

NEW TESTAMENT CONCEPT OF RECONCILIATION AND UNITY

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Abstract

In Christianity, reconciliation between God and humanity through Jesus is a fundamental theme. This paper presents Christ's love as a key to reconciliation and unity in the contemporary society. It examines the sources of conflicts and ways of reconciliation. Christ is the prince of peace who has shown love to humanity by giving himself to be crucified in order to bring reconciliation between man and his creator. The reciprocation and replication of this love by man to God and his fellow man is a basic key to unity and reconciliation in the contemporary society. The world is faced with chaos, conflicts, injustice and all forms of distress. The world at large has been seeking for a lasting solution to the turbulent times mankind is plunged into. Nations that have been ravaged by terrorism, natural disasters and war have sought for help from world leaders and various institutions but all these have failed. We are separated in purpose and interests as Christians today because of prejudice. Church leaders are mostly mindful of self and thereby engaging in unhealthy competition. Through a descriptive approach, this paper discovered that we cannot have a united people who live in harmony without love. Christ's love is the key to reconciliation and unity in the contemporary society.

Key Words: Conflicts, Christ's love, Unity and Reconciliation

Introduction

Reconciliation is a socio-political concept which emanates from the Christian tradition. The concept of reconciliation and unity for the contemporary society is a subject that calls for attention because of the weakening of solidarity and the seen and unseen forces threatening our peace and social life. Buford (2009) opines that our social life depends on trust, shared norms, and commonly accepted patterns of behavior believed to continue through change. As these are undermined, the solidarity and stability of our social life weakens. Though we may find solace in them and tenaciously hold to them, in practice as their power is lost or diminished our social life loses its stability, and our identity as persons becomes problematic.

Trust, shared social patterns, and common values are necessary to solidify and stabilize our identity, yet, they are fading away. Buford (2009, p.8) laments that “we cannot continue to hold to the present unifiers and stabilizers of our society, but we do not know where to turn for replacements. We are in a state of crisis.” This instability in social life of a people is the motivating force in the call for peace, reconciliation and conflict resolutions.

Conflicts in the Contemporary Society

Conflict can be defined as “the pursuit of incompatible and particular interests and groups by different groups.... It is the denial which causes re-solvable differences to degenerate into armed violence or armed conflict” according to Best (2007, p. 20). It is the absence of peace in a given institution or society. The conception of conflict has led to these terms, love, unity and reconciliation. There are different stages of conflict discussed in *Peace and Conflict Studies in West Africa* edited by Shedrack Gava Best (2007). They are:

1. The Pre-Conflict Stage: This is the first stage of conflict which is not easily noticeable because parties try to hide it from the public. At this stage, communication is undermined. When this stage is not really controlled, it degenerates to the second stage.
2. Confrontation Stage: The conflict becomes known to the public. At this point, parties could fight, seek for the help of allies and show strained relations.
3. The Stage of Crisis: Crisis fully erupts at this stage. It is the stage of war, the use of small arms and light weapons.
4. The Outcome Stage: At this stage, one side wins and the opponent loses. There may be a cease fire, a retreat or surrender, the government or other external forces could intervene to proffer a solution which could bring about dialogue, peace talks and or reconciliation.
5. The Post Conflict Stage: This is the stage of addressing the underlying causes of the conflict. Failure to control the causes of the conflict at this stage could lead to a recycling of the stages of the conflicts.

Apparently, there are numerous challenges threatening the peace and unity in our contemporary society. The problem extends beyond contemporary religion and culture. It penetrates to the core of the whole systems and nations. The issue lies

at the taproot of modernization, corruption, betrayal and distrust. Stanton (2006) observes that “soon indeed instances occur in which the bonds between different members of the body become strained, owing especially to differences of origin and character in the elements of which it was composed” (p.5). Another challenge we have today in the world and religion is denominationalism. We are separated in purpose and interests as Christians today because of prejudice. Church leaders are mostly mindful of self and thereby engaging in unhealthy competition. This does not mean that doctrinal and denominational distinctive are wrong, because each local church must be fully persuaded by the Spirit. But it does mean that we must not permit our differences to destroy the spiritual unity we have in Christ. We ought to be mature enough to disagree without in any sense becoming disagreeable.

