



*what  
the  
Bible  
says  
about*

***RECONCILIATION***

"So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift."

*(Matthew 5: 23-24)*

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT RECONCILIATION was written by **Eric Gallagher** and edited by staff of the Joint Peace Education Programme of the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace and the Irish Council of Churches.

The Author and Editors wish to record their grateful thanks to Rev. Brian Lennon SJ, Rev. Dr. John Morrow, Rev. Peter Briscoe and Rev. Prof. John Barclay for their most helpful comments and suggestions at various stages of the preparation of this study guide.

First Published: February 1988

© The Irish Council of Churches and the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace.

## Contents

Foreword .....	Page 2
Paper 1: Is Conflict Inevitable? .....	Page 3
Paper 2: Reconciliation is an Act Of God .....	Page 6
Paper 3: Reconciled In Christ .....	Page 9
Paper 4: Reconciliation Between Persons .....	Page 12
Paper 5: Reconciliation and the Churches .....	Page 15
Paper 6: Reconciliation Between Communities .....	Page 18
Notes: .....	Page 21
Useful Reading .....	Page 23

Biblical quotations are from "The Common Bible" (1973 - Revised Standard Version text) published by William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., and used by permission of the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

# Foreword

by *The Rt. Rev. Samuel G. Poyntz, Church of Ireland Bishop of Connor and  
Chairman of the Irish Council of Churches (1986-8)*

and

*The Most Rev. Dermot O'Mahony, Roman Catholic Auxiliary Bishop of Dublin  
and President of the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace*

It is encouraging to discover that among the best-selling publications of the Joint Peace Education Programme of the Irish Churches has been the "What the Bible says about ...." series. Christians from different traditions have found much to help them in their understanding of peace and justice issues, and to motivate them towards common witness and service. Although the series has been developed with the Irish Churches in mind, interest in these studies has by no means been confined to these shores.

Few Irish Christians are better equipped to reflect on reconciliation than the Rev. Dr. Eric Gallagher. A former President of the Methodist Church in Ireland, Dr. Gallagher has a breadth of ecumenical experience and involvement as a reconciler at the sharp edge of Ireland's conflict. His various publications have included narrative accounts of a range of Christian involvements in working for peace and understanding, and it is appropriate that in this study he is able to lead groups into a more reflective understanding of biblical teaching on reconciliation.

We wholeheartedly commend "What the Bible says About Reconciliation" which is the fourth in an on-going series. The very existence of this series, as one of the fruits of a co-operative venture already ten years old between Irish Christians of different denominations, is in itself an indication that reconciliation is being steadily realised.

The Most Rev. Dermot O'Mahony  
President of the Irish Commission  
for Justice and Peace.

The Most Rev. Samuel G. Poyntz  
Chairman of the Irish Council of  
Churches.

February 1988

## PAPER 1

# Is Conflict Inevitable?

*Genesis 3: 1-15 ; Joshua 1; Psalm 23 ; Hosea 11-13 ; Jeremiah 1: 9-10 ; Luke 1: 50-53 ; John 10: 10 ; Romans 8: 22-23.*

The idea of reconciliation is attractive. 'If only the opposing sides could be reconciled'. 'After all, we are all brothers and sisters together'. 'The same God made all of us'. 'Why can't we agree?' This is the kind of thing that can be said by some blacks and whites in the U.S.A. or Britain, or by some Protestants and Roman Catholics in Ireland.

The Bible produces little evidence to suggest that reconciliation can ever be easy. From the very beginning it recognises the fact of division and conflict and shows that sin has the inevitable effect of separating sinners from God and from each other. What do we make of Genesis 3:15; "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed."?

Other examples seem to bear this out. Reconciliation did not figure prominently in the thinking of Moses as he planned the Exodus of the Children of Israel, despite his earlier attempts to "win over" Pharaoh (Exodus chapters 11 and 12). It was the same with Joshua (see Joshua 1 and following). Conflict and division seem to be part of the pattern of life. Even the 23rd Psalm, for all its comfort, has a touch of triumphalism about it; "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies". The Prophets were the supreme exponents of practical religion, thus Hosea, for all his insights into the love of God, recognised the prospect of Ephraim being defeated and punished (chapters 11 - 13). Similarly Jeremiah was no starry-eyed idealist (chapter 1).

