

Reconciliation through forgiveness and mercy

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From the beginning of mankind's history, reconciliation has been a vital topic, yet the awareness of its necessity was hardly ever as great as in our time - reconciliation between peoples, groups and individuals, reconciliation of a person with himself and primarily reconciliation of a person with God. One can speak about reconciliation in different ways: there is a political, a humanistic-sociological and a religious starting point. In this article I want to speak primarily of the biblical standpoint, of which I am deeply convinced that it can and must encompass a person's whole life and whole consciousness. Therefore it creates a permanent basis for reconciliation in the life of the individual who exposes himself to it.

What is the condition for reconciliation? I will go into two aspects: mercy and forgiveness, and how to deal with the question of guilt, on the one hand as God's offer to man and on the other hand as man's answer.

Concerning both, the life of the individual and the fate of peoples, reconciliation and its necessity is a matter of life and death. In order to understand this urgency, we must look at the word 'reconciliation' and its original meaning. The German word for reconciliation, 'Versöhnung', is related to 'Sühne', atonement. Whenever atonement is spoken of, an accusation must first have been made and the question of guilt must have been asked.

Reconciliation always has something to do with the cleansing of guilt and with forgiveness. Therefore, in order to understand reconciliation, we will first consider the question of guilt and then turn to the question of mercy; finally we will look at the nature of the ambassador of reconciliation.

What is guilt?

Guilt is a relationship aspect of fallen creation and penetrates the whole living space of men. Just as leaven penetrates dough, so is a person's whole net of relationship affected by the reality of guilt.

We understand living space as the totality of the necessary conditions of life which every person needs in order to grow optimally and develop wholly in body, soul and spirit. The development of human life depends primarily on the experience of life-affirming care. This is a pre-condition of every kind of growth, including the biological. The experience of care and relationship is much more basic and necessary for a person's life than eating and drinking.

The German word for caring, literally 'turning to', already expresses a relationship.

Guilt is the refusal to care and relate. Whenever a person is not 'turned to' another, he misuses him for his own ends. In order to get hold of life, he degrades his neighbour to an object. When I refuse to see the other as one who has the same right to life as I, but consider him only in regard to my own needs, I'm no longer turned to him. I am in debt to him; I become guilty toward him because I do not affirm him for his sake but only for my sake.

Whenever I am only devoted to myself, I become guilty. The refusal to relate can have many faces. I can actively refuse to relate to my neighbour by opposing him. But the refusal is just as real when I am indifferent toward the other because he is not interesting for me and does not serve my needs. I am guilty because I violate my neighbour's living space. Guilt always has to do with relationship and takes place in it.

Reconciliation, the atonement of guilt, must - like guilt itself - take place within relationships. Being reconciled is a dimension of relationship.

Where guilt started

Guilt entered the relationship of man to God and to other persons when he turned from God, broke off the relationship to him, withdrew trust in him, and took for himself what belongs solely to God. All guilt began here; and when the individual person does not consciously turn again to God, he remains in this reality of a broken relationship to God and thus to other persons as well.

When man lost his relationship to God in the Fall, he also lost his relationship to himself. He lost his innermost consciousness, his understanding of God's reality and of himself. He no longer knows who he is and who God is. Man lost his self-understanding and with it the feeling for his value and his living space.

The first reaction after the Fall was fear: the people hid from God. When a person no longer knows who God is and who he himself is, when he loses the reference to God's reality, he is exposed. The people became painfully aware of this and recognized that they were naked. They realized that they had lost the knowledge of their own reality and the reference to themselves. Thus they lost their identity.

They were ashamed because they realized that they were naked. Loss of identity, self-esteem and ability to relate leads to shame. Using creation, God himself scantily covered man's nakedness. To the present day we are still obtaining life from creation, from creaturehood, as a substitute for the true, eternal life from God: We rejoice in nature, in familiar friends, lovely homes, good food, all aspects of this transient creation. But whatever life we obtain from creation, it will one day pass away with it; only what each person has lived in Jesus remains eternally.