Today in many parts of the world people are divided from one another on the basis of nationalist, ethnic and/or religious rivalries. These rivalries are frequently passed from generation to generation as seen in the examples of Nigerian civil war (between the Biafrans and Nigerian Government), Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina etc. We are divided today on the basis of ethnic, cultural, religious and political differences. The outbreak of the pandemic and its resultant effects of social distances and massive deaths have further created a gap in the world system. Man has tried in diverse ways to procure a solution but there cannot be a lasting solution outside the atoning death and love of Jesus.

The society cannot be void of conflicts. The solution to conflict is tolerance, having the mindset that conflict is inevitable. However, experience shows that the world does not give peace no matter how hard man tries. From the Christian point of view, only embracing the love of Christ which is all encompassing can give man peace. The love of Christ reflects in our character when we show love to one another.

The Concept of Reconciliation

According to Brouneus (2003), the word reconciliation has its etymological roots in the Latin *reconciliare*: *re*, “again” “make friendly”. The term reconciliation has strong religious connotations. It is used in Christianity to describe the broken relationship between God and mankind due to sin, with Jesus re-establishing conciliation between them through the sacrifice of his life. Christ reconciles the world to himself regardless of man’s shortcomings. Reconciliation is a “societal process that involves mutual acknowledgment of past suffering and the changing

of destructive attitudes and behaviour into constructive relationships toward sustainable peace” (Bronneus, 2003, p.3). Forgiveness and transparency is a condition for reconciliation.

The word reconciliation is normally used in the context of post conflict and post genocidal situations. The word itself not only refers to a state of peace that should be re-established but also has religious connotations which can be problematic for many. It is difficult to have a definite definition of the term reconciliation according to Brouneus (2003) due to the question of who is being referred to: reconciliation in the society or the individual victim? (p.14). Reconciliation as a paradigm, for Schreiter, exists alongside other paradigms of mission. They include dialogue and conciliare: inculturation, and liberation of the poor.

In the continuation of Luke’s writing which is Acts, there is an example of a dissatisfaction felt by the Hellenistic Jews, who were visiting, or had again taken up their abode at, Jerusalem, because a fair share of the alms was not assigned to their poor by the Palestinian believers, who had the advantage of being more permanently established in the city, and were probably the majority. To address this case of marginalization and unjust treatments felt by the Hellenists, the Apostles took wise measures to remove the grievance and prevent a breach. The action taken by the apostles helps us to see the absolute necessity of Unity in Christ, of religious reunion, for the sake of both Christianity and the world. This is an example of reconciliation. When the right steps are taken to appease the offended, reconciliation is achieved.

Christians have been growing more and more uneasy about their acquiescence in religious division. Stanton (2009, p. 3) says:

the reading of the Gospels, and especially the eighteenth chapter of St John, where Jesus prays on the threshold of His agony that His disciples may be one, even as He and the Father are one, has become nothing less than a torment to those who have any real passion for the doing of God's will, or who are humbled by the tremendous love of our Lord Jesus Christ, for each and for all. Thus far have we gone from the clear mind of Christ; thus far have we ruined His plans for the health and happiness of the world; thus far have we failed to imitate or display the love, the humility, the self-sacrifice, that walked to Calvary: He bade us be *one*, and to *love*; we, the disciples, have chosen to hate and be many.

Reconciliation is a basis for every attempt to peace building. It examines one of the important areas of conflict management – how to consolidate peace through

reconciliation. The Church as an agent of change should work to strengthen and support national initiatives for reconciliation in post-conflict nations.

Unity in the Body of Christ

Unity is not uniformity. Unity comes from within and is a spiritual grace, while uniformity is the result of pressure from without. Paul used the human body as a picture of Christian unity (1 Cor. 12), and he adapts the same illustration in Eph. 4:13-16. Each part of the body is different from the other parts, yet all make up one body and work together. Christianity alone is split into many denominations. Milner-White (2006) posits that we had lost even the sense that division mattered. Furthermore, he reiterates that "It is quite ridiculous to pretend that nothing is wrong with the religious ideas or state of a race, which produces hundreds of bodies, big and small, to worship Him who only asked that His worshippers should be ONE. Denomination itself has become a word of shame which we shall not be able to use much longer" (p.27).