And it would be a mistake to think that the New Testament has any easy answers either. The Magnificat is a great hymn of thanksgiving and praise. But inherent in it is the picture of enemies being defeated, some people being deposed and others disappointed (Luke 1: 50-53). Jesus himself saw the inevitability of conflict. We tend to forget such incidents as his instruction to his disciples if they were not received in certain towns and villages (Luke 10: 10-12), or his rather disturbing words: "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34)

What then are we to make of all these references? Does God intend wars and destruction? Is there no place for reconciliation and no hope of peace?

The Old Testament clearly shows evidence of a developing awareness of the kind of person God is. But that growing awareness never loses sight of the failure of mankind to do God's will. These basic truths are clear throughout the Bible. People were made by God for God. That means that they were made to enjoy the love and peace of God, which cannot fully be experienced in conflict. But conflict **is** a reality; mankind has failed to live up to its high destiny, and people find themselves in opposition to God and to their fellows.

Conflict, however, is not necessarily a bad thing. Just as pain encourages us to keep clear of fire or the sharp edge of a knife, so conflict can force us to face up to genuine differences, and can creatively lead us to learn more of God's will. But when communication breaks down and conflict leads to coercion, then it can be harmful. Thus when there is conflict there is always a need to search for a solution.

But is it realistic to expect to be able to resolve conflicts? Does the *inevitability* of conflict mean that reconciliation is impossible? Instinctively we say, "No? That cannot be". But are there any Biblical grounds for that instinct? Jesus made the purpose of the Incarnation plain in his memorable words: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10: 10). Abundant life, fullness of life (wholeness - Shalom: see Note 1) implies harmony and togetherness, not bitterness and enmity. Paul suggests that whatever may be our present differences, God's plan is working towards the disappearance of all that goes with division; 'We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8: 22-23). If God's plan is for full abundant life for his children, and if everything is moving towards the great fulfilment then there must be a place for reconciliation in that plan.

## Group Work

1. Collect as many Biblical references as you can which suggest that conflict is inevitable.
2. Similarly list as many as you can which suggest that humanity's high destiny is something other than conflict.
3. Note about six community or national situations where conflict seems either inevitable or incapable of solution.

## Group Discussion

1. Discuss the proposition that human failure or fault is always at the root of conflict.
2. Are there any tenable grounds for believing that reconciliation in human relationships is God's purpose?
3. What is implied in the 'full' or abundant life referred to in John 10:10?

## For Individual Reflection

Am I living the abundant life in all its implications God wishes for me to live?

Am I in conflict or potentially in conflict with any other individual? If so, why?

## Reconciliation is an Act of God

*Matthew 5: 24; Romans 5: 10-11; 11 : 13-15; 1 Corinthians 7 : 11; 2 Corinthians 5: 18-20; Ephesians 2 : 13-16; Colossians 1: 19-22*

What does the Bible say about reconciliation? When we use the words 'reconcile' and 'reconciliation', we tend to think of doing something to enable two people who have been estranged to sort out their differences and then live at peace together. Invariably the word has a human context for us.

The Bible rarely uses the word in this way. With a couple of exceptions (see below and Papers 3 and 4) the word always appears in the context of God's relationship with us. Indeed the words translated 'reconcile' and 'reconciliation' appear only in the New Testament. There is no direct Old Testament parallel. (See Note 2).

It is popular to say that the Church, and consequently its members, has a 'ministry of reconciliation'. We frequently quote 2 Corinthians 5 : 18: "God ... gave us the ministry of reconciliation". We tend to jump immediately to the conclusion that this means in the first instance a ministry of 'getting people reconciled to each other'.

But if we look at the context of the passage, and indeed if we read all of verses 18 and 19, we begin to see that the word is not used about human relationships at all: "All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation".