Man was able to continue living only because other life was sacrificed for him. Animals died in his place in order to cover his nakedness. This fact found further expression in the old covenant's sacrifices; they themselves were an indication of him who would one day come to bring back the true life. This sacrifice continues in all relationships. If for example father and mother didn't sacrifice and give away their lives daily, then their children's bareness and helplessness would not be covered. The children would not find life, they would remain abandoned in naked fear and would ultimately die. Up to the present day, nakedness can be covered only if life is given and shared.

Instead of remaining in a relationship to God and trusting him, man preferred to turn to himself and make himself the measure of all things. This remains unchanged to the present day. Every alienation from God leads to fixation on self, to egoism. If God can no longer create and give people living space, as he did with the creation, then man must - in order to survive - acquire this for himself, he must acquire what behoves only God to give.

Now the struggle for survival begins on all levels, the struggle for confirmation and recognition. Here each person makes himself directly guilty of his fellow men's lives because his struggle is always at the cost of the one or the other. The strong person infringes on the life of the weaker and deprives him in some way of his possession. In order to attain recognition, power and life, one takes or curtails his neighbour's material possibilities; impinges on his soul by humiliating, disdaining, exposing or excluding him, by simply not taking him into consideration, by ignoring him. This is also guilt.

Who is guilty?

«All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God» (Rom 3:23). All - I, you, your brother, your sister, your children, your parents...

Solving guilt

Men try to solve the problem of guilt in different ways:

1. Easiest solution

The easiest solution is ignoring guilt, not wanting to acknowledge it. But with the years it will become increasingly difficult to suffocate the cry of accusation, because the accusation in our relationships becomes ever more powerful, more vindictive and more comprehensive.

2. Philosophical solution

Guilt is accepted and explained as an integral component of our humanity. It is acknowledged and allowed to stand as the human aspect of life.

3. Psychological solution

Guilt is understood as a life-negating component of life, which one must and can remove through therapies, explanations or projections (on other people, on evil).

4. Atheistic solution

It is said: Guilt and guilt feelings arise only if one makes reference to God and believes in him.

And yet, where there is guilt and accusation; judgement cannot be circumvented in order to be rid of guilt. Justice must be spoken. Therefore we read in 2 Cor. 5:21, «God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God». God made the guiltless son of God, Jesus, to be guilt because of us. «We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all» (Is. 53:6).

God's judgement, which regulates the question of guilt, has taken place. «He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed» (Is. 53:5)

The solution to the question of guilt is no cheap thing. Where there is guilt, there must be punishment as well, according to the measure of the guilt - in this case the death penalty! «Having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross» (Col. 2:14). God himself saw to it that the accusation against us, with all further consequences as described above, was obliterated. He did away with the accusation (not just forgot it or 'let grass grow over it!'). «God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation» (2 Cor. 5:19).

The only place where guilt is done away with is at the cross. Through his substitute death (the death penalty was for us!) Jesus destroyed the accusation. In this place every person's guilt is solved. At the cross we recognize that we all, without exception, are guilty. Here every stone which we had picked up to throw at another falls from our hand; here every person is freed from himself and his claims, from his demands for justice and from his accusations against himself and his neighbour.

Love grows from the experience that I was and am truly guilty; that I had no thoughts of salvation, either for myself or for others, but only judged and accused; or that I was indifferent to all suffering, to others' need; and I was then forgiven. It is a matter of confessing my guilt before God, as in Ps. 51, «Against you I have become guilty through my attitude and my thoughts, for you are a God of life, of forgiveness, a God of love. You went to the cross to bear the guilt and the need of man. I, on the other hand, am always judging. I take other's living space, put down people and expose them in the hope of looking better myself, so that my guilt and need is not so visible.» Thus I become guilty toward God, then toward my neighbour and myself.

I can change absolutely nothing of this guilt's reality in my life, nor the necessity of recognizing, confessing, and asking for forgiveness. The only thing which remains for me to say is, «Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner». This is the only attitude which leads to forgiveness.

Love grows out of the basic and then the daily experience that God forgives me; God's kingdom begins to spread in me.

Granting forgiveness

«... but if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins» (Matt. 6:15).

Forgiveness is the pre-condition for reconciliation, the key to unlock the prison door of enmity and hate, of loneliness, darkness and inner poverty. This leads people to the light, to freedom, hope, and a new beginning.