It brings up at once the thought of something partial, little, far less than the body for which Christ died; and a host of yet more horrid pictures of old squabbles and present rivalries, of contempt and bitterness and controversy. It does not suggest one *Christian* idea at all. The Church is not in any way united. Christ is not divided; therefore, the Church which is his body ought not to be divided. It is very unfortunate to note that pastors are on each other's neck today as a result of unhealthy competitions of membership and the exhibition of charismata. The Gospel that is handed over to the Church is meant to keep us united and not divided. However, today the different interpretations and understanding of the Bible have led to various dogmas which are in no measure strengthening the faith and unity of the Church.

We belong to one family of God and share the same divine nature. We are living stones in one building and priests serving in one temple. We are citizens of the same heavenly homeland. It is Jesus Christ who is the source and center of this unity. If we center our attention and affection on Him, we will walk and work together; if we focus on ourselves, we will only cause division.

Unity does not eliminate diversity. Not all children in a family look alike or behave in similar way, nor are all the stones in a building the same. In fact, diversity adds beauty and richness to a family or building. The absence of diversity is not unity; it is uniformity, and uniformity is dull. It is fine when the choir sings in unison, but preferable when they sing in harmony. Christians can differ and still get along. All Christians who are called into "one faith" and who serve "one Lord" can love

each other and walk together (Eph. 4:1-6). God may call us into different ministries, or to use different methods, but we can still love each other and seek to present a united witness to the world. At the end of our lives' journey, we will assemble together in heaven (John 17:24); so it might be a good idea if we learned to love each other as Christ loved the Church. Wiersbe (1996) cites St. Augustine who said: "In essentials, unity. In nonessentials, liberty. In all things, charity." Love is the ultimate. We cannot have a united people who live in harmony without love.

Peter said in 1 Peter 2:4 to believers living in five different provinces, that they all belonged to *one* "spiritual house." There is a unity of God's people that transcends all local and individual assemblies and fellowships. We belong to each other because we belong to Christ. This does not mean that doctrinal and denominational distinctive are wrong, because each local church must be fully persuaded by the Spirit. But it does mean that we must not permit our differences to destroy the spiritual unity we have in Christ. We ought to be mature enough to disagree without in any sense becoming disagreeable.

The Ground of Unity (Eph. 4:4-6)

Many people today attempt to unite Christians in a way that is not biblical. For example, they will say: "We are not interested in doctrines, but in love. Now, let's forget our doctrines and just love one another!" But Paul did not discuss spiritual unity in the first three chapters; he waited until he had laid the doctrinal foundation. While not all Christians agree on some minor matters of Christian doctrine, they all do agree on the foundational truths of the faith. Unity built on anything other than Bible truth is standing on a very shaky foundation. We have every reason to pursue peace. The world is faced with confusion and disunity. This was the case during Paul's time. The Church is not united in our days. We see division, fights, false teachers and wolves in sheep's clothing. The Church harbors pride, jealousy, selfishness, lying and rudeness. Paul wrote the letter to the Ephesians to help them work through those problems. Paul names here the seven basic spiritual realities as a guide to preserve the unity of the Spirit.

1. **One body:** The first element of reconciliation and unity is 'one body.' All human beings throughout time and around the world who are truly Christians are part of the body. The picture of the body is one of Paul's favorite ways to describe the Church. All parts of the body are necessary if

the body is going to function well. Bucknell (2022) says that the concept of 'one body' means that we cannot separate ourselves from other Christians. We ought to live for one another. Our spiritual gifts are meant to be used to build up one another and not for selfish aggrandizement. This is, of course, the body of Christ in which each believer is a member, placed there at conversion by the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 12:12-31). The one body is the model for the many local bodies that God has established across the world. The fact that a person is a member of the one body does not excuse him from belonging to a local body; for it is there that he exercises his spiritual gifts and helps others to grow. We do not criticize the ear not being the eye. Each part has a unique function which is necessary for the body to function as a whole, so, rather than criticizing other people, or other Churches for not being like us, we should look at them as different members of our one body.