Clearly in this passage reconciliation is the result of an action of God. With one exception all the New Testament uses of the words 'reconcile' or 'reconciliation' occur in the epistles of Paul. The main passages are Romans 5:10f; 11:13-15; 1 Corinthians 7:11; Ephesians 2:16; Colossians 1: 19-22. The one exception is found in Matthew 5:24: "... first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift". The interesting thing, however, is that the word translated 'be reconciled' in the Matthew passage is different from the one used by Paul (see Paper 4 and Note 3).

When we look closely at the passages from St. Paul's writings listed in the two previous paragraphs, we see that all of them, with the exception of 1 Corinthians 7:11, where Paul is writing about reconciliation between a man and his wife, refer basically to the act of God, who through Christ has created a new relationship between himself and his children.

So reconciliation in Biblical teaching is an act of God which takes away our estrangement or separation from God and restores us to our oneness with him.

We are called to witness to that act: we are to be engaged in "the ministry of reconciliation". But a question remains. If you are reconciled to God and I am reconciled to God, what should be the relationship between you and me? Life is too important and the Bible is too practical for us to ignore that issue. Jesus has reminded us that entry into the Kingdom will depend on how we do the will of God. There is abundant New Testament evidence to prove that God's will entails having the Spirit of Christ towards our friends, our neighbours and our enemies (Matthew 5:44). In particular we read in 1 John 4:20 that "If any one says, 'I love God', and hates his brother, he is a liar. In other words, if I am at odds with my brother or sister, I am being challenged to get my relationship with God right.

This will be considered in greater detail in Paper 4.

### Group Work

1. Using a concordance, collect all Biblical uses of the words 'reconcile' and 'reconciliation':
2. Note as many examples as you can of the need for reconciliation between Christians.

### Group Discussion

1. What do our respective Churches mean by the phrase "The Ministry of Reconciliation"?
2. Do we give the advice 'Get reconciled' too easily or glibly?
3. Does **reparation** play any part in reconciliation?

## For Individual Reflection

Do I go to Church without being reconciled to some brother or sister?

How should I treat someone whom I wish to forgive but who does not wish to be forgiven?

Do I accept God's forgiveness without facing up to all its implications for my life?

## PAPER 3

# Reconciled in Christ

*2 Corinthians 5: 17-18; Ephesians 2: 14-16; Colossians 1: 19-20.*

We have seen that reconciliation in the Biblical sense applies to what God does for and in us. There are, however, two passages from the writings of St. Paul where the idea of reconciliation spreads over into the relationships between people. Ephesians 2: 14-16: "He is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross." The other passage is Colossians 1: 19-20: " In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross".

In the Ephesians passage Paul is writing about the relationship between peoples - the Jews and Gentiles. He sees the end of the division, or partition, between them. Enmity will disappear. The Colossians passage envisages an end to strife, and attainment of peace between created things. What is more, the goal of peace is attainable in the *here and now*. Colossians 1:20 is explicit about this "...whether on earth or in heaven .....Equally the Ephesians reference applies to the present, the here and now: "He is our peace, who has made us both one" (Ephesians 2:14).

And so Paul's teaching emphasises the act of God in reconciling us to himself but it *implies* 'reconciliation' in the sense in which the word is commonly understood.

However, it would be easy to come to superficial conclusions. These passages call for closer scrutiny, for in each of them Paul is saying an important thing. He is not at this stage writing about reconciliation generally. He says that reconciliation between people is possible when they have been reconciled to God through the cross. Jews and Gentiles are reconciled when both are 'one in Christ'. As we come nearer to Christ, we come nearer to one another. And yet there is the other side of this coin - that if we do not draw closer to each other, we estrange ourselves from God also. (See I John 4:20 and Paper 2).

Whatever else we may learn about Biblical teaching regarding the possibility or impossibility of reconciliation, in the modern sense of the word, between people and groups generally, one thing at least is clear. Reconciliation between groups of people, all of whom are 'in Christ', is a necessary consequence of reconciliation with God. "If any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5: 17-18).