Forgiving means giving up the accusation, renouncing compensation, releasing people from the accusation, no matter how justified it may be. Because I have experienced God's mercy, I can and should be merciful to my neighbour. Because I myself was released from the accusation, because I have experienced freedom from punishment and judgement and can begin anew every day, I am called to daily release anew those indebted to me, whom I have a reason to accuse, so that they can also begin anew, so that something new can come about in their life, so that whole relationships can grow and the hope of change awakens anew every day. Therefore Jesus said to Peter, «Not seven times, but 77 times you should forgive», in other words without limits grant a new beginning every day, always hoping for a turn-around.

God's character becomes most clearly visible in our lives in the attitude of forgiveness; God's kingdom shines brightest here. God always creates salvation, healing and liberation. The devil, on the other hand, accuses, enslaves and destroys. If a person does not forgive and set others free from negative pictures and experiences, if he holds fast to accusation and judgement, he identifies himself with the accuser - and that is not God! If a person is not willing to set others free from accusation, God's love can never really spread in his heart, and the message of reconciliation remains strange to him. Even the mercy he has experienced from God will be lost, and darkness will return.

Reconciliation takes place quite easily by confessing guilt in order to let oneself be forgiven and in order to forgive.

Mercy leads to reconciliation

Being reconciled means being open before God and one's neighbour, without accusing or hiding anything.

Reconciliation is not theoretical, it is not an absolution for the confession of some sins. It is the complete restoration of relationships and lays hold of a person's whole being, on all levels of his life.

Mercy lived concretely creates this space for reconciliation and for change on all levels of a human life. This mercy is not emotionally motivated help from the position of the stronger toward the needy, in order to bring relief as quickly as possible. Mercy means stepping into a person's need, darkness and suffering. I do this by building a relationship to him and by personally participating in his life. This is possible only if I can endure his suffering and with my faith and my hope create room for him to turn around, to repent, to be healed and restored. This kind of mercy creates room for a person to find the way back to God, to himself, and to his brother. This is true for both the victim and the wrong-doer.

Of course it is easier to show concern and mercy to the person who suffers wrong, for his life was destroyed by evil in some form of violence, wrong, or humiliation. The understandable results are bitterness, accusation, refusal to forgive, insistence on restitution, and hate. And yet these results block a person's return to life. They make restoration, healing and true reconciliation impossible. Living as an ambassador of reconciliation now means creating for a wounded, bitter person room for healing, for release from bitterness, hate and accusation through concern, through love, through weeping with the weeper, it means leading him out of his prison of loneliness, where his suffering has bound him fast.

It is not always easy to extend such mercy to victims. Soon enough, very emotionally-based mercy will die away because the ambassador or reconciliation is often first made the goal of dammed-up aggression, rejection and bitterness. But in the merciful attitude of reconciliation it is possible to bear this without breaking off the relationship. An ambassador of reconciliation waits, prays, suffers and continues to speak hope and a new beginning into such a life.

But what about being merciful with the wrong-doers? Can one be merciful toward those who in our eyes consciously do evil, consciously practice violence, humiliate others, take goods, slander and speak negatively about others, spread hate and destruction, consume others' lives like beasts their prey?! Is mercy appropriate when one meets naked guilt, when people are apparently in the grip of evil from within, and one has the impression that they have consciously given themselves to evil?! Should one even build relationships to people who with no apparent guilty conscience are proud that they have assaulted and destroyed others?! Should one turn to such persons when anger, contempt, revenge or even hate are the first feelings which arise?! It is exactly here that God's kingdom differs from the natural world: God offered us reconciliation while we still scorned, ignored, ridiculed, denied, or even fought against him and rejected his love out of arrogance and pride. Jesus even named Judas, whom he knew would betray him, his friend. Those were no empty or ironic words. With this, Jesus wanted to give Judas room to turn around, like another betrayer who was able to turn around and later became an apostolic prince: Peter.

We can live mercy toward wrong-doers, which may sound strange in our ears, only if we keep two facts before our eyes:

First, the reality of our heart. «There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one. Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing

and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know. There is no fear of God before their eyes» (Rom. 3:10-18). We must recognize that we really would be capable of the same as any terrorist when we come under the influence of hate. It is not our reward, but mercy, if we are not devoted to evil in the same way!

