

ROOTED AMONG THE BROKEN:
A CHRISTIAN REFLECTION ON RECONCILIATION

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INTRODUCTION

Christ is like a great jazz trumpeter. Christ is playing a tune, a song of love, and longing, and desire for us. And we are like a cell phone that rings discordantly, and threatens to ruin the whole of this coruscating creation. And Christ pauses. There is a moment of dramatic tension, and grief, and anger, and loss, which we could call judgment. And then slowly, painstakingly, but eventually thrillingly and joyfully, Christ weaves us back into the improvised melody until all is resolved and in harmony forever.

—Samuel Wells, *Out of This World*¹

This essay attempts to lay out a particularly Christian vision for reconciliation. Reconciliation is a trendy word, often being proclaimed without material rootedness as a way to help us mask the world's tragedy with our claim that things are actually getting better. Chris Rice and Emmanuel Katongole put it simply when they say this about the work of reconciliation: "*The way things are is not the way things have to be.*"²

In Matisyahu's epic song *One Day*, he paints a grandiose picture of the world drawing on his deepest hopes for humanity: "One day we will all be free, and proud to be, under the same sun singing songs of freedom."³ This prophetic look into the future may resonate with you, or it may signal red flags of yet another false witness to a promised brighter future that may never happen. Maybe you are like me and

¹ Duke Chapel, "Sunday Service - 11/22/2009 - Samuel Wells," YouTube, streaming [http](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dx9en5GoVG4) video, 1:20:52, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dx9en5GoVG4> (accessed April 4, 2009).

² Katongole, Emmanuel and Chris Rice, *Reconciling All Things: A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace and Healing* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 13.

³ Matisyahu, *One Day "Light,"* Sony Music Entertainment, 2009.

feel like some days you could flip a coin to decide your outlook. In any case, it is important to note Matisyahu's social location to grasp a deeper understanding of his lyrics. He is an American Hasidic Jew, which should shed light on the use of a word like "freedom." For a Jew, and for a Christian, to be a slave to God is to be free, a reality much different than the individualistic influence embedded in American neo-conservative ideology. Essentially, what Matisyahu is hoping for is humanity's return to who and how we were supposed to be, a collective community of radical love reflecting their God who draws intimately close to the brokenness of the world.

One truth on which we may have a unanimous agreement is the current division so pervasive in the human experience. We are at conflict with nations and "terrorists." We are at conflict with races, neighbors, classes, relatives, genders, spouses, nature, sexual identities, and religions. We are, most destructively it seems, at conflict with ourselves. There seem to be worlds competing for our allegiance. If you believe there is an ultimate reality, we may say the competition is really between stories that contend to shape our imagination of that reality. For Matisyahu, our division is a sign of bondage. We have immersed ourselves in the wrong stories, and the consequence continues to be great. We need reconciliation, not as a goal, but as a way of life.

I must confess, I feel overwhelmed as I think about writing an essay on reconciliation without the resume of so many who have worked tirelessly for years living among the deep recesses of broken lands, broken people, and broken relationships. I only hope I can communicate their influence and stories well

enough, that you may find your way to the common spirit, embodied by all whose hopes for a reconciled humanity take them to places that most of us would never go, trusting that the great jazz trumpeter will indeed resolve the melody and, as Samuel Wells puts it, “Those are the safest hands we will ever know.”⁴

JESUS’ KINGDOM VS. PILOT’S KINGDOM

A tired old world has ended, an exciting new one is awaiting recognition.