2. **One Spirit:** The same Holy Spirit indwells each believer, so that we belong to each other in the Lord. There are perhaps a dozen references to the Holy Spirit in Ephesians, because He is important to us in the living of the Christian life. We cannot walk in separate ways if we are led by one Spirit. There is only one Spirit and he leads us differently. The Spirit of God is the Spirit of truth and he is always calling us back to oneness in Christ. The Holy Spirit within each of us strives to get us all to live in unity with each other. When we fail, it is because we are walking according to the flesh, not according to the spirit (Romans 8:4-13).
3. **One hope of your calling:** The Christian hope is the hope in Jesus Christ. And since God does not lie, our hope in him for eternal life is a certainty. This refers to the return of the Lord to take His church to heaven. The Holy Spirit within us is the assurance of this great promise (Eph. 1:13-14). Paul is suggesting here that the believer who realizes the existence of the one body, who walks in the Spirit, and who looks for the Lord's return, is going to be a peacemaker and not a troublemaker. Our hope is in Christ. We all hope in the Messiah to redeem us from our sins. Therefore, to be united in Christ, we ought to keep focus and not to drift away from our hope.
4. **One Lord:** If we serve one Lord, we will not be getting orders from our Master to be in disagreement with each other. His command will not contradict or cause disunity among his servants. We serve the same master,

the Lord Jesus Christ. Our allegiance are all to him. We may be from different denominations and have different theological inclinations, but we all have one Lord to follow. This is our Lord Jesus Christ who died for us, lives for us, and one day will come for us. It is difficult to believe that two believers can claim to obey the same Lord, and yet not be able to walk together in unity. Acknowledging the lordship of Christ is a giant step toward spiritual unity among His people. The only way disunity occurs is when we disobey our Lord and master, Jesus Christ.

5. **One faith:** All Christians have been saved in one way only through faith. We are not Christians by birth but by faith alone. There is one settled body of truth deposited by Christ in His church, and this is “the faith.” Jude calls it “the faith which was once delivered unto the saints” (Jude 3). The early Christians recognized a body of basic doctrine that they taught, guarded, and committed to others (2 Tim. 2:2). Christians may differ in some matters of interpretation and church practice; but all true Christians agree on “the faith” –and to depart from “the faith” is to bring about disunity within the body of Christ. Our faith is in the finished work of Christ on the cross. Faith is the gift of God made available to us by grace.
6. **One baptism.** There are different modes of baptism performed by various Churches but here Paul is referring to the baptism of the spirit not water baptism. Bucknell (2022) speaks of the process of repentance and on how each of us has died to ourselves. Having died to ourselves, we are then baptized into one body in the name of Jesus Christ. We become one body through spiritual baptism. Since Paul is here discussing the one body, this “one baptism” is probably the baptism of the Spirit, that act of the Spirit when He places the believing sinner into the body of Christ at conversion (1 Cor. 12:13). This is not an experience after conversion, nor is it an experience the believer should pray for or seek after. We are commanded to be filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18). As far as the one body is concerned, there is one baptism – the baptism of the Spirit. But as far as local bodies of believers are concerned, there are two baptisms: the baptism of the Spirit, and water baptism. The Holy Spirit indwells the washed believer and provides him/her with the power to have victory over sin.
7. **One God and Father.** We are not divided by race, class or gender because we are children of one father and God. The Christian in Asia is a brother to

a Christian in Africa. Paul likes to emphasize God as Father (Eph. 1:3, 17; 2:18; 3:14; 5:20). The marvelous oneness of believers in the family of God is evident here, for God is over all, and working through all, and in all. We are children in the same family, loving and serving the same Father, so we ought to be able to walk together in unity. Just as in an earthly family, the various members have to give and take in order to keep a loving unity in the home, so God's heavenly family must do the same. The "Lord's Prayer" opens with "Our Father" – not "My Father." The oneness mindset should shape our belief, thought pattern, decisions and way of life.

Paul is quite concerned that Christians do not break the unity of the Spirit by agreeing with false doctrine (Rom. 16:17–20), and the Apostle John echoes this warning (2 John 6–11). The local church cannot believe in peace at any price, for God's wisdom is "first pure, then peaceable" (James 3:17). Purity of doctrine of itself does not produce spiritual unity, for there are churches that are sound in faith, but not sound when it comes to love. This is why Paul joins the two: "speaking the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15).