Second, God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezek. 18:23). He wants every godless person to turn around and live. Every person is his creation, created to know and love him, the living God, of whom the prophet Isaiah said, «But your are our father» (Is. 63:16). Through the Messiah Jesus every person can come home to the father and there experience life. Since the substitute death of God's son, since Israel's God gave his own heart in his son out of love to his creation, the question of righteousness and justice no longer passes through the courtrooms of this world but rather through the torn heart of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Evil is no longer fought with its own weapon: hate against hate, violence against violence (an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth). In order to save all men, God decided to show mercy to the wrong-doer. As long as the wrong-doer lives, he always has the possibility of turning back.

Of course evil must be unmasked and judged. Of course the ambassador of reconciliation can only reject and hate evil, violence, lies, denial, hate, pride and contempt. If there is anything we should hate, then it is evil, first in our own life and then in other's lives as well. However, the kingdom of God differentiates between the sinner and sin, between the person imprisoned by evil and evil itself.

Unfortunately, not everyone will accept reconciliation or take hold of the outstretched hand, turn about and turn away from evil, but as long as a person lives, there is hope from God's side, because it is written, «Hope does not disappoint us» (Rom. 5:5).

By being merciful toward the wrong-doer, an ambassador of reconciliation will experience reconciliation's price in all of its pain and in all the darkness.

Much effort is expended in order to bring reconciliation on a purely human level. But when we exclude God, who alone has the right to remove guilt from the centre, then genuine reconciliation remains a utopia which at best can only be a temporary solution to a conflict. Every solution to conflicts it to be welcomed. However, a person can never grant genuine reconciliation because he would have to take the guilt on himself. He would have to pay the price of the guilt and give up the claim to his own life, i.e. die, because life always stands against life.

In general, people try to limit conflict and dam it up as well as possible. But even this has its price. The costs are divided as evenly as possible among all the parties involved so that no one loses face, no one loses his self-esteem or is seen as a loser. So a compromise is found, but the roots of the conflict are not dug out. The conflict is only dammed in. It can break open again any moment. A certain margin for action is created with agreements, this margin limits the individual's claims and lays them fast in a contract. This constricts. Reconciliation, on the other hand, gives space because one can let go and set free, no one must be held responsible.

On the basis of these considerations, one can ask whether reconciliation is possible between nations, which as states exclude God's reality. In political and legal areas, compromise is the only way to limit guilt. However, a compromise on the national level must be followed by reconciliation on the personal, mutual level of relationships; otherwise the compromise will not last.

We want to testify to the true reconciliation in Jesus Christ, who can change hearts.

Ambassadors of reconciliation

Only a person who has himself experienced reconciliation and lives in it can pass it on to others. According to 2 Cor 5, the pre-condition for this is becoming new - no less! «Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf, 'Be reconciled to God'» (2 Cor 5:17-20).

Even as Christians we must continue to ask ourselves: Do I experience this newness in my inner person? Is reconciliation a reality in my life? Is there still accusation in my life toward God, my neighbour, family, friends, congregation? Do I experience God's justice in daily life? Do I have a place where I feel completely protected and safe, no matter what the circumstances? Do I still have to struggle for my life? Do I live in peace?

People who are completely in Christ have experienced reconciliation. Through Jesus they were reconciled with the Father, with themselves and with their neighbour. A person who has been reconciled with God is in a restored, healed relationship to God. A person who has been reconciled with himself has a healed relationship to himself. A person who has been reconciled with his neighbour is in a healed, genuine relationship to him.

It is not a matter of first having taken all the steps from recognition of one's own guilt, through forgiveness, to the experience of righteousness and peace; this will never be the case. For God it is enough that we are willing to be sincere in our thoughts, words and deeds, and he will allow us to grow into his reconciliation. The kingdom of God will grow up in us. «The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all the seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches» (Matt. 13, 31-32).