If communities which claim to be Christian live in tension and mutual suspicion, something is wrong. More especially if Christian Churches, which profess to believe and practise the fullness of the Gospel which has reconciliation at its heart, suspect and do not trust each other, we should be deeply concerned.

But are we concerned? We have to ask ourselves how much we really care if our denomination, our Church, is distrustful or suspicious of some of the others. It is not enough just to say, "It's a pity!"; we need to say, "This is wrong. It is a sin!" (See Paper 5).

## Group Work

1. Using a concordance, note as many Biblical references as you can to peace being made between individuals and also between groups or nations.
2. Suggest factors that cause rivalry or conflict between Christian denominations in Ireland or elsewhere.

## Group Discussion

1. There are doctrinal differences - many of them obvious and others not so obvious - between different Christian denominations. Is reconciliation of any kind possible between them so long as the doctrinal differences survive?
2. What options are open to a denomination genuinely seeking better relationships with another which refuses to 'have anything to do' with it?

3. Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, Quakers, Moravians, Non-Subscribing Presbyterians, Lutherans, Salvation Army, Free Presbyterians and many others here in Ireland claim to be 'in Christ'. So why is there such tension and mutual suspicion?

## For Individual Reflection

I claim to be 'in Christ', In what way can I claim to be 'a new creation'? (2 Corinthians 5 : 17)

Do I personally contribute anything to the tensions existing between my Church and any other? Have I feelings of superiority or complacency, or being right and the other wrong?

## PAPER 4

### Reconciliation between Persons

*Matthew 5:9, 24, 39-41, 44; 7:21; Mark 8: 34-35; 1 Corinthians 7: 10-11; 2 Corinthians 5 :17*

We have looked at the Biblical meanings and usages of the words 'reconcile' and 'reconciliation'. With two exceptions they refer to the activity of God. The two exceptions are 1 Corinthians 7 : 10-11: "To the married I give charge, not I but the Lord, that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does let her remain single or else be reconciled to her husband) " and Matthew 5:24: "...first be reconciled to your brother and then come and offer your gift." Interestingly the word used in the second quotation is different from the ones used in all the other passages we have examined. (See Note 3).

These two passages clearly refer to relationships between people as such and not, in the first instance, between people and God. So then do they throw any light on Biblical teaching about reconciliation in the modern sense? The general thrust of the word 'reconcile' is clear enough. The Oxford Concise Dictionary has it as follows: "Reconcile: 1. make friendly after estrangement (persons one to another, person to or with another, person to oneself; .....4. heal, settle (quarrel etc)".

The two passages quoted above may seem to be the only ones in which reconciliation as such between people is mentioned. But there are others which demand attention. 2 Corinthians 5:17 makes it clear that "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation ....". And Jesus himself emphasised that Christian discipleship involves more than profession of faith: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 7:21). For the Christian, doing the will of God is "a must", not an optional extra. To know the whole of God's will is beyond all of us; but some of it is clear. The gospels leave us in no doubt what our attitude should be to other people with whom we may not be in agreement.

Christian duty is made clear in the New Testament with regard to establishing right relationships with others. Christians are to be peacemakers (Matthew 5:9) - a theme

which will be looked at in its wider sense in Paper Six. Christians are to love and pray for their enemies (Matthew 5:44). In order to create right relationships they are to do the most unlikely and unexpected things: to turn the other cheek, to give away property rather than face a law case, to go 'the second mile' (Matthew 5: 39-41). Some years ago Lord Soper gave a contemporary example of doing the unexpected when he said that the first thing he would do if the Russians came marching through London would be to offer them a cup of tea. This sounds naive, but sometimes unexpected acts can have unexpected results. 1 Corinthians 13 is almost embarrassingly clear about the kind of attitudes and actions to be expected of Christians. They are not only to do all they can to avoid bad relationships; they are to maintain and develop good ones. In some ways, the most explicit of all the commands of Jesus is found in Matthew 5:24: "Leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother This means trying to break down the barriers that separate us from others, making positive attempts to achieve trust and friendship. (See Note 4).

