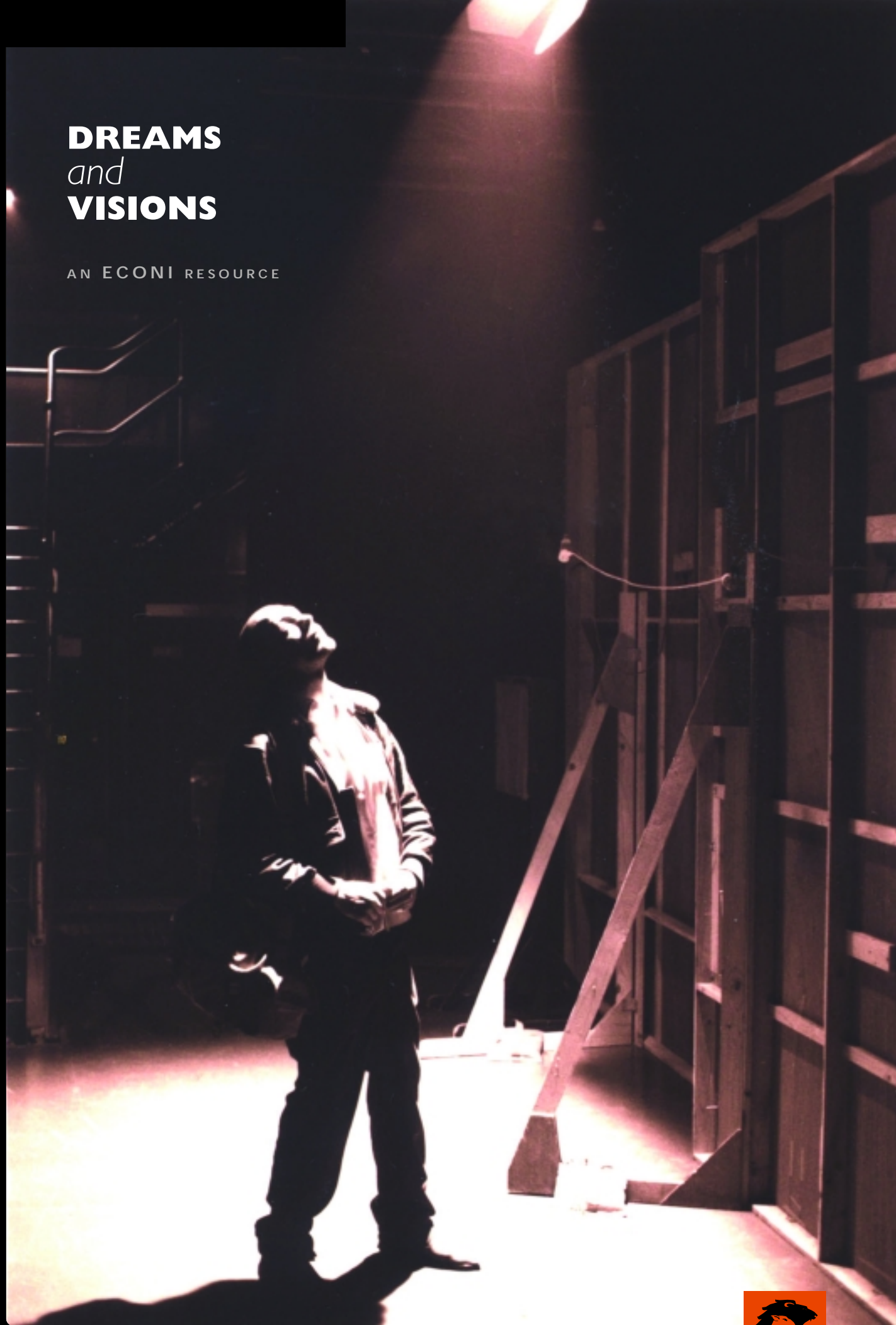


# **DREAMS** *and* **VISIONS**

AN ECONI RESOURCE





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The International Fund for Ireland



Community Relations Council



**DREAMS**  
*and*  
**VISIONS**



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# FOREWORD

ECONI formally came in to being in 1988. A group of evangelical Christians wanted to make a contribution, however small, to the healing of bitterness and conflict in their community. They were convinced that the truth of the Bible was critically relevant to the context in which they lived. Between 1971 and 1988, more than 2500 people had been killed and many more horribly injured. The scale of the grief and suffering was immense. Those responsible seemed to think it was politically justified. There was a sense of hopeless despair.

