



Faith, Hope and Love: A Theological Approach to Reconciliation within Evangelicalism

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Abstract

Evangelicalism in South Africa does not have the luxury of operating according to a modernistic epistemology if it is to be relevant in a secular, post-Christian South African context. People want to live in peace, and the issue is how the Evangelical Church can contribute to nation-building. This article attempts to reframe the theological understanding of reconciliation by adding to Western Evangelicalism's presuppositions that focus predominately on divine-human reconciliation -the proclamation of the gospel at the expense of human-human reconciliation – the demonstration of the gospel, namely social/racial reconciliation. In this paper, it is argued that using faith, hope, and love will aid in a biblical and holistic understanding of reconciliation by deconstructing how this term is understood within Evangelicalism. This approach will hopefully free evangelicals from individualism, fundamentalism and fideism. Using Vorster's sense of reconciliation, this paper adds a fourth aspect that is negated within Evangelicalism, namely social reconciliation. This paper thus seeks to ask the important question, how do Evangelicals understand restitution in relation to reconciliation?

Keywords: Reconciliation, Evangelicalism, faith, hope, love.

Introduction

In this paper, faith, hope and love are used to render an understanding of reconciliation within Evangelicalism which is vulnerable to being challenged to interpret the biblical notion of reconciliation through our own lived experience as South Africans. While at the same time we also see reconciliation within Evangelicalism as a critical transformation agency in our context based on the commitment to community solidarity marked by justice and forgiveness to address the continued legacy of apartheid. Understanding how the South African community has been caught up in the destructive nature of apartheid, including presenting an individualised understanding of the gospel is critical. This paper discusses the holistic nature of reconciliation at the heart of the Christian message and how Evangelicals understand the doctrine of reconciliation, thus calling for a critical re-examining and meaning of reconciliation within evangelicalism. This paper presents a theological understanding of reconciliation by employing Vorster's (2018) meta-theological methodological approach to the doctrine of reconciliation while at the same time adding a fourth, namely, social reconciliation, to reconstruct an evangelical understanding and praxis of reconciliation for the unique South African context. This paper also seeks to ask how Evangelicals understand reconciliation in relation to lament and restitution?



Evangelicalism

Evangelicalism is modern Christianity's movement covering many Protestant traditions, denominations, organisations, and churches. It originates from the Greek word *euangelion*, meaning “the good news,” or, more commonly, the “gospel.” During the Reformation, Martin Luther adopted the Latinised form of the term *evangelium*, dubbing his breakaway movement the *evangelische kirche*, or “evangelical church”—a name still generally applied to the Lutheran Church (See “Evangelicalism” in Elwell, 2001:405-409). In the English-speaking world, however, the modern term usually describes the religious movements and denominations that sprung from a series of revivals that swept the North Atlantic Anglo-American world in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In the 21st century, numerous Evangelical churches have become active in Africa, in countries including Sudan, Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Rwanda, Uganda, Ghana, Kenya, Zambia, South Africa, and Nigeria (Freston, 2004; Koschorke, 2007). Bebbington (2006) identifies four primary characteristics that provide a summary of Evangelical distinctiveness, namely:

Conversionism: the belief that lives need to be transformed through a “born-again” experience and a life-long process of following Jesus and thus justification by faith in Christ and repentance.

Activism: the expression of the gospel in missionary reform, namely the proclamation of the Gospel in preaching and social actions in communities.

Biblicism: a high view of, and obedience, to the Bible as the ultimate authority thus, it is faultless and fully trustworthy.

Crucicentrism: a stress on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as making possible the redemption of humanity. There is thus a substitutionary atonement, in which Christ died as a substitute for sinful humanity by taking on himself the guilt and punishment for all human sins.

Love Hope and Faith

The Bible asserts that love is greater than both faith and hope. One cannot live without faith or hope. Without faith one cannot know the God of love and without hope, one cannot endure in faith. Nonetheless, despite the importance of faith and hope, love is even more essential.

Evangelicals often interpret Paul's understanding of hope, faith and love independently. However, I would suggest that hope and love depend on faith. Faith makes possible hope and love by allowing love to take its proper object in God and provide content to the notion of hope. The biblical vision of hope is intimately connected to images of flourishing, shared life and deep transformation with repentance. Hope in our world is often confused with optimism and success, but biblical hope is dependent on love since love secures the appearance of the future in which one sees faith as good. Finally, love is dependent on hope insofar as love is the working of faith in worship of God through activities the end of which the agents are self-consciously unable to achieve by their solo efforts.