For the Christian, reconciliation and relationships with other people go hand in hand. This can never be a matter simply of shaking hands or verbal pleasantries. It is more than just saying 'sorry'. Following Christ in human relationships, as in everything else, is costly, very costly: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it" (Mark 8: 34-35).

### Group Work

Find examples of estrangement between New Testament Christians where misunderstanding or separation continued.

### Group Discussion

1. Discuss the reasons for the continuance of estrangement between Christians as recorded in the New Testament.
2. What positive steps should any congregation take to avoid estrangements, rivalries or 'break-aways' taking place? Is there any room for compromise?

## For Individual Reflection

Do I take offence too easily?

Do I cause offence too easily? If so, why?

To what extent am I prepared to deny myself, when it comes to seeking reconciliation with someone else?

## PAPER 5

### Reconciliation and the Churches

*Matthew 6:15; 8:11; Luke 11:4; John 15:8-14; 1 Corinthians 12: 12-27; Ephesians 5: 22-30.*

So far we have considered the issues of conflict and reconciliation and their implications for individuals, and in Paper Six we shall look at Community Reconciliation. But it is also important to look at the whole issue in so far as it affects the Church and the Churches. Those of us in Ireland have special need to do this, where the Churches, rightly or wrongly, are usually identified with the two communities which are in conflict.

What is the role of the Church and the Churches? The first obligation, transcending all political and ethnic considerations, is *to be what God intends*.

1 Corinthians 12:12-27 sets out clearly Paul's understanding of the role of the Church and the Churches. They are individually and together 'the body of Christ'. The members of that body are to be co-ordinated, to work in harmony for the benefit of each. Ephesians 5 draws comparisons with individual and family life. Verses 22-30 refer particularly to relationships between husbands and wives. Here Paul is stressing the essential harmony and unity in the ideal marriage, where the partners are to love each other 'as Christ loved the Church' (verse 25). He proceeds in verse 27 to say that Christ's self-giving was directed to one aim: "... that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing".

Whatever our views about the visible unity of the Christian denominations, all members of the Churches have to face up to some important issues. What does it mean to be 'the body' or part of 'the body of Christ'? What does it mean for the relationships between parts of that body? If the Church is to be "without spot or wrinkle" (Ephesians 5:27), is it right that the Churches should be regarded as the 'spiritual identities' of conflicting communities?

The Church is to be the community of the Kingdom (Matthew 8:11). It is expected

to be the reconciled community. If it is truly living in Christ, it will receive his power to be just that.

The Churches are called to a ministry of reconciliation (see Paper Three). Can they be credible in this role if they fail to show the same love towards each other as Christ showed to us? love is the Christian imperative (John 15:8-14). There is also the call to offer and receive forgiveness (Matthew 6:12, 15; Luke 11:4). We only make hypocrites of ourselves if we do not take seriously this passage in the Lord's Prayer.

Can the Church or the Churches justifiably and credibly call the communities to acts of reconciliation, if *they themselves* fail to act as reconciled communities?

In the light of passages like 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 5:25-28, Christians must examine very seriously the implications of phrases like "by one Spirit we were all baptised into one body" (1 Corinthians 12:13), both for their own denomination and for its relationship with the whole Body of Christ, the Church.

### Group Work

1. Suggest the major causes of division between Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches in Ireland.
2. What are the real causes of division or dissension between those Churches in Ireland which support, and those which oppose, ecumenism?

### Group Discussion

1. What words, judgements or actions on the part of Protestants do not respond to the condition of Roman Catholics with truth, fairness and love? And vice-versa. (See quotation in Question 3, below.)
2. What blame should Protestants accept for disagreements with, or separation from Roman Catholics? What about Roman Catholics?
3. In order for the Churches to be credible, it has been said, they require:
  - to acknowledge that both sides were to blame for the disagreements which have resulted in and have perpetuated the separation of many Christian communities;

- to eliminate those words, judgements and actions which do not respond to the condition of other Churches with truth, fairness and love;
- to dialogue more intensively on theology and doctrine in a way that would identify common ground and disentangle those issues which are truly theological and doctrinal from the social and the cultural;
- to follow up the social consequences of theological and doctrinal differences and attempt to ease some of them;
- to worship together;
- to co-operate on projects for the common good".

