

# What does the Bible say about reconciliation?

It is important to look carefully at what the Bible says about reconciliation. This helps to form a basis for the development work we do. This section looks at some biblical principles to help us think through why Christians should be involved in encouraging reconciliation. These principles can also be shared with Christians affected by conflict so that they can be godly in their attitudes and actions during or after conflict.

## Reconciliation with God

Our model for reconciliation is reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ.

The first chapter of Genesis tells us about God's creation. God created the heavens and the earth. God saw that what he was creating was 'good'. He then created man and woman and declared them to be 'very good'. Adam and Eve lived in God's land under God's blessing (v28). People experienced shalom (peace) with God, each other and the environment.

### Shalom

The Hebrew word *shalom* is used in many places in the Bible. It is translated into English as *peace*. The modern English definition of *peace* is an absence of tension or war. But the word *shalom* means more than that. It means a completeness and wholeness with God, with others and with creation.

However, in Genesis 3 we are told that God's good creation was spoiled by sin. The shalom of the garden of Eden was destroyed. People's relationship with God was broken. This resulted in the relationships between people, and between people and the environment being broken.

The rest of the Bible is a story of God's plan to restore his creation – to bring his creation back into a right relationship with him. Isaiah 9 prophesies the coming of Jesus. Verse 6 describes him as the 'Prince of Shalom'. The New Testament adopts the Hebrew idea of shalom as wholeness in God's presence. Shalom, or peace, comes through Jesus' death on the cross. Colossians 1:19-20 says 'For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him [Christ], and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.' Jesus brings people back into a right relationship with God, with each other and with creation as a whole. Revelation 21:3-4 tells us that in heaven, God will dwell with his people, and 'there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain'.

## Reconciliation with others

Christians should be committed to reconciling people to God. In Corinthians 5:18-20 Paul tells us that God has given us the ministry of reconciliation. He calls us 'Christ's ambassadors' to share the message of reconciliation with others. This is our call to witness to those who are not yet reconciled to God through the cross. In the Bible, reconciliation with others accompanies reconciliation with God. Our response to God's saving grace is expressed through our response to others.

The Bible shows that broken relationships are at the root of poverty, marginalisation and conflict. We are living in a world where human rebellion against God has led to self-centredness, which in turn results in exclusion, mistrust, greed and injustice. God's intention is reconciliation and community. There are many places in the New Testament where Christian unity is emphasised, and guidelines about how to live at peace with one another are given.

In the rest of this section we look at some biblical principles in order to come to an understanding about why Christians should become involved in encouraging reconciliation.

### PRINCIPLE 1 **Blessed are the peacemakers**

In Matthew 5:9, Jesus tells his disciples 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God'. Peacemaking is an essential aspect of the Christian character. Notice the word *peacemakers*. Peace has to be made. It is not something that just happens. It is interesting that our sinful nature makes us peace-breakers. This is shown in today's world as much as in the time of Jesus. Because of sin, people all too easily break the peace. This can be through large-scale wars, destructive conflict between individuals, and sadly conflict within or between churches.

People's relationship with God is restored through the blood of Christ. But in these verses in Matthew 5, Jesus is also showing concern for healing within society. He wants to see restored relationships between people, and he assumes that Christians will be peacemakers. This means that Christians should make peace with each other. Christians also have a role in creating opportunities for conflicting non-believers to meet and reconcile.

By providing opportunities for reconciliation, we can show the reconciling power of the gospel in a visible way. This requires that we ourselves are reconciled with God. It also means that church conflict needs to be resolved. There are many passages in the New Testament that address the issue of church conflict. It was as much a problem in the early church as it is today. Church conflict will not be covered in this book, but it is an important issue, so we provide useful Bible passages and resources in SECTION 5.

Resolving conflicts among Christians ensures that:

- we are acting in the way that God wants us to
- we can identify with others in conflict because we know that we experience conflict ourselves
- we are not accused of being hypocrites
- non-believers can see how Christians work together in harmony
- we point people towards Jesus so that they might be reconciled with God.

## PRINCIPLE 2 **Identity and unity**

The people that we relate to best are usually those with whom we have something in common. God made men and women in his image, but he made us all unique. There are no two people completely alike in the world. We all have a different identity. This is partly due to inherited characteristics such as our ethnicity. It can also be moulded by the people we spend time with or where we work. We may find it easier to get on with people of the same ethnic group, family, language group, age or gender, or with those who have similar interests, such as sport or music.

### Reflection

- Think of different elements of your identity (eg: ethnicity, religion, gender, caste, age).
- Think of your best friends and colleagues. What is it about their identity that enables you to relate well to each other?

God loves the idea of groups, such as family and ethnic groups. The desire to belong to a group is part of our human nature, created by God. Sadly, group identity is often abused rather than celebrated. When two groups come into contact, it is often their differences that are emphasised. Group identity is also often used as an excuse for conflict, or to hide other issues.

Yet the Bible tells us that Jesus is able to unite people from different groups and give them a common identity. The terms *family*, *community* and *nation* are all used in the Bible to describe the group of believers (see Galatians 6:10, Hebrews 2:11, 1 Peter 4:17, Genesis 28:3, Genesis 12:2, Genesis 18:18, Deuteronomy 26:19, 1 Peter 2:9-10).