Scripture calls us to love God and our neighbour (Mark 12:29–31), and God is love and loves unconditionally. The triune God provides a model for human love. The life and practice of the church in response to God's love are summarised in Mark 12:29–31. Harold (2016) observed that the term “living in love” is not something that we can achieve on our strength, but something that happens to us in faith and from God and when one loves God. God-loving us is a decisive element in the life of love. By being loved by God, the church understands what it means to reflect God's reality and demonstrate love in all we do. Hope is nothing else than expectations of those things that faith has believed to have promised God. Moltmann



(2012:22), in speaking of hope, states that “hope makes the Christian Church a constant disturbance in human society.”

A Meta-theological Understanding of Doctrine of Reconciliation

Among the various concepts by which the reality of salvation is understood in Scripture, the language of reconciliation is most prominent within Evangelicalism. Its close association with atonement, justification and forgiveness is deeply embedded in Evangelical theology. Within Evangelicalism, the doctrine is understood as the sacrifice of Christ that averts the judgement of God upon sin, which is the revolt of humans against his holiness. However, this article seeks to bring into dialogue a fourth concept, namely the social relevance of divine reconciliation, thus deconstructing an individualised notion of God-human reconciliation and addressing the human-to-human reconciliation as a result of divine reconciliation. While the word reconciliation is used sparingly in the New Testament, it is a central Pauline doctrine and is inherently part of Pauline theology. The word reconciliation is translated from several Greek words, namely the verbs *katallasso* and *apokatallasso* and the noun *katallage* occurring in Colossians 1:20-22 and also Ephesians 2:16.

The Greeks utilised these words to emphasise peace treaties between nations and groups. The word *Kattallasso* means “to exchange or exchange; to affect change”. De Gruchy emphasises that when we are reconciled “we exchange places with the other and are in solidarity with rather than against another”. Ndulue (2008:9), citing Macdonald, describes reconciliation as “restoring or bringing back to friendship or union, to bring to agreement or contentment. Reconciliation can also mean the process involved in bringing two warring parties together so that they will regain original friendship and love existing between them.” The whole message of reconciliation is centred around the love of God and the death of Christ as Paul reminds us that “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). This brings us peace with God because of the forgiveness we received in Christ Jesus salvific act at Golgotha.

Vorster (2018) suggests three essential elements needed to understand the Pauline thought about reconciliation, to which evangelicals adhere.

Firstly, **Reconciliation as an act of God is covenantal** -God and God alone initiate the task of reconciliation. De Gruchy (2002:25) states that God alone is the agent of reconciliation. Because of the depravity of humankind, we cannot build new relationships (God is reconciling the world to himself). We have nothing to appease God. Welker (2013:199) states a false understanding of sin and atonement suggests that human beings are in a position to “reconcile and appease God” by some sort of offering. Thus, Van Drunen (2014:415) rightfully observes that reconciliation is a gift from God founded on the promises enshrined in God’s covenant. Real redemption is a gift from God in his particular grace to people he has atoned for based on his justification. Therefore this covenant of grace is a gift in Christ and is revealed to the faithful by the Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 12). Thus, reconciliation is God’s initiative in restoring the world “to himself all things” through Christ (Colossians 1:20), restoring the relationship between people and God, between people, and with God’s created earth. Christians participate with God by being transformed into ambassadors of reconciliation

Secondly, **reconciliation is eschatological as an act of God**. Vorster (2018) states: “It indicates the eschatological reparation of all things. Reconciliation brings about peace removing all the distortion brought about by evil. Reconciliation forms the foundation of a new creation.” Therefore, Paul claims:



For God was pleased to have his fullness dwell in him and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his bloodshed on the cross. (Colossians 1:19–20)

Vorster (2018) states, "All things' refer to the totality of cosmological restoration as they were before the fall". Thus indicating that not only humanity but all of creation is included in God's act of reconciliation.

Reconciliation is thus eschatological as well as covenantal. Vorster (2018) observes: "It denotes a radical and all-encompassing transformation of everything that is realised in principle in this historical dispensation and will reach its fullness and completeness with the coming of the new age introduced by the consummation in the second coming of Christ".