*Quoted from Paragraph 3.4.1 of "Breaking Down the Enmity" - first published in 1985, and now included in "Choose Life". (See list of Useful Readings on page 23).*

Are these the conditions of reconciliation? Are they true or partly true? If they are, what do they mean for all our Churches in Ireland?

### For Individual Reflection

Am I as outgoing as I ought to be towards individuals of other

Churches? Are my attitudes born of prejudice, ignorance, 'gut-feeling'

or conviction?

## Reconciliation between Communities

*Proverbs 14:34; Deuteronomy 5:21; Psalm 72:12-13; Amos 2:6; 4:1; 5:11, 14-15; Micah 6:6-8; Hosea 6:6; Isaiah 1:10-17; Matthew 12:25; 22: 15-22; Romans 12:18; Colossians 3: 12-17.*

So far we have considered the Biblical meaning of the word 'reconciliation', the responsibilities of individual Christians to establish and maintain reconciliation with their fellow human beings, and the need for reconciliation between the Churches.

But has the Bible anything to say about community or group reconciliation in situations where divisions, suspicions and hatred are caused by real or imagined grievances?

The well-being of any nation depends on the quality of life it provides for all its people. Proverbs 14:34 sums all up: "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people". In book after book the 8th century prophets make it crystal clear that whatever righteousness might mean in terms of relationships with God, it means right action and fair dealing in relationships between people. They took up the theme of Deuteronomy 5:21 on the importance of caring for the poor and the needy, the orphan and the stranger, for such people are a special concern of God (Psalm 72:12-13). The prophets hammered that message home: Amos 2:6; 4:1; 5:11; Micah 6:6-8; Hosea 6:6; Isaiah 1:10-17. All these passages spell out in stark clarity the conditions that either make or do not make for a healthy society - one that meets or does not meet the mind of God.

If an employer is unjust to his employee, relations between them cannot be fully right. Similarly, if basic justice is denied by a group to a minority or minorities, or, indeed, if a minority ignores the rights of the majority, right relationships between the groups that make up that nation or community become impossible. Reconciliation is out of the question because it demands a positive attitude of mind and heart from both sides of an estrangement. Irrespective of how willing the aggrieved party may be, it is impossible if the dominant party still has it in its heart to dominate. Conversely no matter how much the party in power may wish or seem

to wish for better relationships, these will be impossible if the aggrieved party is *still* aggrieved or *feels* aggrieved.

Before meaningful reconciliation can take place, there must be the willingness of all parties, but particularly the dominant one, to seek righteousness and justice. Men and women, if they are to live life to the full, must be able to make meaningful decisions with regard to their lives. Amos lays down the conditions for the good life and the communal experience of God's graciousness: they are that justice should be established 'in the gate' (Amos 5:14-15). What Amos means is that if a country is to experience justice it must find it first of all in the courts.

What of the aggrieved or minority party? Matthew 22 : 15-22 gives a clue. It tells of Jesus' attitude to the civil authorities (the Roman occupying forces in Palestine). Jesus seems to suggest that the Emperor (in other words, the State) is entitled to his lawful due from a citizen, even if that citizen is a member of an "aggrieved community" (as the Jews felt themselves to be), so long as that obligation does not conflict with duty to God.

Biblical teaching may not, indeed does not, set down detailed guide-lines about how precisely to achieve a reconciled community. It has however a great deal to say about the conditions in which a reconciled community may become possible. There are certain truths to keep in mind. They are, to sum up: (1) The majority or dominant power or party has an obligation to provide justice (Amos 5). (2) The aggrieved party has an obligation to give Caesar his lawful due (Matthew 22), although this does not prevent him seeking for another kind of society, provided he does so with due regard to God and man (3) There is no satisfying future for a divided community (Matthew 12:25)

Sometimes, however, community conflict remains unresolved. In such cases people can either abandon themselves to apathy or despair, or they can make the attempt to live with the pain of their failure to achieve reconciliation. The Christian response is surely the latter one, and in this case Christians must seek to live in "peace and reconciliation" at least on a personal level (see Romans 12:18 and Colossians 3: 12-15) while continuing to pray and work for the healing of community strife.

