

# The Gospel of Reconciliation—Paradise Restored or God's New Deal for Sinners?

Colleagues,

I got 32.8 million references when I typed "Reconciliation" into the Google search machine just now. So I won't go there to get my data.

The term is central to two items that are on my desk this week. I'll just stick with them.

One is a "call for papers" for next year's "12th Assembly of the International Association for Mission Studies [IAMS]" beginning on this very day (Aug. 16) in 2008 in Budapest, Hungary. The Theme is "Human Identity and the Gospel of Reconciliation: Agenda for Missionary Churches in the 21st Century." I've been attending IAMS gatherings since assembly #5 (Bangalore, India, 1982), so I'm signing up for this one too. There are differing opinions—no surprise—amongst the IAMS colleagues about the Gospel of Reconciliation, and voices for the Augsburg Aha! about that reconciliation are a still small voice.

The other is an ORBIS Books 2007 reissue of Bob Schreiter's 1988 publication "In Water and in Blood. A Spirituality of Solidarity and Hope." Schreiter is a theology prof in Chicago (Catholic Theological Union), a major Roman Catholic voice in today's missiology. At least half a dozen of his books are on ORBIS's current list. One carries the title "The Ministry of Reconciliation." That has been Bob's outside-the-classroom

“real-world” work now for many years. He’s regularly on-the-road to major troubled spots in the world to practice just that ministry. The ORBIS book editor sent me the new reissue as a freebee. Doubtless there’s a message there. So I read it a few days ago. Reconciliation is a central theme here too. But it left me unhappy. So I now must read his “Ministry of Reconciliation” book to get his full blueprint. Bob presents reconciliation in the same format as surfaces in the IAMS PR for next year’s gathering.

In both cases the gospel of reconciliation comes out “too small” when compared with the Biblical original. The gist of my complaint is that the major focus for Christian mission is human-to-human reconciliation—expressed in nickel works, getting conflicting folks to stop fighting and be nice to one another. In Schreiter’s constant mantra, God’s reconciliation project is God, Christ, and now Christ’s people “staying in solidarity and hope with those who suffer . . . who struggle for a better world.” The gospel of reconciliation is God’s own “peace and justice” agenda for the world.

Though never denied, the reality of a planet-wide humanity still UN-reconciled to God never surfaces for serious attention, as though since Christ’s cross and resurrection it’s a done deal—even if multitudes around the globe (also inside the churches!) don’t trust it. The conclusion is: so now let’s get busy with intra-human reconciliation, with undoing the daily news headlines of worldwide mayhem and madness. That’s the only part of God’s reconciliation project not yet complete. In language you’ve seen before in these posts, all the attention, the hype, is on reconciliation coram hominibus (the human-to-human interface) and reconciliation coram deo (the God-and-us interface) at best gets briefly mentioned, but then bypassed in favor of the former.

A while back when the IAMS assembly info arrived, I waved my flag complaining about this to our IAMS executive secretary. a dear guy in Holland. When I read Bob Schreiter's book I saw the parallels. Namely, that THE gospel of reconciliation was getting short shrift. In Bob's book he uses specific Biblical texts to anchor each chapter. But these Biblical anchors always wind up mooring his case for reconciliation coram hominibus, and only now and then do we hear—sometimes only in allusions—of the coram deo agenda. And never that getting folks reconciled to God is STILL the center of Christian mission. But I'll hold my peace for now until I read his "Ministry of Reconciliation" volume. Since the title itself comes right out of St. Paul's magna charta for coram-deo reconciliation (2 Cor. 5), that may silence my caveats.

I did respond to the IAMS assembly promo piece when it came. So for this ThTh posting here are some thoughts on the topic.