—Stanley Hauerwas, *Resident Aliens*⁵

Recently I spent time with an intentional community of young Mennonites in Pittsburgh. We sat on the porch of their house and spoke of community, sacrifice, friendship, and alternative lifestyles peculiar to the status quo which Walter Brueggemann calls the “royal consciousness.”⁶ One brother who had lived in Pittsburgh shared a story about a man he met years ago that has become his own local picture of reconciliation. As the story goes, this man felt deeply burdened by the racial violence burgeoning around him. Instead of writing a compelling book, running for public office to fix brokenness from Capitol Hill, or joining most of us on a one way suburban flight, he decided to fall in love with a community the rest of Pittsburgh had rejected and ignored. He was young, talented, had the skin color that does not offer much less than the entire world at your fingertips, and he decided to do possibly the most countercultural act a young white American can do today: He

⁴ Wells, “*Sunday Service – 11/22/2009 – Samuel Wells.*”

⁵ Hauerwas, Stanley and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: A Provocative Christian Assessment of Culture and Ministry For People Who Know That Something Is Wrong* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 15.

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 81.

rooted himself with a people, planted himself with a simple vision to live for friendship in a community feared and disinherited by the dominant culture.

When I asked my new brother why this man would live such a strange existence, he responded with this simple proclamation: “He was a Christian.” Now, this certainly was not a statement of religious superiority, but rather a step toward understanding: Who is this Jesus? It was a story of someone who followed Christ out of the “tired old world” and into a way of life that birthed a kingdom “not of this world” (John 18:36).⁷ In this new world, Christ is King, a radical truth indeed.

We may pass over a phrase like “Christ is King” as a fluffy theological statement with no bearing on our task of reconciliation. However, if we can discover that our theological convictions undergird almost everything we do, it becomes the fundamental task of reconciliation to articulate this fresh reality called “the kingdom of god” (Mt. 19:24), and how it affects our way of living not responsibly, but faithfully in the world. Indeed, this is not a mere attempt for individual salvation. The kingdom of god is the proclamation that a shift has occurred at the foundations of our existence and the world no longer works the same way.

A claim that Christ is running the world is a threat to those who would like to run it for their own benefit. Jesus runs the world by being born into a homeless family, soon becoming a refugee, living a precarious existence, eating with sinners, lepers, and tax collectors, and finally being executed by the very world he loved and

⁷ All Scriptural references are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

suffered for next to thieves and rebels. How strange for a King to choose to proclaim the beginning of this new Kingdom in this way.

It is important, I think, to see the dichotomy of worlds Jesus uncovered so vividly, the way of understanding and living as a community in the midst of this dichotomy that he seemed to think had eternal significance for this world, his followers, and the work of reconciliation. It is when we are able to articulate these two competing stories that we start to understand the root of our conflicts. It is true we see conflicts focused on race, class, gender, and other classifications. It is also true that undergirding all of these manifestations of division are the two worlds, one ruled by God, the other ruled by empires. This makes the work of reconciliation a slow, painstaking, but eventually a thrilling and joyful task.⁸

You may ask what is so thrilling and joyful about an empire that must crush this preposterous claim that Christ is King to continue its self-gratifying rule? It is here we uncover in more chilling depth what a Christian vision of reconciliation may look like. Prevailing visions of reconciliation have done a large disservice to the word by articulating inadequate visions and false hopes about the way things could be. In some cases, reconciliation is synonymous with a “can’t we all just get along” mentality. In other cases it is similar to a retributive system that knocks the mighty off their thrones and punishes them for the crimes so routine to their rule. Both of these systems are not all bad. Certainly we hope for a day when we can see each

⁸ Wells, “*Sunday Service – 11/22/2009 – Samuel Wells.*”

other as truly human. We also see there are consequences for a life of greed and exploitation. They simply are not the nature of this new Kingdom.

The dominant theme, however, in both prevailing visions of reconciliation ignore a lifestyle that looks like Jesus. Certainly we can say, since Jesus died for the whole world, that he loved even his enemies. However, the gospels show his relationships with the powers were less than cordial. Through solidarity with the poor, Christ made the division between oppressor and oppressed more visible. More than retribution, a restored relationship through being awakened to oppression was partly the goal of this act. Thus, reconciliation is impossible apart from authentic relationships on the margins. Indeed, reconciliation *is* the friendships we make when we step outside our comfort zone and into the places where the Kingdom of God is found.

