

The Gospel of Peace Revisited

by Marie-Noëlle von der Recke

Initial Publication: May 1999

I - The Gospel of Peace

The theme of reconciliation poses a critical question for humankind. A major theme in the Bible, in fact this is its most crucial and central theme. From Genesis through Revelation we read about how God creates relationships, heals and restores them when they have been broken. Referring in this article to the "Gospel of Peace," we will concentrate on the climax of the Biblical story, which is the coming of Jesus of Nazareth. This man lived among his own Jewish people, and as a consequence of his life and action, died the death of a political criminal. Those who witnessed his life and death also became the witnesses of his resurrection. They transmitted a message to us, a message which is best summarized with their own word Gospel: Good News.

The New Testament uses various expressions to speak about this Good News. One of them is "the Gospel of Peace". All too often in the life of the church the "Gospel" has been interpreted in a very narrow way, which has had very serious consequences for its life and witness. One scholar has commented colourfully on this tendency toward narrowness: "reductionist interpretations of the Good News almost inevitably end up with a truncated gospel, an amputated Christ and a crippled church" ¹. Let us look at several texts in the epistles attributed to the apostle Paul in order to gain a new and wider vision of what the New Testament means when it speaks about the Gospel and particularly about the Gospel of Peace.

II - Some key passages from the New Testament (NRSV)

Rom. 5:6-11

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person - though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

2 Cor. 5:16-21

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat 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.

Gal 3:26-29

In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Eph. 2:11-21

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called "the uncircumcision" by those who are called "the circumcision" - a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands - remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the

dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the corner-stone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord.

Col. 1:15-22

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers - all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 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.

Each of these texts speaks directly or indirectly about reconciliation. Each one contains fundamental thoughts about salvation in Jesus Christ. Each one spells out the essential shape of Paul's theology on the relation between reconciliation and salvation. However, a closer look at the context of these passages shows that Paul's aim in writing was not to formulate a clean and well-cut theology. Each affirmation is a response to particular tensions in particular churches.

III - Tensions within the early Christian communities

The epistles to the Romans, Galatians and Ephesians, all three, address the question of the place of Christians of non-Jewish origin in the Church; all three letters can only be understood in the context of the tensions between Christians of Jewish background and Christians of Gentile background.

The letter to the Colossians reflects the tension which existed within the early church with the emergence of Gnosticism (which for the sake of simplification we might compare with today's New Age Movement). Both letters to the Corinthians are full of allusions to a personal conflict between Apostle Paul and some members of the church in Corinth, who questioned the validity of his ministry. These "super apostles," as Paul called them, preached a gospel of spiritual self-fulfillment while Paul lived and preached a ministry of poverty.

Keeping in mind the conflicts in these churches, we can make sense of Paul's statements about reconciliation. The things he says about reconciliation are not abstract dogmas. He does not put forward lofty, unattainable ideals. What he attempts to do is the very opposite of giving easy answers from an ivory tower. His aim is to encourage people not simply to accept conflicts and tensions. Paul desires to help them to face the conflicts and to cope courageously with them on the basis of the ministry of Jesus Christ.

It is clear that we cannot give pat answers to all the difficult, bitter and painful situations of non-reconciliation in our world and in the Christian Church today. We cannot give cheap formulas for healing the wounds of wars nor suppress the reality of conflicts with some pious words. But I believe we can find genuine help in these passages - Paul's practical teaching in the face of particular, often severe, tensions.

IV - Paradigms for reconciliation

Paul approaches tensions and enmity within the Church with a number of paradigms, all of which have something to do with the ministry of Jesus, and especially with his death on the cross. These paradigms, or patterns, show the consequences of Jesus' way for mediating God's peace to humankind.

Social revolution - In this paradigm reconciliation means that classes and casts disappear. All people have a right to a common heritage. The text in Galatians affirms that faith in Jesus Christ ² makes all well-anchored barriers between people disappear. In Jesus all people become heirs of God and can call God their father the way Jesus himself did. "Clothing ourselves with Jesus" is just like putting on a new coat. It makes us experience this new reconciliation of relationships.

