



Ted Ward on Reconciliation¹

Ted Ward

Since the downfall of ideology as the major basis of war and conflict (e.g., democracy versus communism), a deeper, older, and more sordid sort of human conflict has re-emerged: ethnic hatred. Unfortunately, numerous examples come to mind: several nations on the continent of Africa (Zaire, Nigeria, Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda, Somalia, South Africa, and so on) provide a literal showcase of raw ethnicity wherein people cannot get along with other people with language and cultural differences. The wars in Yugoslavia are religious wars, but ethnic in origin. Different ethnic groups have a third group trapped in their midst: Serbs, Croats, and others of the ethnic groups of Yugoslavia have the Muslim minority trapped in their midst. In today's Germany, Neo-Nazis are attempting to stamp out anyone who is not purely German. In England, the profound schisms between Christians and Muslims in the cities of England are at the ragged edge of out-and-out street rioting. We need not go too far from home for similar examples. We are not that far from raw racism ourselves. In fact, to understand ourselves honestly, we must understand that there is a racism endemic and historic within the American society that has indeed affected the imagery and the ideas and the willingness of Christians to make something that honors the Lord Jesus Christ out of their churches. Consider the implications of the fact that a racist and a Neo-Nazi was able, in our time, to become a serious contender for governorship.

People desperately need to be reconciled to one another; but this world has never been so lacking in skilled agents of reconciliation. If you take the Bible seriously, you have to reflect on the fact that the church wasn't even worth persecuting until after Acts 6. They were growing, but always in Jerusalem. The Great Commission said to get out to Judea, to Samaria, to the outermost parts. But they stayed in Jerusalem until after the stoning of Stephen. Acts 6 records the story of a dissension among them, an overlooking, an ignoring, a mistreatment of a minority group within the church. We so easily refer to this as the time when the church instituted deacons and from then on they had parking lots!

Luke goes to great pains to tell us that the church did something phenomenal in Jerusalem when they finally recognized that the problem in the church was their own internal neglect of people who were different. The Jews were neglecting the Greek-speaking sector within the converts, and the widows in that Greek-speaking sector were systematically being overlooked in the distribution of food to meet their needs. Because they recognized this problem and came together and did something totally unthinkable, God caused the church to prosper in altogether new ways.

In ways that are not recorded, the church got together and solved the problem by asking people *from the minority to help the majority* learn to relate effectively to the minority. Luke emphasized the significance of this action by recording the names of all seven of the deacons. Read it carefully. Every name is a Greco-Roman name! What does the process described in Acts 6 suggest about what God wants his church to be today? It is quite possible that part of our problem today is that the church of Jesus Christ has never taken seriously enough, at least in our time and in our places, the role of the

¹ Ted Ward on Reconciliation. Excerpted from an address to Christian Camping International Conference, 1992

peacemaker and the reconciler. God intends his people to be peacemakers and reconcilers. Note James 3:17-18: “But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure, then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere, peacemakers who sow in peace raising a harvest of righteousness.”

Is this perhaps our next frontier? Even as Jesus Christ reconciled humanity to God at the cross, so our task is reconciling people to God through the blood of Jesus Christ, and reflecting that reconciliation in terms of our relationships with one another. I believe that the church of Jesus Christ today could be producing a significant number of the people needed in this world to serve as peacemakers and reconcilers. Why doesn't the Christian church have a reputation in this world for doing that?

Perhaps the greatest value of Christian camping really attuned to our times is the providing of situations within which Christians can learn to be peacemakers. Consider five aspects that are important in learning to be peacemakers:

1. Learning to live with others who are different.
2. Learning to share and cooperate—in effect, learning to be an effective community.
3. Being part of a situation or place where people can trade in, even temporarily, their control-orientation, based as it is even for Christians in pride and prestige; and in exchange, adopt a strength posture based on love.
4. Gaining self-awareness and reciprocal respect: self-awareness meaning who I am, what my strengths, weaknesses, and flaws are, what my heritage is and the weaknesses in my heritage. And then a respect for others that is reciprocal.
5. Experimenting with more Christ-like interpersonal skills and attitudes. The camp ought to be a safe place to try out a slightly different persona.

We need to develop and propagate Christian attitudes and the skills of gentleness, meekness, mercy, compassion, and other qualities that are spoken of in the Scripture. Consider Colossians 3, an absolutely marvelous statement of the negatives: anger, rage, malice, slander, the things of the old life, the negative qualities of life bridged into the beauty of the virtues of love, compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. That Colossians 3 contrast of the old with the new is bridged over in an easily overlooked verse, verse 11, that describes a place where this transformation needs to happen. “Here (is a place) where there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, or free, but Christ is all and in all.” There is a place where people can move out of this old life and into the new. Where is that place? Is that place your camp? It could be.

Ethnicity. Culture. Large and slippery words. Let me give you a practical definition—not a professor's definition. These matters we're discussing are differences that divide people if they aren't otherwise reconciled. There are things about being a human being that cause other human beings to be turned off. It occurs in families; it occurs in churches; it occurs in camps and on staffs. Unless these are reconciled, these differences are usually matters that you can see, hear, or smell. Race, color, hair color, size of lips, shape of the eye, language, lifestyle, age. Differences between old and young are like ethnic problems. And then there's gender. We have to come to terms with the matter of gender in the Christian church. We simply cannot hide behind a few narrowly interpreted New Testament texts and put the issue off to the side. We have to find ways to bridge the ethnic-like differences between men and women.

I am encouraging you in the name of the Lord whom we serve, that we present ourselves more effectively as builders with him of his church. A few practical suggestions: Focus your ministry. You can't do everything. Do that which brings out the best in people. Be a learner. Don't make the same mistake twice. Be experimental. Make new mistakes! Be real. Let people feel your heart. I am trying to impress on you, not just intellectually, but as a spiritual burden, the importance, the urgency, of what it is that you are doing to build and strengthen the body of Christ. You are carrying out an important ministry. Do it in ways that reflect the righteousness, justice, and mercy of God. Do it in the strength of the Holy Spirit. Do it as the Incarnate Christ would do it. And do it well. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called God's family.