Something like this is what I sent to the IAMS office:

*To the program committee:*

*This weekend I spent some time with a closer reading of what's come from the IAMS office re: our next year's gathering in Hungary. I was surprised (I hadn't noticed it in previous readings) that although the GOSPEL OF RECONCILIATION is 50% of the conference theme (Human Identity and the Gospel of Reconciliation) there's no reference to it in any of the subsequent prose, nor in the call for papers. Is it taken as an "of course" that "everyone" knows what the Gospel of Reconciliation is and thus no direct attention to that topic is needed? I know that you know that that is not true. Or is it that that topic is too much a conflictive "hot potato" in our diverse ecumenical group, and so we would do well not to address it directly?*

*It is surprising to me that, even though “the Gospel of reconciliation” is one center of the conference-theme ellipse (Human Identity and Gospel of Reconciliation), the NT text chosen by the conference committee to focus it never once mentions the word reconciliation. And there are classic NT texts where that term is the focus –both for what reconciliation means and for its consequences for Human Identity.*

*You doubtless know the prose for the upcoming conference by heart, but I’ll just copy some of it (from the website) to pinpoint what I’m talking about.*

*Human Identity and the Gospel of Reconciliation: Agenda for Mission Studies and Praxis in the 21st Century*

*26 for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. 27 As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, - heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:26-29, NRSV)*

*[Significant by its “real absence” is any reference to reconciliation in that Galatians text.]*

*The descriptive material in the announcement prompts these thoughts:*

*“. . . Christian faith finds its fundamental identity in a gospel of reconciliation.”*

*[Right. So first let’s ask: Just what does “gospel of reconciliation” mean in NT usage? Why is it allegedly Good News? What’s the “Bad News” that it supplants? Etc. And then*

*why not review in subsequent church/mission history the variety of views of reconciliation—even conflicting views— that have come since those NT times? I know that you know, for example, that the 16th century Reformation/Counter-reformation was at root also a debate about just what is the Gospel of Reconciliation. Why not put these cards on the table?*

*The variety of understandings of reconciliation will surface willy-nilly as we gather next year and get to discussing the second center of the conference ellipse: Human Identity. That's a given, as you too know from past IAMS gatherings. And therefore the following prose about the conference on the website comes off sounding unreal—almost platitudinous.]*

*“What is the relationship between the different, even conflicting, human identities and the gospel of reconciliation?*

*[The conflicting opinions arise already in how we read the “gospel of reconciliation.” Why not speak to that topic? Shouldn't we take a close look at the “horse” before we examine the “cart”?]*

*“Is there a human identity that supersedes all specific identities-national, religious, gender, and/or economic, etc.? How can apparently conflicting identities be reconciled?”*

*[That is NOT the primary conflict that the Gospel of Reconciliation addresses. The NT reconciliation Gospel centers in the “coram deo” conflict, not the “coram hominibus” conflict. The two are connected, of course—one the malady, the other the consequences, the symptoms, the signals, thereof. The NT axiom is: If the coram deo reconciliation agenda is ignored, any coram hominibus efforts are analogous to re-arranging deckchairs on the Titanic.]*

*“How can one achieve a wholesome self-identity that includes*

*the possibility of change and transformative mobility?"*

*["Wholesome" self-identity is never the goal of NT reconciliation, is it? Wouldn't "cruciform" identity be more grounded in THE gospel of reconciliation? Or even the flip-side of that, "Easter people identity?" "Wholesome" sounds too much like current pc therapeutic rhetoric. Some of the other terms in that sentence are what in US slang is called "boilerplate." The identity, the change, the transformation, offered by THE Gospel of reconciliation is Good-Friday-and-Easter in its format. Calling that "wholesome" (or transformative, or abetting mobility) seems to trivialize the radical NEW identity that comes with THE Gospel of Reconciliation. At the simplest level the Gospel of Reconciliation changes human identity. It bestows the identity of being God's children when once we were God's enemies.*

*"And what is the role of reconciliation as offered by the Gospel to the Christian community and by the Christian community?"*

*[If we don't specify early on in the conference that the NT Gospel of reconciliation is a coram deo agenda item, God's gift in Christ (but nowhere else that we know of) to a God-hostile humankind, then we'll be confused at best about what's offered TO as well as BY the Christian community. If the conf. committee had chosen one of the primary Reconciliation texts in the NT, e.g., 2 Cor 5, we'd at least have initial "easy" answers to get started on those "TO" and "BY" questions. Coram deo God in Christ is reconciling sinners to himself. That's the TO. That's God's offer TO the whole human race—churchly or non-churchly—in Christ.*

*The "offered BY" element is what Paul in that same 2 Corinthians 5 text calls the ministry of reconciliation, the*

ambassador's assignment "God making his appeal through us." After the initial indicative sentence ("God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself") comes the ambassadorial imperative: "Therefore be reconciled to God . . . so that in Christ we/you might become the very righteousness of God."]