Sacrifice - Both the Romans and Ephesians texts speak of the pouring out of the blood of Christ, a metaphor of sacrifice, as the means for reconciliation.

War and Peace - The letters to the Romans and to the Colossians speak of people as God's enemies for whom Christ died because of love for them, thus reconciling them to God.

New Creation - This paradigm opens for us a new way of viewing enemies. The II Corinthians text explains how Paul can see his opponents with new eyes: if someone is in Christ, a new reality has begun. The Greek word *ktisis* here should not be understood in a narrow or individualistic sense, but in a global sense. It is the act of creation. And so our text says "there is a new creation".

Destruction and Construction - In the Ephesians text, Jesus' ministry has two facets. He destroyed or annulled the efficacy of barriers, institutions and regulations which separated the Jews from Gentiles. There is an allusion in the text to the wall in the Jerusalem temple which prevented the Gentiles from having full access to worship. But Christ not only broke down the barrier wall. He also created a new body, the Church, a reconciled community which is made up of former enemies.

Looking at these five paradigms we see that the language of sacrifice (which in later theological affirmations has tended to become just about the only way of speaking about salvation in Jesus Christ) is just one among a variety of ways of trying to express what Jesus' life, death and resurrection mean for us. We may presume that the vocabulary of sacrifice made sense for the first readers of these texts, but it has become more and more difficult for people today to understand, at least in Western societies. In fact, people are tempted to reject the whole message as unacceptable when it is presented in terms of sacrifice. The variety of the paradigms we have examined allows for a wider view of the meaning of Christ's work. We can better understand them because they are borrowed from areas of life which are more familiar to us. These paradigms lead us away from a vertical understanding of salvation focused on the individual, and towards an understanding which is holistic and community-centred.

V - Towards a holistic and community-centered understanding

A closer look at the word "reconciliation" will help us move further in the direction of this holistic and community-centred understanding of reconciliation and salvation. We discover that the Greek verb *katalasso* does not come from the language of worship or law but rather from that of diplomacy and social relationships. *Katalasso* means to exchange, to change. In our texts the agent of this change is always God. It's not we who reconcile ourselves with God but God who reconciles us to himself. Thus reconciliation is a one-sided declaration of peace from God to his enemies.

This thought is unique in religious history. In the Greek religion, the divinities were distant from humans. They were so far away from humanity that any idea of reconciliation with them was unthinkable. Pacification of the anger of the gods was the issue, not human reconciliation with them. This was true in Greek, Roman and German religions. An angry God or angry divinities had to be pacified through rites of purification, sacrifices, prayers, and asceticism. All these actions were aimed at appeasing the gods. The biblical view on reconciliation is the precise opposite. God is not an angry God whom humans have to pacify. Instead, God is himself the agent of reconciliation.

This appears clearly in our texts, which address two crucial questions: 1. What is God's attitude towards his enemies? 2. What does God do about enmity between people? The answer to both questions is: God gives his own life; God offers himself, thus breaking the endless chain of sin, violence and retaliation. The answer is supremely in the cross of Christ, which is "the expression of God's nonviolence, who does not annihilate his enemies but goes into death for them" ³.

Our Ephesians text adds one more element to this thought: In Jesus Christ a new humanity arises; a reconciled community takes shape. The cross of Christ spells peace for us: peace with God. This is peace

which becomes possible and tangible precisely where God creates peace between former enemies. To put it another way around, peace between estranged people is "the realm in which the reality of peace with God may be experienced"⁴. And so, peace between enemies is not to be seen as just a possible result of reconciliation with God. Peace with God takes its very shape in the community of reconciled antagonists. The new humanity is a visible reality. It is recognizable by the fact that in this new community the barriers between classes, races and genders no longer count. Here the Galatians text is very much in keeping with the Ephesians one.

It is clear throughout the New Testament witness that peace with God cannot be reduced to quietness of an individual's soul. Peace with God inevitably means reconciliation with the estranged, with the enemies. This kind of peace is possible only through sacrificial love. What is meant is not some faraway goal or ideal or even a vision for the hereafter. The tense of all the verbs in our texts is the aorist, which is the tense for fulfilled actions. Jesus' victory over enmity and sin is not somewhere in the future. It is here already. All creation longs for this reality to become visible.