Every person who has experienced reconciliation in his own life is an ambassador of reconciliation. His life should become a place where people come to know God's nearness and care, where they can experience the solution to the question of guilt and also life in righteousness and in God's peace in body, soul and spirit. The life of a reconciled person should be like this tree which offers shelter, protection and refuge. «Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect» (Matt. 5:48). These are neither empty words of Jesus nor ideals which are unattainable even for the best of the best. They are to be sure unattainable for the natural man who attempts to do good from his own strength, but attainable for him who has experienced forgiveness of fatal guilt, liberation from fear, God's love, and the resurrection to a new life. This is perfection for him who can say from his heart, «I no longer live, but Christ lives in me» (Gal. 2:20).

No one can ever from within himself speak hope of change, liberation and healing to the measureless suffering and pain of a humiliated person. We are impotent. Our comfort can easily become stale. But Christ in me, he who knew suffering and bore it like no other creature, who knows hearts to their depth, creates comfort and hope through the heart of his ambassadors. He himself will create new life in the wounded person.

Still less can a person of himself bring light into the darkness of a hardened, hate-filled, proud or cowardly heart; or call to conversion and to truth; or speak hope for a new life in righteousness and peace. No, only Christ in me, who himself experienced the attack and violence of evil as no other creature before him and who overcame evil (1 John 3:8, «The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work»), only he can speak hope of conversion and change through my heart into the wrong-doer's life and bring light into his darkness; through our heart, «because God has poured out his love into our hearts» (Rom 5:5).

If not love for God and my neighbour is my motivation for creating reconciliation, then everything I do is meaningless and hopeless (see 1 Cor 13, whole chapter!). Reconciliation is not simply a spiritual thing, but has to do with the concrete way I live my relationships to other persons, whether victim or wrong-doer. God's kingdom must become visible in the way I do that.

It would be so easy to act out of identification with human emotions, to take sides, to come close to people by accepting their enemy images and sharing their aggressions, and thus draw power to act. No matter how humanly understandable this path may be, it can never be a path of God's kingdom and can never lead to reconciliation. Our struggle can never be against flesh and blood. Therefore the person cannot be our enemy; he is always one to win for God's kingdom.

An ambassador of reconciliation lives his relationships with the attitude that he is not an accuser, that he can demand a right from no one, but must also fight against no one and can be an enemy of no one. He can take no sides. Thus we will also repeatedly refuse to identify with people's negative thinking toward others or to allow enemy images to arise in us, no matter how 'justified' these may be. We will take sides only against evil.

An ambassador of reconciliation always stands in the gap which has arisen between God and man, between man and man, between peoples and peoples... If we stand wholly on Jesus' side we will discover that we have the same distance to all people, that all people are equally near us, because every person stands equally near God. He has no favorite children.

Just as God decided to let himself be spit at, despised, beaten and rejected, without turning away or breaking off the relationship (Is. 53), without giving up the hope of conversion, so it the person who belongs to him, his child, his servant, his ambassador caught up into the same reality. Therefore he must let his heart be repeatedly cleansed of accusation, bitterness and anger, in order to pray and struggle for liberation from evil for the violent and proud, for the haters and despisers. For God's sake, an ambassador of reconciliation should not allow himself to be overcome by evil, but remain steadfast with his eyes fixed on God's son on the cross. He should not stop living God's mercy toward the wrong-doer; he should offer him a hand so that he can experience liberation from evil and find reconciliation. This is the claim of God's kingdom since the coming of the Messiah Jesus.

The most demanding work of an ambassador of reconciliation is therefore the work on his own heart. I must let my heart be cleansed daily from bitterness where I was wounded, from accusation where wrong was done to me, from vulnerability, indifference, half-truth and lies, negative speech or thoughts toward others (even if it were 'justified'), from anger and aggression, distance and pride, from accusation and the demand for retribution. The list could be lengthened endlessly. Whoever want to proclaim the message of reconciliation and lead people to reconciliation must struggle for a large and pure heart of his own; for only a person with a pure heart can see God and from God's standpoint see people as God sees them.

Jesus became completely involved in the accusation and in this unholy world. He did not withdraw from rejection, hate and all mistrust. The result, the consequence of his life was death. This will be no different for a person who lives reconciliation on all levels of his life, for «the servant is not greater than his master». Whoever wants to live reconciliation must be aware of the fact that he thus steps onto a battlefield, where shots are being fired from both sides. This cost Jesus his life.

But the ambassadors of reconciliation can claim the promise for themselves,

«Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God»

(Matt. 5:9)

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