

Our Hope for Biblical Reconciliation

Reflections on the AU School of Theology Mission Statement

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As expressed in the proposed mission statement for the School of Theology, it indicates the faculty's resolve "to form women and men at the graduate level for the ministry of *biblical reconciliation*." As are most terms in popular usage, reconciliation possesses a linguistic range of meaning which can convey a variety of denotative and connotative connotations (e.g., we reconcile our checkbook at the end of the month or attempts at racial reconciliation between different ethnic groups). To further indicate what we intend to denote in its usage, we have added the adjective "biblical" to delimit its understanding. We view biblical reconciliation as a holistic descriptor of the church's promise and purpose into which God calls us. Reconciliation, as a biblical construct, is a term used within Scripture to indicate the restoration of humankind to a positive relationship with our Creator, thus ending the estrangement and enmity between humanity and God. It is imperative to remember that the New Testament never speaks of God being reconciled to us, for it is humankind who is estranged. God is always portrayed as the active partner who in love comes to reconcile us. Because of human sinfulness, the relationship between God and creation was marred, with death as a result. In the experience of death, one encounters the ultimate rupturing of relationships with others. (Yet, even in the narrative of Genesis 3, grace is also present and must be acknowledged: the stated punishment for violating God's instructions was to be death, which does eventually come, but only after God makes clothing for the couple and assures them of life and continued procreation.) This left humanity not merely uninterested in the creator God, but actually as God's enemies (which bespeak a more active opposition to the divine) and rightly alienated from our Creator. To overcome this alienation, God bears the pain and cost of restoration by uniting us with Jesus Christ. Drawing an inference from the references to God's love for sinners concretely enacted in Christ's death and resurrection, Paul continues in Romans 5:8-11, "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." In good Hebraic parallelism, verse 10 restates verse 9, using the metaphor of reconciliation in place of justification, while also expanding the horizon. Paul's language that we were God's "enemies" (*echthroi*) indicates humankind in active opposition to the God who is also its King. As Paul makes abundantly clear earlier in Romans 1-3, humanity has turned from the worship of the true God to worship of false idols. In this act, we seek to replace the true God with gods of our own making and who serve our idiosyncratic purposes. Into this self-imposed void, God sends the Son to bring us back into relationship with God and to free us from the approaching divine wrath: God has acted to take those who hated God and bring them back into positive relationship with God's self. This is at the heart of Paul's claim in 2nd Corinthians 5:18-19: "Now all these

things are 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.” God does this through our incorporation into the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit (cf. Romans 8), which calls forth new forms of life that are in accordance with our new identity in Christ Jesus. Accordingly, in our opinion, biblical reconciliation is both the privilege and the burden of the church that we seek to serve through the faithful preparation of fellow servants and leaders through whom God will guide God’s church.

The destruction of relationship between humanity and its Creator has not only impacted the divine-human relationship, but likewise it leads to the ongoing lack of relational integrity between fellow humans. As such, we require not only reconciliation with God but as well with other humans, for God created us not in isolation but as relational creatures. As Paul suggests in Ephesians 2:14-17, it is expressly in the cross of Jesus Christ that the hatred between humans (in this instance between Jews and Gentiles) is definitively overcome. In this divine act, humankind is brought into the one body of Christ and thereby made one. Kevin Vanhoozer portrays this new reality under the rubric of “Exhibiting Reconciliation.” The church “witnesses in its corporate life to the redemptive act and purpose of God, not only to what God was doing in Christ *but to what that action brought about..*” Vanhoozer continues, “As a theater of reconciliation, the church both proclaims what God has done in Christ and practices what it preaches...The church does not have to achieve reconciliation so much as display and exhibit the reconciliation already achieved through the death [and I would add the resurrection and ascension] of Christ.”¹ Toward that end, the church is to embody the new reality definitively enacted in Jesus Christ, even though its full embodiment will only occur in the *eschaton*.

As a holistic category, furthermore, reconciliation bespeaks of the full restoration of humanity even with the created order. As Isaiah 65:25 envisages, eventually even animals will live in restored harmony one with the other. Furthermore, in Revelation 22:2’s vision of the *eschaton*, the trees even “bring healing to the nations.” This is predicated upon God’s work in Jesus Christ, for as Paul expresses in Colossians 1:19-20, “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.”

Miroslav Volf, in his work *Exclusion and Embrace*, rightly warns against attempts to impose systematically some earthly version of final reconciliation, for this is wholly the project and domain of God alone.² Our attempts to impose this understanding on others would amount to the denial of our belief in its veracity. That which we seek to be and to engender in our students is not this ultimate goal, for only the Spirit of God can and will fulfill this *telos*, but a space where those reconciled to God in Jesus Christ through the Spirit’s agency can take up our own lives as those so reconciled and explore the new form of life God has enacted in Jesus Christ and

¹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: a canonical linguistic approach to Christian theology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2005), 434-435.

² Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: a Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 125 ff.

by grace calls us into in our shared relationships. It is in this manner that we endeavor to form our students for the ministry of reconciliation.