Now, fifteen years on, the context has changed. The machinery of political terrorism no longer dominates the daily news. The IRA ceasefire has its own integrity. But the republican movement is not yet able to dispense with its threat to inflict more violence. As a result, our devolved power-sharing government, after a promising if fragile early life, has been suspended. If it was actual violence that dominated the political scene in 1988, today it is the threat of violence, real or perceived. The hoped-for growth of trust from shared responsibility has been thwarted. With an election imminent, political statesmanship has limited scope to compromise further. Peoples of different identities are more geographically divided than ever and riots can ignite from the colour of a youngster's football shirt.

It is in this polarised sectarian context that ECONI offers *Dreams and Visions*, an updating of biblical materials appropriate to the current needs of our community. Central themes of biblical teaching such as peacemaking, reconciliation and forgiveness are increasingly relevant. There are at least three reasons why these are presented now with confidence.

First, ECONI has had increasing opportunities to work alongside those with important responsibilities in Church and State, publicly and privately. Many meetings have been held and much material published. Positive response has encouraged us to keep at it. Much needs to be done and doors continue to open.

Second, there are many in civic leadership whose pragmatism has led them to recognise that the sectarian problems of Northern Ireland cannot be resolved by law enforcement alone or a multitude of independent commissions. There is a necessary spiritual element to the healing of hurts as deep as those we have encountered. Rightly do politicians look to Christian Leadership for input.

Third, those of us who struggle to acknowledge the Lordship of Christ, have an unavoidable mandate to practice His teaching with its radical implications for our citizenship. ECONI's primary aim is still to address its fellow Evangelicals, so that we shall portray a body of people more identifiable with the glory of God alone, than with our personal political preferences.

**David Hewitt**  
ECONI President

# INTRODUCTION

“... shine like stars in the universe in which you hold out the word of life ...”

*Philippians 2:15-16*

What a dream! What a vision! Imagine what it would be like if the members of the body of Christ shone out like stars in this world, in practical, active love, with hearts set on building peace, holding out the word of life to those around them.

That is Paul's dream, his vision of what we could and should be in this world. And this is the dream that *Dreams and Visions* seeks to fulfil; the vision on which it sets its sights.

ECONI's vision was expressed back in 1988 when it published *For God and His Glory Alone*, ten biblical principles for Christians living in Northern Ireland. Fifteen years on, *Dreams and Visions* returns to that original vision, seeking to re-envision people in this land to continue living for God's Glory alone – to fulfil that dream of Paul's that we “shine like stars”.

In the following pages you will find the ten principles – love, forgiveness, reconciliation, peace, citizenship, truth, servanthood, justice & righteousness, hope, repentance – explored through Bible passages, pertinent questions, personal reflections, provocative quotations and responsive prayers. This mixture of elements adds depth and appeal in its diversity, which we have not sought to over-harmonise or make bland. There is also a useful guide on how to make the most of this resource, as well as a sermon outline and suggestions either for a Sunday service or another time.

At this point, many thanks should be given to the contributors (whose names are given under their particular essays); Ruth Hutchinson for proof-reading; Merve Jones for the design templates; Ben Walker for editing; the various members of ECONI staff who have brought their talents to this resource, especially Claire Martin and Anna Rankin for layout and production; Amy Ornée and Helen Smith who have developed the concept and contents for this resource.

As a church/group leader or member, as someone seeking to learn what biblical peacebuilding means, and someone concerned with living the Christian life in this divided world, we hope that you will find these study materials challenging and inspirational. We hope that you “dream the dream” and “catch the vision”.

But of course, words don't fulfil dreams. People do. Words express our visions but it is we who live them out. So, in saying that *Dreams and Visions* seeks to fulfil the dream that we "shine like stars", what is really meant is that *Dreams and Visions* seeks to help us to fulfil that dream, by the power of the Spirit. We are called to be peacebuilders. We are called to live for God's glory. As W. B. Yeats said, "In dreams begins responsibility".