## Group Work

1. Compile a list of groups of whatever kind where reconciliation is necessary:
  - (a) in Ireland
  - (b) in Britain
  - (c) elsewhere in Europe
  - (d) elsewhere in the world.

## Group Discussion

1. Can a person forgive another person for injury done to a third person? For example, can a parent forgive someone who has injured his/her child? Or is forgiveness the prerogative of the child?
2. Are the Israelis morally justified in their relentless pursuit of Nazi war criminals 40 or 50 years on? Should Eichmann have been executed? Can *today's* Germans be forgiven for yesterday's holocaust?
3. Is it to be expected or possible for Irish Nationalists of today to forgive Protestants for the actions of settlers and planters centuries ago?
4. Is it really possible for a whole nation to be reconciled with another nation?

## For Individual Reflection

Do I as a Protestant/Roman Catholic feel any resentment towards the Roman Catholic/Protestant community because of things done to my community?

Do I hold any feelings of animosity against the 'other' community?

Can I with integrity encourage and talk about reconciliation in Ireland without personal participation in the political process?

## NOTES

### Note 1:

**Shalom**, the Hebrew word for peace, comes from a verb meaning "to make complete", and it indicates "wholeness", "health", "prosperity", "harmony". "Shalom" is the ideal condition of life for God's people, and it encompasses the related concepts of *justice* and *reconciliation*. In order to understand any one of these words fully, we need to be aware of the Biblical teaching on all of them. For a fuller treatment of this, see "What The Bible Says About Peace" and "What The Bible Says About Justice", both in this series.

### Note 2:

#### RECONCILIATION IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Although the word "reconciliation" does not appear in the Old Testament, the idea can be identified in a number of ways.

"A major theme of the Hebrew Scriptures is the establishment of the Covenant Relationship and the idolatry which threatened it. The "Writing Prophets" spell out the forms which this idolatry takes - oppression of the poor and social injustice - and describe the inevitable consequences in the destruction of the nation. A broken relationship with God is completely bound up with a broken relationship between people. But both explicitly and implicitly in the Prophets' message there is a call on the Covenant People to turn from idolatry and oppression to a new relationship with God and with each other. This is in so many ways a pre-echo of Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom. (See, for instance, Hosea 6:1-6; 12:2-6)

"There are also many narrative examples of how enemies were turned into friends: Abram allowing Lot to take the better land in order to avoid a quarrel (Genesis 13); Abraham's appeal to the Lord on behalf of Sodom (Genesis 18: 16-33); Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers (Genesis 45); Jonah and his unwanted mission to save the enemy Gentile city of Nineveh, etc. See also Proverbs 25: 21-22".

*(Quoted from "Reconciliation: Steps for Action" - the chapter on Biblical Perspectives by Norman Richardson. See "Useful Reading" on page 23.)*

**Note 3:**

The three New Testament Greek words translated as "reconciliation" are all compounds of the verb *allassein*, which in classical Greek meant **to change** (shape, colour or appearance), or **to exchange** (one thing for another). The most common of these compounds is *katallassein* which even before its use in the N.T. had become the characteristic word for the bringing together again in friendship people who had been estranged - to reconcile. "Katallassein" is one of the great themes in the writings of St. Paul, who always used it of the restoration of relations between God and man (except for 1 Cor. 7-11, where it is used of husband and wife). In Eph. 2:16 and Col. 1:21 Paul uses the intensified form *apokatallassein*, which stresses the completeness of the reconciliation. The verb *diallassein* is found only once in the N.T., at Matthew 5:24, suggesting the mutual reconciliation of two estranged persons. Some English translations render it as " ... **make peace** with your brother ..." The English "reconcile" is nevertheless a reasonable translation for each of these words.