BIBLE STUDY  
**Unity in Christ**

And they sang a new song: 'You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.'  
**Revelation 5:9**

- Read Romans 10:12-13.
  - *What do these verses tell us about God's attitude towards different groups?*
- Read Ephesians 2:11-22. This passage emphasises that all people can have equal access to God, and that his peace affects our relationships with other people. The Jewish people took pride in their circumcision, which was a sign of God's covenant with Israel. The Ephesian Christians were not Jews by birth.
  - *What assurance does Paul offer the Ephesians in verses 11-13?*
  - *What do verses 14-18 say about hostility between Gentiles and God, and Gentiles and Jews? What is the unifying force?*
  - *In verses 19-22, how are the Ephesian Christians described? What vital role does Jesus play?*
  - *How does this passage challenge you in your relationship with other Christians? How does this passage challenge you in your relationship with Christians from a different culture?*
- Read Colossians 3:11 and 1 Corinthians 12:12-13.
  - *What do these verses mean for us today?*
  - *Replace words such as Greek and Jew with the names of groups in a community with which you work.*
- Read Romans 15:5-6. Why does Paul emphasise the need for unity?
  - *Many partners use the phrase 'Unity in diversity, rather than uniformity.' Discuss this phrase in the light of the Bible passages you have just read.*

PRINCIPLE 3 **Love your neighbour**

Many times in the Bible we are called to love our neighbour. As the Bible study below shows, our neighbour is not only the person who lives next door to us or even from the same country.

BIBLE STUDY  
**Loving our neighbour**

- Look at Leviticus 19:18, Matthew 19:19, Mark 12:28-34 and Romans 13:9.
  - *What do all of these verses have in common?*
- The parable of the Good Samaritan explains the command to 'love your neighbour'. Read Luke 10:25-37. The important point that Jesus is making is that we should love each other even across cultural and social boundaries. When the lawyer asks Jesus 'who is my neighbour?' he was perhaps expecting Jesus to answer 'your fellow Jew'. But Jesus answered otherwise.
 

We are not told anything about the man who is attacked in the parable, although those listening were Jewish and would have assumed that he was a Jew. However, a priest and a Levite, who were both members of the religious elite in Israel at the time, passed by the injured man. In the time of Jesus, Samaritans were despised by the Jews. Yet in the parable, it is a travelling Samaritan who sees the injured man and has compassion on him.

- *Who is your neighbour?*
- *Think of times when you have found it difficult to love your neighbour. Why did you find it difficult?*
- *How will your attitude towards others change in the light of this passage?*

## PRINCIPLE 4 **Love your enemies**

It is often hard to show compassion to people we do not know or find difficult to relate to. It is even harder when we are hated or threatened by those we are in a position to help. The Bible's teaching on the issue of how to approach our enemies is quite clear.

### BIBLE STUDY **Loving our enemies**

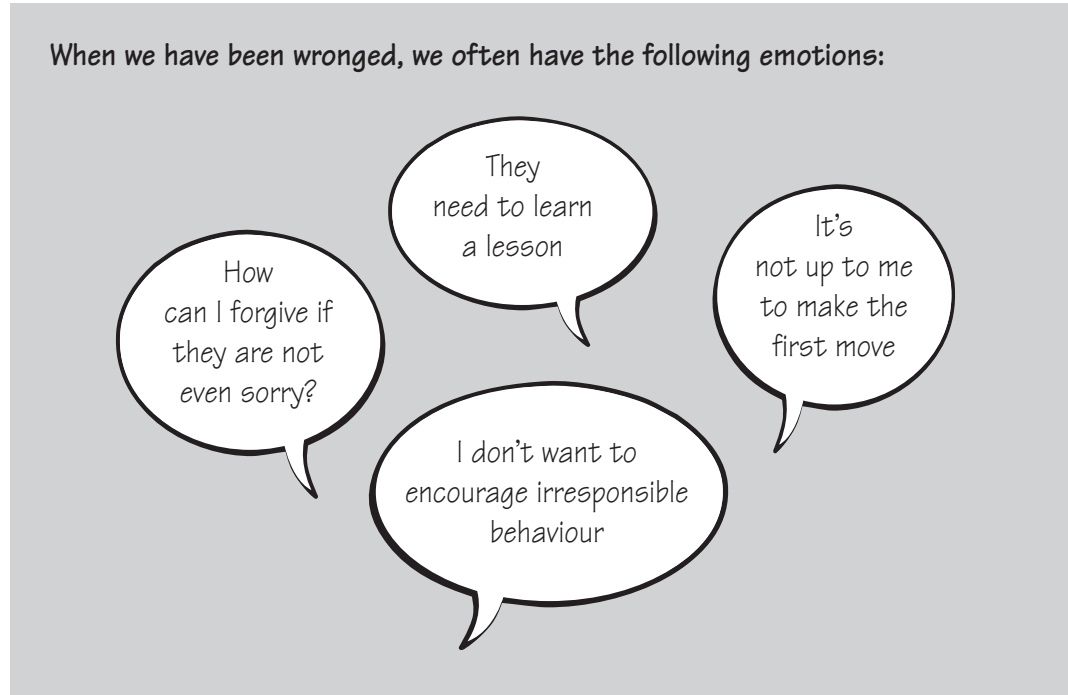
- Read Matthew 5:43-48. Jesus urges his listeners to love their enemies. He uses the example of God, who causes the sun to rise and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous alike. He is talking about unconditional love. The greatest demonstration of unconditional love is God's grace through Jesus Christ. He loves us despite our sin.
- It is very easy to love and spend time with those who love us.
  - *What does Jesus challenge us to do in verse 46?*
  - *What does he also challenge us to do in verse 47?*
  - *What implications does this have for our relationships with people who hurt us?*
- The passage ends with verse 48 encouraging us to seek perfection or completeness – an idea that is very close to the wholeness of shalom. Although we will never be perfect on this earth, we should try to follow God's example by showing grace to our enemies. This means reaching out to them with God's love despite their wrongs against others and against us.
- Other passages to study: Luke 6:27-36 and Romans 12:14-21.