It's not enough to have a dream,  
Unless you're willing to pursue it.  
It's not enough to know what's right,  
Unless you're strong enough to do it.  
It's not enough to learn the truth,  
Unless you also learn to live it.  
It's not enough to reach for love,  
Unless you care enough to give it.

*Samuel Smiles*





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# How to use this resource

*Dreams and Visions* is designed to enable and encourage Christian groups – house groups, study groups, social concern groups – to become involved in the task of peacebuilding.

Peacebuilding is a range of activities, which create and sustain in the long term a peaceful society characterised by attitudes, behaviours, and structures which promote: justice; diversity; healing relationships; the on-going transformation of conflict.<sup>1</sup>

*Dreams and Visions* attempts to stimulate thinking, discussion and decision-making but there is not a set pattern for using the material. It is dependent on the resources and experience of the group and should be used in a way that accommodates the pattern of the group.

## **DREAMS AND VISIONS STRUCTURE**

The resource provides the base material for biblical reflection, discussion and engagement with the complex realities of living out the Christian faith in a contested society.

### **Quotations**

Coming from a wide variety of people, the quotations are intended to provoke, stimulate and help the group engage in a new way with the key themes. They can be presented in many ways:

1. Print and distribute them around the walls of the room. Encourage the group to read each quote and then ask which provoked the strongest reaction both positively and negatively. Why do they think it caused that reaction? This can open the theme up to both the opinions and feelings held by members of the group.
2. Split the group into pairs or groups of three and distribute one quotation per group. Give participants 5-10 minutes to reflect on what is being communicated, why they think the author might reflect this view and what their own reaction to the quotation is. All the groups' views can be heard in a feedback session. As a variation, each pair or three can be given a sheet with all of the quotations and asked to comment.
3. Depending on the size of the room or meeting space, the quotations could be used in a more interactive way: The leader divides the space into two distinct areas. One area is for those who agree with the quotation and the other for those who disagree. The leader then asks participants to listen to the quotation and to choose sides. If people are unsure about

what the quotation means, it may be necessary to facilitate some initial discussion on what the author might be saying. Group members should still be encouraged to make a choice. In their groups, “Agree” and “Disagree”, participants should take time to talk to others about why they chose to take this side. The leader then facilitates a discussion between the two groups about the statement made by the author. Many people may want to ‘sit on the fence’. This usually happens when people are not sure about what they think. It is possible to create a third group, “Not Sure”; however, if this happens too soon the initial impact of having to form an opinion quickly can be lost.

Depending on the size of the group, the leader may only be able to use one or two quotations. Listening to the groups’ points of view and experience can take more time than expected. The pressure to get through each section, or get to the Bible study, or answer the questions can often shape the agenda for the small group. Recognising that tension, our experience has been that time given to the groups’ experience and views is not wasted time. Good facilitation and leadership will identify the connections between the comments from the exercise and the rest of the material to be covered.

### **Introduction**

The introduction simply ‘sets the scene’ for each of the ten themes. It offers a broad overview of the subject, linking the quotations with the content of the essay, the Bible passage and the key issues to be explored.

### **Essay**

Each theme has a short essay. These essays are personal reflections that give participants the opportunity to reflect on and react to what is being communicated. The aim is to stimulate a deeper exploration and with this in mind, we recommend that the essay is photocopied and distributed in advance to give the participants sufficient time to engage properly with the theme. It takes time to read and absorb the essay. If this is not possible the leader might convey some of the ideas to the group, perhaps using the structure of the talk outline as a guide (see note on Talk Outline).

### **Bible Reference and Questions**

Each section has a passage of scripture to read together in the group. Biblical reflection is at the heart of this resource and it is essential to root personal opinions, reactions and the discussions in the teaching of Christ, the early church and the Old Testament. We recommend reading the text together, maybe in a variety of translations. (The group can be sub-divided to cover a number of versions and then the meaning of the text can be explored collectively). We also recommend that the leader help the group with a contextual understanding of the passage being studied.

The questions should be asked within groups that are small enough to enable every member to participate at some level. This may mean creating sub-groups, perhaps pairs, though we suggest that a sub-group should be no more than six people. You will notice that, of the six questions, two relate more directly to the essay while the others explore the Bible passage, although there are common ideas between the two. It is not essential to ask every question and we encourage you to choose the questions that are ‘right’ for your context. Your choice will be determined by the experience of the group, your church community, denominational expression, your locality and the particular issues you face living out the Christian faith in your area. We encourage you to make those connections and add your own questions to those we have listed in the resource.

## HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

### Talk Outline

The resource contains a suggested general outline of how the material can be used as a talk. This may be appropriate for a midweek meeting or for small groups that value a presentation from the front.

The outline can also be used by a study group to help them break down and understand the Bible passage before coming to questions. Similarly, the questions can and should be used by those giving a talk to help them think through and properly apply some of the key issues.

### Prayer

Each section contains a prayer that we hope will frame the group experience. It can be used at the start or end of the group, or as part of worship if this is part of your group's pattern.

### Extract: *For God and His Glory Alone*

*Dreams and Visions* is a fresh look at the themes identified in *For God and His Glory Alone*, the original and foundational publication for ECONI. As supporting material to enhance the resource we have included the original text for each principle. Shaped by the context of violence in 1988 it reflects the high energy levels in churches to address division and to see these issues named in churches. Aimed primarily at the Evangelical Protestant community the challenge presented then has played a significant part in initiating healthy debate concerning the role of evangelicals in our divided community. It is our hope that the inclusion of the original text will generate new energy to re-engage with the biblical principles that are as relevant now as they were fifteen years ago.

## PARTICIPATIVE AND EXPERIENCE BASED STYLES

Our hope is that this resource will help Christians think biblically and become peacemakers in the community. We recognise that people engage and learn more when they fully participate in the learning experience. Because of this, we have created a resource that relies on group leaders who are comfortable with groups and with facilitation as a way of leading groups.

A number of styles can be used to create the a helpful environment for learning to happen:

- Giving information: to enhance or challenge views expressed, or to support the group in further study.
- Using exploring and open type questions: helping people to express their ideas and opinions.
- Sharing responsibility: it can be helpful for group members to take on responsibility for aspects of the session.
- Accessing the experience contained within the group: every group has a wealth of experience that can be unlocked if handled appropriately by the leader.

The style largely depends on the skill and experience of the leader and ECONI can offer you further support in this area. While many groups express valid concerns about activities or exercises, these can be overcome if the group and the leader come to an agreement about the process of learning and the delivery of the material.

There is a well-known Chinese proverb that says:

What I hear I forget

What I see I remember

What I do I learn

Participative and experience-based activities expand the capacity of the group to make the connections between an idea and the resultant action. We do not want people to know about peacemaking alone, but to know how to be peacemakers. As you plan each session we offer the following suggestions:

- Reflect on the experience already in the group and consider ways in which you can access that experience.
- Use appropriate questioning. Questions that simply require a 'yes or no' answer are often the least helpful in small groups.
- Make spaces in the session for feedback and questions from the group. This is often ignored because the leader is unsure whether these questions can be answered. As a leader, you are facilitating everyone's learning; you do not need to be 'the expert' as well. Complex or unanswered questions can bring other 'experts' into the group or can be a means for group members to follow up between sessions.
- Make links to current issues, your locality and your own experience. The biblical principles need to be rooted in behaviours and actions.
- End the session with a summary – again leave space for people to comment on what the session has meant to them. A closing activity which encourages them to say one thing they are 'taking home' with them can be enough for them to leave with a focus, and for you to gauge how they connected with the theme.

### **THE WAY GROUPS WORK**

A safe environment needs to be established so that:

- The themes can be explored without people feeling too vulnerable. Some of the themes require more sensitivity than others. It should be remembered that many people have been deeply affected and traumatised by the violence of the "Troubles".
- People are not afraid to share their beliefs, opinions or experiences with others. Our 'default' culture is one of blame and scapegoating and group members need to be 'protected' by the process and the ground rules you establish together.

We encourage anyone who leads a small group to engage in a short group work course and to read about group processes and dynamics. ECONI has resource material on group work and can facilitate short courses for small group leaders.

**Lynda Gould**

Learning Director with ECONI

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<sup>1</sup> *Pathways: A Resource Manual For Peacebuilding*. Corrymeela Press 2000

## NOTES



# **Love**

**Forgiveness**

**Reconciliation**

**Peace**

**Citizenship**

**Truth**

**Servanthood**

**Justice &  
Righteousness**

**Hope**

**Repentance**

# Love

## Quotations

There is no disguise that can for long conceal love where it exists or simulate it where it does not.