Realizing this new understanding of community was, undoubtedly, not an easy process for the early churches. Not only the texts we are looking at, but also many incidents in the Acts of the Apostles and other New Testament epistles bear witness to the difficulty of accepting this new way of thinking and doing.

But this is the basis, the very foundation on which the apostle Paul builds when he speaks to his opponents and affirms that he is able to love them. He is able to do this without making compromises when he thinks the truth of the Gospel is at stake. This is the foundation for Paul's conviction that love and reconciliation are possible for people whom cultural, social and historical differences have separated and alienated.

VI - The task of the Church

What do our texts say about the task of the Church in the world? In the Ephesians passage the Church is the arena, the place where salvation can be experienced. The responsibility of the Church is just to be the Church. It is the place where former enemies live together and practice reconciliation in their daily lives. It is the place where the Spirit of Christ is given room to move, where the Spirit enables people to follow Christ's example, particularly in his behaviour towards enemies. The task of the Church is to live out the peace Jesus has given us. Our task is to give our contemporaries a glimpse of what things could and will be. This task for the church simply to be the Church is as urgent today as at any time of history. It is beautifully put in this description: "God chose a people whom no one would have to fear"⁵.

The disintegration of the socialist block has led to an explosion of all kinds of suppressed nationalistic tendencies. Even in western democracies racism and nationalism are growing at an alarming rate. The role of the churches in this situation should not be underestimated. William Trevor from the Corrymeela community said, at the 1997 Second Ecumenical European Assembly in Graz, that the situation in Northern Ireland has many similarities with that in former Yugoslavia, but that the strong involvement of the churches for peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland has contributed considerably to the fact that things have not become as tragic there as they did in former Yugoslavia.

On the other hand Ivo Markovic, a Franciscan priest from Bosnia told, also at the Graz Assembly, of the difficulties of convincing his colleagues in the Catholic Church in his country that it is important that they contribute to creating a climate of reconciliation. What happened in Rwanda and Burundi, two countries where a majority of the population is Christian, shows that the churches did not have a role in preventing genocide. Many church people ask themselves how things could go so wrong and if healing is at all possible.

The Church is to be a people whom no one should fear. If Jesus Christ is our peace, then our message consists in just living as peace communities in which the word peace becomes incarnated. Peace will be lived out in prayer, in worship, in sharing and working together. The church will comprise communities which are not homogeneous but in which men and women, foreigners and nationals, waged and unwaged, old and young experience something of what reconciliation means. And in that reconciliation, in that breaking down of barriers, they will know the meaning of the peace which God gives.

Addressing conflicts should be a high priority task in the Church. Our Corinthians text speaks about the ministry of reconciliation which is entrusted to us. We are messengers of reconciliation. God's declaration of peace has to be carried by people to people. The Church is not only a place where reconciliation should become visible, the church is called to be an agent, an ambassador of reconciliation. And so, where there is conflict or hate or suffering, that is exactly the place where the Church should be acting as an agent of reconciliation.

Peace service is needed wherever tensions are increasing or conflict has already broken out. The experiences we gather in learning to practice reconciliation in the daily life of a Christian community can help us tremendously in this kind of service to others. It is useful to acquire the skills that are necessary in order to help effectively where we are needed. Numerous examples from around the world, of Christians engaged in the work of reconciliation, provide tremendous encouragement. Let us keep believing and praying that God may pursue in us and through us the work of reconciliation and peace which was accomplished once and forever through Jesus Christ.

Marie-Noëlle von der Recke
28 January 1999

Presentation at the Church & Peace English-language conference, June 1998, Hothorpe Hall, UK

Notes

1. Marlin Miller, 'The Gospel of Peace' in Robert Ramseyer, ed., *Mission and the Peace Witness* (Scottsdale PA: Herald Press, 1979), 10.
2. Some New Testament specialists translate: Jesus' faith, the way Jesus lived out his faith, the way he related to God and did God's will.
3. John H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1994).
4. Marlin Miller, 'The Gospel of Peace' in Robert Ramseyer, ed., *Mission and the Peace Witness* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1979), 15.
5. Said by Wilfried Warneck in a sermon, 1985.