Bathsheba, against Uriah, against the nation, but he is not recorded as doing so in Scripture. In 2 Samuel 12 the reconciliation described is between David and God. If we are to be reconciled to God we must acknowledge that our relationship with God has been broken by our sin against him. God is just in being wrathful towards us; we have set ourselves at enmity with God (see Romans 1.18; 5.10).

A second movement in the work of reconciliation is honesty. If we are to be reconciled to God we need to hear his declaration of anger and pain at our sin. If we follow the journey from the wrath of God in

Romans 1.18 to reconciliation with God in Romans 5.11 we see there the honesty with which God describes his pain at our sin and his work in Christ to achieve reconciliation.

The final step in reconciliation is one of commitment: 'Nathan said to David, "The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die"' (2 Samuel 12.13b).² God graciously takes this step of forgiveness. Forgiveness and reconciliation are closely related but are not the same thing. Reconciliation must be two-sided, each party in the broken relationship must be reconciled or there is no reconciliation. Forgiveness can be offered and not received. In our being reconciled to God we are shown the willingness of the Lord to be reconciled at the cross of Christ (see Romans 5.8–11). David knows nothing of the cross of Christ but in the word of Nathan he hears and receives the grace of God in his forgiveness. This completes David's reconciliation with God.

In 2 Samuel 12 we see between David and God the clarity, honesty and commitment from which reconciliation can be achieved. There can be no short cuts in this work of reconciliation. After such public sin David can still be reconciled to God. This God who made us to live in relationship with him is willing to achieve reconciliation with us when that relationship is broken.

David is not reconciled

We might have hoped that having experienced such full and generous reconciliation David would be willing to live it out in his relationships with others. Sadly, this is not what happens.

God's word that violence would be a constant presence in the family of David (2 Samuel 12.10) is quickly proved true. In chapter 13 David's daughter, Tamar, is raped by her brother, Amnon, who in turn is murdered by his brother, Absalom. Absalom flees from the presence of his father and for three years lives in exclusion.

It takes Joab, the general of David's army, to notice, 'that the king's heart went out to Absalom' (2 Samuel 14.1). Absalom in his flight has removed himself from the possibility of reconciliation with David. It is easy when relationships are broken to take flight, to remove ourselves from the presence of the one with whom our relationship is broken. But if we do this then reconciliation will never take place. No doubt Absalom fears the king's justice, which may demand his life. However, in his flight, he does not know that, 'the spirit of the king longed to go out to Absalom, because he was comforted about Amnon, since he was dead' (2 Samuel 13.39). David appears well disposed to be reconciled with Absalom.

We might think that this is all that is needed is to bring the father and son together. However, this reunion of father and son does not happen, or it does not happen quickly enough for Joab. We learn nothing of Joab's motives from Scripture,

but we know that Joab manipulates David with the result that Absalom is to be brought back (2 Samuel 14.21). All appears well until David declares, 'Let him dwell apart in his own house; he is not to come into my presence' (2 Samuel 14.24). The Bible does not give an explanation for David's decision. Absalom lives in Jerusalem for two years without ever being welcomed into the presence

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of his father (2 Samuel 14.28). Now it is Absalom who coerces Joab and achieves his goal of being summoned into the king's presence (2 Samuel 14.29–33).

The flight of Absalom from David prevents any clarity being achieved between father and son about the killing of Amnon. The manipulations of first Joab and then Absalom display a lack of honesty in how these men are dealing with one another. The refusal of David to have his son come into his presence denies any commitment towards full reconciliation. In every way, this part of the story is the opposite of David's experience with God in chapter 12. It is easy to see how suspicion can grow in the absence of clarity. Anger and pain that are not expressed cannot be acknowledged. As the years go by, feelings of anger and resentment are hardened into patterns of life and behaviour. This failure of reconciliation has tragic consequences for both David and Absalom as conflict breaks out (2 Samuel 15–18).

Eugene Peterson writes of the failure on David's part to be reconciled with Absalom as, 'the third monumental sin of David's life ... the rejection of Absalom was a steady, determined refusal to share with his son what God had so abundantly shared with him.'³ Where God had satisfied his anger and overcome his division from David, in relation to Absalom David achieves neither. The longing found in the heart of David for Absalom (2 Samuel 13.39–14.1) does not move David into the path of genuine reconciliation. In the story of the life of David we see both the work of reconciliation and the failure of reconciliation. No doubt we can find examples of both in our own lives.