This is clearly expressed eschatologically by Apostle Paul as the foundation for reconciliation, noting that the old is passed away and the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17-18). A new reality is created when evil turns into good, enmity and hostility into peace, and hatred into love. The God of peace will crush evil under his feet (Romans 16:20). Thus, a new relationship is constructed between God and all of His creation. Moltmann (2012:91) states that the new dispensation as an emergent reality gives new meaning to the present and is the foundation of hope in the present life. The promise of the eschatological reality is also the motivation to live morally according to the principles of the kingdom of God as revealed in Scripture. However, reconciliation is essentially about the renewal of all broken relationships.

Thirdly, Vorster (2018) indicates that **reconciliation has thus a relational character** bringing into being a new relationship between humans and God through the death and resurrection of Christ. In the Pauline corpus, this is justification. However, the concepts of *justification* and *forgiveness* in Pauline theology can be seen as two perspectives on reconciliation. Justification is a juristic concept indicating that the sinner has been pardoned from guilt due to the penitential exercise of Christ. In contrast, the concept of reconciliation is another way of expressing the new relationship between God and humans (Ridderbos, 1975:186). It assumes a past breakdown in the relationship, but now, through the death of Christ there has been a change from a state of enmity and fragmentation to that of harmony and fellowship (Romans 5:6-11, 2 Corinthians 5:17).

Social Reconciliation (Human to Human Reconciliation)

Evangelicals are noted for their quietism and pietism, which allows the insidious and growing evil of racism to work and continue within communities (Boesak and Young 2012, Harold, 2019). However, an aspect of reconciliation negated within Evangelicalism is the concept of Social Reconciliation termed human to human reconciliation, which calls for the engagement against racism and injustice. In *Divided by Faith*, Emerson and Smith (2002:ix) summarise the problem well: "Evangelicals desire to end racial division and inequality and attempt to think and act accordingly. But, in the process, they likely do more to perpetuate the racial divide than they do to tear it down."

This approach often commodifies and dehumanises human beings according to a racial hierarchy. This is rooted in a philosophical belief that certain people are higher on the "great chain of being" than others, which justifies mistreating people deemed "lower" as less than human." "This type of racialised injustice is woven throughout every aspect of our human society, and the Evangelical church must understand her commitment to come and speak out against it. "Racism is not disliked, bias or ill will toward another race. It is the assertion of power to obstruct justice, progress and equality." The Belhar Confession 1982 [1982] suggests that Christians who understand the reconciliatory work of Christ cannot accept a social system that assumes human beings can reconcile. The confessions suggest that reconciliation begins



with God in Christ Jesus and their call to the church is to embody reconciliation and to take up the ministry of reconciliation in a socially divided society. The gift of reconciliation is given to all who are in Christ. This call to be Christ representative of reconciliation intends to unseat other lords, nationalism, race or ethnic loyalty as an end to itself and give birth to a deeper allegiance, stories, spaces and communities that demonstrate the reality of God's new creation. Simply put, reconciliation both names the church and requires it to be the agent of God's reconciliation. The gift of reconciliation must give rise to the church's ministry of reconciliation and begins with lamenting.

The Evangelical Church must learn to lament

There are several words for lament or lamentation in Hebrew, and they all convey the same sense, to outwardly demonstrate deep sorrow or regret. In Hebrew, the word lament is defined as "to wail". The Hebrew meaning of lament is expressed in the words "*saphad*", "*nahah*" "*nahag*", "*abal*". All these words mean; to cry out, to wail, to chant a dirge or to lament.¹

Westermann (1974) in his article "The Role of Lament in the Theology of the Old Testaments states that "In the Old Testament, from beginning to end, the 'call of distress', 'the cry out of the depths' is the lament, is an inevitable part of what happens between God and man." Lament, thus, is a voice that refuses to be consoled and calls the Evangelical church into a journey that will change and transform its being at deeply fundamental levels because just as it is a part of human nature that human being can pour out their heart in lament, so it is a part of divine nature that God is concerned about their cry of distress (Westermann, 1974).