"The 12th assembly of IAMS will bring together scholars of different disciplines who will share their research and their evaluation with respect to such questions. It is hoped that a fruitful cross-fertilization can be realized that might stimulate further missiological research and set an agenda for future studies and ongoing praxis. It is also hoped that churches and other religious institutions might gain fresh insights from this assembly for their day-to-day work in a world where conflicting identities seem to subvert reconciliation efforts."

[It's clear that here (and elsewhere in the conference information) "reconciliation" is seen exclusively in coram hominibus contours, the human-to-human interface, and not the God-human interface. Surely, the conf. planners don't see the coram deo agenda as irrelevant? Why then no specific attention to it? Too hot to handle? Surely, IAMS by now, in our 12th gathering, is "old enough" to be able to talk-shop about that, aren't we?]

"The goal of the Budapest Assembly will be to identify and explore ethnic, gender, political, and religious dimensions of human identity as challenge, opportunity, and obligation for Christian churches in mission, from the vantage point of scholars whose academic disciplines intersect with mission studies. Papers from across a range of intersecting or vitally related themes-such as ethnicity, race, gender, violence, poverty, nationalism, religion, ecclesiastical tradition, inner renewal, etc.-will be welcomed."

*[Why not call for papers—even better call for plenary speakers—to address Coram Deo reconciliation? And ask these speakers to ring the changes on how THIS or THAT understanding of Reconciliation shapes Human Identity? For years—at IAMS meetings for several decades and USA annual meetings of the ASM—this has been the constant subterranean debate-topic, but it never gets on the official program: Just what is THE Gospel of reconciliation, and what does it mean for Mission? Why not do it this time at the 12th assembly?]*

*Summa:*

*Dear conference planners,*

*For IAMS XII*

*Don't get us participants so focused on coram hominibus reconciliation that THE Gospel of Reconciliation (coram deo) falls by the wayside. In all the "sending/mission" mandates of the NT—Mark 16:15, Matt. 28:18ff., John 20:21, Luke 24:27—reconciliation coram deo is the clear assignment, not coram hominibus. When the former takes hold, the latter follows. When the former is ignored or "taken for granted," the latter will never happen. Should our gathering, God forbid, spend all our time on the latter and ignore the former, it will be an exercise in futility. The "New" in human identity is that Christ-connected sinners are reconciled to God. Their prior identity is "NOT reconciled to God." Or in the language cited above from 2 Cor. 5, the clean contrary indentities are "becoming the righteousness of God"—as hyperbolic as that sounds—and not having such righteousness to identify with. The difference between these two alternate God-connections qualifies all the other manifold identities in the human community.*

*Peace and Joy!*

*Ed Schroeder*

*St. Louis, Missouri USA*

P.S. To tip my hand a bit:

Luther's exegesis of 2 Cor 5 articulates "Gospel of reconciliation" as Christ's "fröhlicher Wechsel"—"sweet swap" in American slang—with sinners. The One "who knew no sin" takes our sin as though it were his own ("becomes sin for us") and—mirabile dictu—in the exchange sinners get Christ's righteousness, "become (gulp!) the righteousness of God." What a deal! What a sweet swap! "Reconciliation" is understood here not as two enemies becoming friends again, but in the marketplace sense of the term—balancing the books, "reconciling" accounts. The "froehlich" element here is that the debits of sinners are cheerfully assumed by Him who had no such debits, and his credits get offered in exchange to us who have no such credits (surely not with the deity) on our own.

The consequences of this sweet swap for human identity are manifold. One of ML's favorite ways for spelling that out was in the multiple callings—call them "identities"—that every human has by virtue of the individual historical context where God has placed us. Luther was fascinated by one of the NT's favorite terms for Christian identity, namely, "freedom." He articulated that "reconciliation-freedom" into the manifold daily individual identities each person has in family, gender, nation, vocation, social location, education, citizen, etc.

In today's world where human identities everywhere are impacted (yes, imperiled) by global economy and market forces, Luther's marketplace metaphors for the Gospel of reconciliation and the "freedom" spin-offs for daily-life identities are too good to be ignored.

But I'd better stop. That's already the 250-word abstract asked for in the "call for papers." I may just send it to the IAMS headquarters as my proposal for next year's get-together.

Peace and Joy!  
Ed Schroeder