**Note 4:**

In Note 1 we observed the close relationship between the Old Testament Hebrew word *shalom* (peace) and the idea of "reconciliation". In the New Testament the Greek word *eirene* (peace) includes much of the meaning of "shalom", but also the additional idea of "breaking down barriers" - or as we might say, "reconciliation". This is beautifully brought out in William Barclay's translation of Matthew 5:9 (traditionally rendered: "Blessed are the peacemakers ..."). Barclay emphasises the full sense of "eirene" by giving: "O the bliss of those who make men friends with each other." (*See also "What the Bible Says About Peace"*)

## USEFUL READING

Various pressure groups have published pamphlets and booklets which are generally available from them. These publications make interesting reading but they should be evaluated carefully. The main Churches have over the years published important reports or statements which should also be read.

The following are particularly recommended:

**CHOOSE LIFE**

(Published by An Inter-Church Group on Faith and Politics, 8 Upper Crescent, Belfast 7; 1985 - 1987)

**ALL THINGS NEW**

Ian M. Ellis (APCK 1985)

**HUMAN RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES IN BRITAIN AND IRELAND: A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE**

Edited by Sydney D. Bailey (Macmillan 1988)

**RECONCILIATION: THE WAY TO PEACE**

Pope Paul VI, World Day of Peace 1975 (available from the Irish Council of Churches)

**VIOLENCE IN IRELAND - A REPORT TO THE CHURCHES**

(Veritas and Christian Journals 1976 and 1977)

**CHRISTIANS IN ULSTER 1968 - 80**

Eric Gallagher and Stanley Worrall (Oxford University Press 1982)

**THE DEATH CAMPS AND THEOLOGY WITHIN THE JEWISH - CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE**

Albert H. Friedlander (Council for Christian-Jewish Understanding of the Diocese of London 1984).

**TAKE AWAY THIS HATE**

Ray Davey (The Corrymeela Press 1984)

**THE DILEMMAS OF A RECONCILER**

Richard K. Ullmann (Quaker Peace and Service 1963 and 1984)

**CONFLICT RESOLUTION - FELLOWSHIP BRIEFING NO. 5** Catharine Perry (Fellowship of Reconciliation 1984)

**PEACE AND RECONCILIATION PROJECTS IN IRELAND** Ian M. Ellis (Irish Council of Churches, 3rd Edition 1986)

**STEPS FOR ACTION: RECONCILIATION**  
(CFWM/NMC - available from the British Council of Churches 1987)

**RECONCILIATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND**  
Papers from a 1986 Conference (Social Studies Conference, 52a Brookstone Lane, Baldoyle, Dublin 13)

See also the article on RECONCILIATION in **THE NEW DICTIONARY OF THEOLOGY** by Joseph A. Komonchak (Collins, Gill and Macmillan)

This booklet is one of a series issued as part of the Joint Peace Education Programme of the Irish Council of Churches and the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace.

Also available are:

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT PEACE  
WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT VIOLENCE  
WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT JUSTICE

Titles currently being planned include:

What the Bible says about Poverty  
What the Bible says about the Environment

The joint programme publishes other books, packs and study guides for use in schools and churches. For full information and catalogues please contact:

The Irish Commission for Justice and Peace,  
169 Booterstown Avenue,  
Blackrock,  
Co. Dublin.  
Republic of Ireland.

**or** Peace Education Resources Centre,  
(Irish Council of Churches),  
48 Elmwood Avenue,  
Belfast BT9 6AZ, Northern Ireland.

## **What the Bible Says About Reconciliation**

This study Guide has been prepared with adult or young adult groups in mind and could be used in various ways: as a basis for Bible Study and Discussion Groups; as a classroom resource for older pupils and teachers; as a topic for an inter-church group to examine; as a general introduction to the issues for students, clergy and others. In keeping with the other booklets in this series, it has been aimed at the general reader rather than the specialist.