Katongole and Rice (2008) explain that "the first strategy of the Church in a deeply broken world is not a strategy, but prayer. Lament is an action, not a response, to make us " feel better." This is not so easily done within Evangelicalism because of our desire to "lead people to Jesus" before his return. As Volf (2011) would argue, this busy idleness gives the impression that we are busy, however busy with doing things that negate people's lived reality and experiences. According to Katongole and Rice (2008), lament challenges our proclivity for speed, distance, and innocence, which is prevalent today. They argue:

The journey of reconciliation is grounded in a call to see and encounter the rupture of this world so truthfully that we are slowed down. We are called to a space where any explanation or action is too easy, too fast, too shallow—a space where the right response can only be a desperate cry directed to God. We are called to learn the anguished cry of lament.

Lament is therefore a protest against the brokenness of the world. It causes us to come face-to-face with hurting people and places that desperately need the healing presence of God. Lament forces us to come close enough to see the horror of our surroundings. As Lee (2010:27) so clearly articulated:

Lament, in essence, provides a cathartic vehicle for human beings to express all aspects of suffering and to help maintain the value and dignity of one's humanity under hardship, if possible. Lament is, and not secondarily, a call to bring attention to injustice, an anguished.

It also allows us to tell the truth and name the crisis for what it is. Lament also has the potential to move Evangelical Christians of different ethnicities toward social and racial harmony. Lament is flexible and fluid enough for all Christians. Lament can be helpful

¹ See S. Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Studies of the Old Testament*



for Evangelicals as we empathise with those suffering by ending our postured silence and repenting from the injustices caused by our silent pietism. Lament also serves those hurt because of injustices as they lovingly protest the evil, redeem their hurt, and dare to hope for change. As Evangelicals love, listen, lament, learn, and leverage together, lament can be a turning point in racial reconciliation.

Through lamenting, infatuation with race, tribe and nation is brought low. In lamenting, we recognise the gift of God's love in calling us to a serious commitment that resists privileges, loyalties, and selfish desires. Through lament, we understand that justice is an aspect of God's *shalom*, which carries the idea of wholeness and completeness of personal, relational and national. Lamenting enables us to agree on what justice means.

It should be noted that lament isn't a silver bullet. Therefore the fundamental message of the church is reconciliation. McNeil (2015: 22) states that "reconciliation is an ongoing spiritual process involving forgiveness, repentance and justice that restores broken relationships and systems to reflect God's original intention for all creation to flourish."

In lamenting, the church becomes prophetic when it creates and sustains a reconciled and reconciling community. The task of the church's prophetic ministry is to nurture and nourish an alternative consciousness to the dominant culture around us (Bruggeman cited in McNeil, 2015). Reconciliation with God must be demonstrated by genuine reconciliation within the church and by continuing a ministry of reconciliation to the world. Volf (1999) calls this the Pauline concept of social reconciliation. Such a community of reconciliation is the alternative hoped for in South Africa to help reconcile the tension with the surrounding context and culture of social separateness. The practice of lament is a way to draw near and tarry with the pain of those hurting by naming the truth and remembering the awful depth of our unjust past. The prayers of lament as in the Psalms, were public prayers. Therefore, Evangelicals must learn to pray like this and confess our direct relationship to the brokenness of our own contexts. To learn to lament is to become people who stay near the wounds of those hurting.

As South Africa becomes more socially and economically separated, based on the legacy of apartheid and the continued disparity in income distribution² (Harold and Alexander, 2015), the Evangelical church should structure itself to become an alternative conscience and, as needed, even counter-cultural. In the place of justice and righteousness, normal society brandished violence and oppression and called it justice. Bonhoeffer (2005: 63) encapsulated this function of the church well:

The church is the place where the witness is given to the foundation of all reality in Jesus Christ. The church is the place where it is proclaimed and taken seriously that God has reconciled the world to himself in Christ. The church's space is not there to fight for territory but precisely to testify to the world that it is still the world, namely the world that is loved and reconciled by God.

While the church pursues justice and reconciliation, it defines its mandate in biblical terms and thus rejects all forms of violence, manipulation, and injustice. For the Apostle Paul, as argued by Wright (2013), the prophetically promised age of eschatological, messianic peace has arrived in the death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. A period characterised especially by reconciliation and nonviolence.

