CHAPTER 5

Public Theology and Reconciliation

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Introduction

‘Reconciliation’ has a long history as a theological concept, but only a short history as a prominent term in politics and public debates. Current interest in reconciliation as a social issue developed in the 1990s, and became a significant topic in discussions on post-conflict peacebuilding and in the emergent field of transitional justice.¹ These debates examined the challenges after periods of conflict, or transitions after sustained human rights abuses, and how societies might best negotiate the competing challenges of truth, justice, reconciliation and the restoration of democracy as they sought to build their new futures.² This chapter examines how theologians have reconsidered the ministry and mission of reconciliation in response to this renewed interest in social and political reconciliation in other academic disciplines and in public policy discussions.³


The word ‘reconciliation’ is now commonly used, in other disciplines and in the wider public square, as a secular term to describe a key challenge in post-conflict societies if communities divided by violence and enmity are to live together in a shared society. In the academic literature, discussion of reconciliation addresses the legacies of conflict and division, and the mechanisms to help former opponents live and work together more peacefully. Scholars and practitioners form around the world have sought to clarify and define a fuller and more precise understanding of reconciliation along these lines.

Before exploring the theology of reconciliation further, three features of recent discussions of reconciliation are worth noting as relevant context.

A first feature is that reconciliation is understood as a constituent part of a peacebuilding process that involves different stages and dimensions. Reconciliation is the work that usually still remains to be done after the peace agreement or political reforms have been signed, if the agreement is to have substance and meaning for the wider society. This work involves a much wider demographic than those directly involved in the political negotiations. Political leaders can negotiate and sign agreements, but for most conflicts this is not enough. These agreements are only of value, and only sustainable in the long term, if they are followed by a wider reconciliation process at a broader societal level.

Furthermore, if reconciliation is located within the peacebuilding process, it is also clear that that reconciliation itself is most often a process rather than a finished condition. Fanie Du Toit, a South African commentator notes that ‘reconciliation’ is a metaphor, and cautions against defining reconciliation too closely. Instead of a tight definition Du Toit says ‘we propose a modest description of reconciliation as the beginning of a process to overcome personal, social or political alienation which has the capacity to destroy.’

A second feature associated with reconciliation, is that reconciliation is concerned with creating or re-building positive social relationships. The US Mennonite peacebuilder and scholar John Paul Lederach, who pioneered the study of reconciliation as an academic field, comments: ‘As a perspective, it is built on and oriented toward the relational aspects of a conflict. As a social phenomenon, reconciliation represents a space, a place or location of encounter,

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