We will fool ourselves, however, if we think these friendships will be marked by peace, serenity, and sunshine. Jesus' embodiment of hope and reconciliation in the midst of a world ruled by empire was marked by chaos and suffering. It is strange to think about following the Prince of Peace into a life so chaotic. It is strange to think that the ones who live most intentionally seeking peace and reconciliation seemingly find the least of it. Unless, of course, Christ is King. If Christ is King, no longer are our definitions of peace and reconciliation defined by the peace of Rome, which says "eat, drink, and be merry" (Luke 12:19). Jesus' peace is defined by stories of dry bones being breathed back to life in the valleys of this world. Jesus' peace is defined by stories of true fasts, of good creation, and of God's

faithful dwelling among the world's most vulnerable people. Jesus' peace is defined by his own taking up of his life again so that we may no longer fear the sting of death. This is true reconciliation. The slow, painstaking, but eventually thrilling and joyful journey we are invited into not as emperors, but as followers.

IN CONCLUSION: UBUNTU

A self-sufficient human being is subhuman. I have gifts that you do not have, so, consequently, I am unique—you have gifts that I do not have, so you are unique. God has made us so that we will need each other. We are made for a delicate network of interdependence.

—Desmond Tutu, *God's Dream*.⁹

In conclusion, it is important to remember that life is not all suffering. Love and understanding are rightfully sought after in the midst of our life together. While we would do well to accept the consequences of seeking reconciliation in a world run by empires, we also need a word of hope, a vision for life together that offers the rewards of rich relationships even now. It is here I turn briefly to the work of Desmond Tutu's "ubuntu theology."¹⁰ "Ubuntu" is a word of the Bantu people group in Sub-Saharan Africa that literally translates "me we."¹¹ The paraphrased translation reads, "I am because we are." It is more than a philosophy of community. It is a philosophy of identity.

⁹ Battle, Michael, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1997), 35.

¹⁰ Ibid., 4.

¹¹ Ibid., 5.

Consider a flower. A flower is created using non-flower elements of clouds, water, soil, nutrients, etc.. Without this delicate web of interdependency the flower would have no chance of survival. Similarly, ubuntu theology recognizes our need for other people for us to understand who we really are. Truly we are persons only because of other persons. In this theology, we do not lose sight of our individuality, but rather constantly understand our uniqueness as part of a greater whole that is intimately connected with everyone else. While we are individuals, ubuntu theology understands themes such as brokenness, healing, and wholeness as collective realities. If one is broken, we are all broken. We are not whole unless we are communally whole.

Desmond Tutu articulated this vision in the context of apartheid in South Africa where Christians were buying into a God who placed relative value of racial significance. It was within this material rootedness that Tutu suffered for reconciliation with restorative justice through radical love. Emmanuel Katongole offers a similar vision for reconciliation in the midst of the Rwandan genocide of 1994, where the tribal loyalties superseded religious commitments, as Christians slaughtered Christians, in a one hundred day battle that killed nearly one million people. It is in this material rootedness that Tutu and Katongole proclaim that God is working, dwelling, and saving in an entirely different way.

In a haunting account of concentration camp hangings, Elie Wiesel tells the story of a young girl being fastened to the noose. He hears the cries of his fellow

prisoners who were forced to watch: “Where is God now?”¹² Wiesel mutters to himself, “There is God, hanging on the gallows.”¹³ This is the God that is King over time. This is the God who is King over our own brokenness. The one who cannot be the spectator or the executioner, but instead chooses radical solidarity in taking on the form of a young helpless girl brutally and publicly executed in a world ruled by empires.

Let us walk in the way of “ubuntu.” What is your apartheid? What is your Auschwitz? What is your Rwanda? “I am because we are.” We are connected, and it is our task to find our place in the song, as the great jazz trumpeter orchestrates a melody much more beautiful than we could imagine. Let us turn off our cell phones, and walk faithfully, as the thrilling, joyful climax of a world where Christ is King concludes with perfect harmony, forever. Amen.

¹² Wiesel, Elie, *Night* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1972), 86.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 186.