² See IMF report Six Charts explain South Africa Inequality. [mf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/01/29/na012820six-charts-on-south-africas-persistent-and-multi-faceted-inequality](https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/01/29/na012820six-charts-on-south-africas-persistent-and-multi-faceted-inequality)



Liberation, then, is not a mere political movement and power struggle. The message of reconciliation of the church is to preach the good news about the peace Christ brings, reconciling man to God, man to man, and bringing harmony with God's creation (Harold, 2022). Reconciliation is thus with God, the Church, and those against whom we sinned. This is what Conradie (2013:27) calls cosmic reconciliation. In lamenting, we understand that there is no justice without reconciliations and certainty, no reconciliation without justice. In this journey, not only do we see justice and peace meet but also truth and mercy. Justice, therefore, foregrounds truth, and truth must lead to merciful action.

Radical Reconciliation

The mission of God in our fragile and fallen world is reconciliation. Scripture witnesses reconciliation as holistic, including relationships with God, self, others, and creation. Reconciliation and the quest for justice are inseparable. There cannot be reconciliation if sin is not named, judged publicly, and condemned. In the face of oppression, when the church remains silent is a double injustice upon the afflicted. Bonhoeffer (2005:66) observes that how Christians relate to the world is determined by God's relation to the world and thus has as its "task and essence to proclaim to the world its reconciliation with God, and to disclose to it the reality of the love of God".

How then is reconciliation to be enacted? The Evangelical church must be agents of spiritual and racial reconciliation that is more than mere words, but a reconciliation that demands action. Vellem (2013:111) underscores that if justice becomes subservient to reconciliation, then reconciliation is just cognitive, aborting the true reconciliation. Vellem (2013:111) asserts that what is needed is the discovery of reconciliation through experience.

It is through restitution that this is possible. Ali (2022) defines restitution as "the act of doing good things or giving the amount equivalent to the victim's loss, harm, or injury".

Harold (2022: 250-253) states that the church as an agency of peace must condemn violence and bloodshed in the re-appropriation of land. Harold and Alexander (2015) state that "when the church fully understands the impact that three decades of separateness had on the masses and the degradation it caused, making people non-persons, the church is required to make practical engagements". This is what Vellem (2013:112) calls the "logic of experiential clarity regarding reconciliation". If reconciliation is to be fully realised, then restitution must be engaged. This is where the church can challenge the government to speed up its programme of Land Reform that seeks to turn around what happened when specific racial groupings of the church in South Africa benefited unethically from the 1913 Land Act (Harold, 2018. 2020, 2022).

Reconciliation requires that restitution be made to those who suffered under a corrupt system by the church herself. Restitution is perhaps the most human part of the reconciliation process. Restitution requires that we give up something, which gives us a better understanding of the suffering apartheid caused to the majority.

Faith in God and hope calls the evangelical church to move away from a theology that leads to escapism to theology that calls one to take action to address the lived realities of many South Africans, to show what Stone (1996:104) calls resident charity (love), love that is authentic in contrast to an alien charity that is insulated and isolated from human suffering that drops in from the outside. When Evangelicals, as a community of God's people, lead this process, they do so from a place of compassion. It is the love of God and our neighbour that embeds our calling for restitution, that the wrong done against others be corrected.



Conclusion

Christian fellowship is not a human ideal, but a divine reality created by God in Christ through reconciliation. From Genesis to Revelation, Scripture witnesses God's total mission "to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven" (Colossians 1:15-20). Amidst the profound brokenness of the world, God's peace action through the resurrected Christ is now powerfully at work, seeking to reconcile humanity to God's intended purposes for union with God, resulting in the flourishing of all. The fullness of reconciliation is friendship with God in Jesus Christ, witnessed in Christ's two-fold command to love God and neighbour (Matthew 22:37-40). Thus by abolishing the dividing wall through love, hope is incarnated because Christ has prepared the way to bring down the hostility between Jew and Gentile, making of the two one new humanity, and establishing peace (Ephesians 2:11-18). Consequently this brings about a deeper faith in love, with Christ Jesus and for his world.

At the heart of the evangelical witness of reconciliation is the birth and perseverance of blended congregations where historically separated peoples share deep, everyday life. Evangelicals should therefore work eagerly towards reconciliation in society as a critical indication of hope, infusing the community with a radical demonstration of reconciliation. However, in pursuing the ministry of reconciliation, Evangelicals must always be called to remember the centre and source of reconciliation, the atoning work of Jesus Christ. The outcome of reconciliation does not rest in reconciliation itself but in the Reconciler whose love, righteousness and mercy are enactments of our reconciliation between all human beings.

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