A ministry of reconciliation

In his second epistle to the church in Corinth, Paul writes of reconciliation in the life of the Christian disciple. It is worth quoting the passage in full:

'Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of

NOTES

1. All quotations of Scripture are from the English Standard Version, unless otherwise stated.

2. For these three steps in reconciliation, clarification, honesty, and commitment, see VM Sinton, 'Reconciliation' in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology* (Leicester: IVP, 1995), pp. 724–6.

3. EH Peterson, *Leap Over A Wall: Earthy Spirituality for Everyday Christians* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 197.

4. See first stanza of Robert Burns' *Tam o' Shanter* first published in 1791 and now available in many modern editions.

5. For further reflections on reconciliation see Gordon Kennedy, *Reconciliation* published by the Evangelical Alliance 2014 – <http://www.eauk.org/scotland/upload/reconciliation-booklet.pdf> – accessed on 16 June 2018.

reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.'
(2 Corinthians 5.17–21)

The work of new creation is the work of God reconciling those who are in Christ to himself. In his creative work God established good

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relationships between himself and his creation, and between all that he had made (see Genesis 1–2). Now in his recreative work in Christ Jesus God restores good relationships, which is the effect of reconciliation. I think the order in 2 Corinthians 5.18 is intentional, God reconciles the world to himself in Christ, before giving the ministry of reconciliation to those who are in Christ, those who have first been reconciled to him.

In the life of David God first reconciles David to himself. The division between them caused by David's sin is restored. If we long to see reconciliation in our relationships with one another we must begin here with our reconciliation to God our Father. This work of reconciliation with God brings us into a place of security, the security of a good relationship with God. From this place we can enter the risk of seeking to be reconciled with others. When we seek to clarify a broken relationship, when we face with honesty a broken relationship we expose ourselves to misunderstanding, to further pain and suffering. But this is the risk we must take if we are to serve as agents of reconciliation.

As we saw in the life of David God did not count his sin against him, so in Christ God does not count trespasses against those he would be reconciled with (see 2 Corinthians 5.18). In Robert Burns' poem *Tam o' Shanter* we read of Tam's wife Kate, 'nursing her wrath to keep it warm.'⁴ How many of us enjoy being angry, especially if we have been wronged? Do we not work over the account of the wrong done to us that we might stoke our anger into flame?

If God had nursed his wrath against us none of us would know any reconciliation towards him. In the suffering of Christ at the hands of those God would be reconciled to, the anger of God is satisfied. The New Testament does not explain the mechanics

of how God's wrath is appeased, only that it is through the death of Christ (e.g. Romans 3.21–26).

God has not given us a pattern of dealing with anger that we can follow. Rather, he sets before us the experience of knowing his anger towards us satisfied. This experience of reconciliation with God in Christ can be described as 'new creation' (2 Corinthians 5.17). It gives us a sense of the transforming power of this reconciliation that God has achieved with us.

If anyone is reconciled to God this new creation power of reconciliation is released to be at work in our lives, through our lives, to fulfil the ministry of reconciliation between ourselves and one another. Without a pattern to follow but made new in Christ Jesus our Saviour, we can work to achieve reconciliation with others in a variety of circumstances in the power of the reconciliation that God has achieved for us.

If there were no division there would be no need for reconciliation. However, reconciliation can only be achieved where division is healed. It is easier to avoid others than to heal division, we can move our seat in the congregation, join another small group, take lunch at the office with a different crowd, we have an endless number of strategies to avoid those we are divided from. Such strategies should only be employed once patient, sensitive attempts at reconciliation have been made and rejected.

Reconciliation is two-sided. We can work for reconciliation, but it takes two to be reconciled. If someone will not be reconciled to us the path of wisdom and least pain may well be to avoid being together, as far as possible. A broken, unreconciled relationship will cause untold damage to those involved and to other friends and members of a congregation. This damage can only be minimised by separation. This is not reconciliation, but sometimes it might be all we can achieve.

Conclusion

The work of restoring broken relationships is a hard work, but this is no reason for not working for reconciliation. The good news declared in the gospel is that God is reconciled to us in Jesus Christ. As his disciples we cannot do other than work for reconciliation in our own broken relationships. Cover this work with prayer, depend upon God's love for you in Christ, seek the wise counsel of others, and then serve this ministry of reconciliation.⁵