## PRINCIPLE 5 **Forgive each other**

Forgiveness is an important element in reconciliation. For the victim, forgiveness means 'letting go' of resentment because of the pain that has been caused them. It involves finding relief in Christ as the one who bears our pain. In the Bible we are called many times to forgive each other (eg: Matthew 6:15, Matthew 18:21-22 and Colossians 3:13).

Philip Yancey, in his book *What's so Amazing about Grace?*, shows how forgiveness is needed to break the chain of ungrace (lack of grace) which exists in the world. Ungrace is a natural human state, while forgiveness is an unnatural act. Like grace, there is nothing fair about forgiveness. Forgiveness is a very difficult thing to do.

Emotions when we have been wronged



Yancey explains **why** we should forgive:

- Grace and forgiveness are part of God's character, and we are called to be like God.
- One of the lines in the Lord's prayer is 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us'. Jesus demands that we forgive in this world of ungrace. (See also Matthew 18:21-35. The key to this parable is verse 33.) By not forgiving each other, we are in effect suggesting that other people are unworthy of God's forgiveness.
- Forgiveness breaks the cycle of pain and blame. By letting go of resentment, the forgiver finds healing. There is also the possibility that the offender might be transformed.

How do we find we are able to forgive?

- Our experience of being forgiven by God helps us to find it easier to forgive others.
- Forgiveness is an unnatural act. We therefore need God's strength and grace to be able to forgive others.

**Justice** Where does justice fit into this principle of forgiveness? Romans 12:17-21 gives us some insight. After reading that passage, Yancey realised that 'By forgiving another, I am trusting that God is a better justice-maker than I am. By forgiving, I release my own right to get even and leave all issues of fairness for God to work out' (page 93).

It is important to remember that forgiving does not pardon an evil act. As Yancey points out, 'Though wrong does not disappear when I forgive, it loses its grip on me and is taken over by God, who knows what to do' (page 93).

Following that passage in Romans, Paul goes on to talk about the authority God has given to governing authorities to protect society. One of the roles of governing authorities is to 'bring punishment on the wrongdoer' (Romans 13:4). Therefore, even though a victim may have forgiven an offender for a crime committed against them, there is a mechanism to bring justice. This mechanism can be useful where there is no forgiveness, because it can stop a cycle of revenge. However, because of humans' sinful nature, no governing authority is perfect. Not all rulers are 'God's servants', and they often abuse their power.

Today's justice systems do not recognise that crimes hurt people in addition to breaking the law of the land. An increasing number of Christians are arguing that justice should aim to help restore the relationship between the offender and the victim. This type of justice is called 'restorative justice'. It is an attempt to personalise the legal process. Restorative justice looks at the needs of the victims, communities and offenders in order to promote the repair of the harm caused by crime and bring reconciliation.

Often, restitution occurs during a restorative justice process. Restitution is the act of compensating the victim for loss, damage or injury. It is not a necessary element in the reconciliation process, but it is a fitting response to forgiveness and repentance. The story of Zacchaeus the tax collector in Luke 19:1-10 tells of how he recognised Jesus as Lord. He realised that his past practice of cheating taxpayers was wrong and he wanted his lifestyle to change. He therefore gave back the money that he had gained by cheating as a response to the forgiveness that he had received from Jesus.

### **Forgiveness and reconciliation**

Forgiveness leads to reconciliation if the victim and offender come face to face to talk about how they feel. There must be forgiveness on the part of the victim, and repentance on the part of the offender. Whether forgiveness or repentance should come first is not clear in the Bible, but they usually happen very close together.

Whichever comes first, forgiveness from the victim is crucial in breaking the cycle of ungrace. The offender may not first ask the victim for forgiveness. It may be that the victim first needs to tell the offender that they forgive them. The unfairness of forgiveness may then cause the offender to think about their actions and to repent of what they have done. The offender and the victim can then come together to be reconciled with each other.