According to Flemming (2022) people in the Church come from various racial, cultural and social backgrounds, but they must not allow these differences to spoil the unity that God has created in the Church. After all, they are indwelt by the same spirit, they own the same Jesus as Lord and they are children of the same heavenly father. As members of the same body, the Church, they have experienced the same baptism, share the same faith and look forward to the same salvation (4-6).

The Love of Christ, Uniting and Reconciling the World

In the atonement theology of Isaiah, the restoration of a healthy relationship between God and sinful humanity is brought about by the paying of a very great sacrifice. As Isaiah 53:5 puts it, 'upon him [the suffering servant] was the punishment that made us whole'. Although the text refers primarily to the restoration of peace and reconciliation between God and sinful humanity, the same is often true in human situations where genuine and lasting peace could only be achieved by true sacrifice by the parties involved in the true spirit of give and take.

Johnson, A.J. (2012) opines that Christian faith is frail and impotent vessels apart from the underlying reality of God's being. For instance, the claim that 'we know love by this, that [Jesus Christ] laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another' (1 Jn. 3.16) has meaning only because of the underlying

belief that Jesus Christ is the Word of God become flesh (Jn. 1.14), and that in doing so he reveals God's love for the world (Jn. 3.16), a love which ultimately rests in the very being of God himself: 'God is love' (1 Jn. 4.7). The core of the Christian faith rests on its claim to know God, to know his being – in this act.

Bronneus (2003) opines that the term reconciliation has strong religious connotations. In Christianity, reconciliation between God and humanity through Jesus is a fundamental theme. Historically, within Christianity there has also been a division between Eastern and Western traditions regarding the view of sin and thus also of reconciliation. The Eastern Orthodox Church considered sin from a relational perspective, emphasizing the breaking of loving relations between God and man or between human beings. Western Christian traditions (Catholicism and Protestantism) were in the past more influenced by the Roman legal tradition and focused thereby on the legal dimension of sin – seeing sin mainly as disobedience of the law of God.

Today, however, the Western traditions have shifted from this preoccupation with normative moral rules to considering sin and reconciliation from a relational point of view. One approach to the Bible's concept of justice is that it can be seen as interpersonal reconciliation, which focuses in particular on the issues of compassion, mercy and forgiveness. Interwoven in the theological context of reconciliation is also the notion that human justice is limited. Justice can never achieve full retribution for the victims, especially not for the dead, but the theologian hope is that victims will be vindicated after death. Reconciliation is from this point of view seen as the "ultimate fulfillment of justice", requiring forgiveness. God is in the business of reconciling man to himself and expects man to be an agent of reconciliation and peace. That is the idea of Vorster which he revealed in this lines:

Christians are called upon to do good to all people and to love the enemy. They have to be the promoters of peace in society. As the 'salt of the earth' and the 'light of the world' they have to be agents in the formation of a new humanity. Seen from this angle, the doctrine of reconciliation has indeed social implications and public theologies are correct in their promotion of reconciliation in the public domain (Vorster 2018, p.6).

Christianity promotes unity and reconciliation through the love of Christ. We are united in faith and in love. Jesus loved men and women, all manner of people not minding the race, occupation and class. His love saves, clothes the naked, feeds the hungry and fight for the people. Jesus made friends with sinners, tax collectors,

the sick etc. He never fought with anyone and never asked anyone to carry a sword.

Conclusion

The power that Christ bequeaths the Church is to unite Christian denominations with one another, and also to unite races and nations, different portions of that common wealth of nations and different classes within our own nation. Christianity can unite men. We have a special reason for considering our relations to one another as members of Christian bodies, with regard to the matter of unity not minding colour, culture and class. Unity in Christ is loving one another regardless of our differences. The early Church after the ascension formed a fellowship bound together by faith in their common Lord, by the confident hopes with which that faith has inspired them, and the new view of life and its duties which they have acquired.

They act as moral agents in many spheres such as politics, education, business, et cetera and in all of these they have to promote social cohesion and peace. They have to enhance the reconciliation they experience in the exemplary church and resonate the prophetic testimony of the church in this regard in all their spheres of life. Christians. The Church ought to focus on what makes us one and not on our differences. Focus on the things we have in common. There will never be peace and reconciliation if we continue to focus on our differences.

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