*François de La Rochefoucauld*

Love is never lost. If not reciprocated, it will flow back and soften and purify the heart.

*Washington Irving*

Love is an act of endless forgiveness, a tender look which becomes a habit.

*Peter Ustinov*

It is in deep solitude that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brothers. The more solitary I am the more affection I have for them. Solitude and silence teach me to love my brothers for what they are, not for what they say.

*Thomas Merton*

There is always some madness in love. But there is also always some reason in madness.

*Friedrich Nietzsche*

Nothing takes the taste out of peanut butter quite like unrequited love.

*Charlie Brown (Charles M. Schulz)*

'Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.

*Alfred Lord Tennyson*

Brothers, do not be afraid of contact with sinful men. Love man even in his sin, for that love is like the divine love – the highest of all. Love all God's creation – the whole of it, every grain of sand. Love every leaf, every ray of light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love each thing you will perceive the mystery of God in all. Once you perceive this, you will begin to understand it better every day, and you will come at last to love the whole world with an all-embracing love.

*Fyodor Dostoevsky*

## Introduction

"Love is all you need."

*The Beatles*

Despite being a contender for the most overused and oversung word in the English language, "love" is still profound for all of us, and is a deep mystery which originates in God himself. The following reflection considers the importance of understanding the love of God and its significance for living love amongst ourselves.

This was pertinent for the church at Corinth. The Corinthians were very "gifted", but Paul was compelled to teach them about the most important gifts, the greatest of which is love. Perhaps it is less "love is all you need" and more "without love you are nothing".



## Essay

A thousand words on love? A thousand years might cover it.

Parents may love their children, and children their parents. Brothers and sisters, cousins, aunts and uncles, nephews and nieces, grandparents and great grandparents may love each other. Friends, soul-mates, fellow-workers, partners, carers, teachers, helpers. Pupils, recipients of help, care and love: these too are lovers.

Opposites may attract. Cats and dogs, pigs and chickens, all sorts of unlikely partners learn to love. Humans love animals; animals' love humans. Humans love inanimate objects, sports and hobbies, work and leisure, places and cultures, home, country, fictional characters and celebrities, stories, music and art, sounds, smells, colours, textures, patterns, nature, fresh air. Oh yes, and then there are the loves about which the media are obsessed: erotic love, sexual love, the love of the idea of being in love.

And there is the love of God. By God and for God.<sup>1</sup> Love which God is.

How can I write about love? What do I know of the loving faithfulness of daily devotion to God? What can I say about loving my neighbour; when I so frequently let others down, retreat into myself, break promises, and avoid difficult conversations and encounters? I, who live in a secure home, have a regular income, a loving family and a caring church, I who have received so much love, what do I know about loving my neighbour? I know that I have received far more than I appreciate, I know that she who is forgiven much loves much<sup>2</sup>, but what do I know about giving love, the kind of love demanded by Jesus? To the man who obeys the legal requirements but lacks the love for God which would inspire him truly to love his neighbour; Jesus says, "Sell all you have and give to the poor."<sup>3</sup>

I am in no position to teach others how to love. It's like asking the blind to describe light. And yet, it may be given to the blind to see some light, even to appreciate light in ways which those with perfect vision take for granted. So, from my spiritual blindness, I hope to speak of the love I have seen.

Insofar as our first childhood lessons in love come to us from people, this too is God's gift of love to us, to help us as we grow to appreciate God's own love for us. But since we do not all receive the love we need as children, let us begin with God's love – that love which gives itself sacrificially, generously, without insisting on its own way.<sup>4</sup> All love, even God's love, hopes for requital, though it does not demand or insist upon it. Human loves often insist, demand, harass for a response. God's love is gentler, more giving, more patient, but still seeks a response.

This raises a fascinating and contentious question – one which raises strong emotions but it may also bear spiritual fruit in our lives if it leads us to appreciate how much we are loved. The question is this: does God need love? Let me resume the issue as follows: if God truly loves, firstly within the trinity, then extending that love towards creatures, does such love create a need for the love to be requited? Within the Trinity, the question of need does not arise, because the faithfulness of the love is constant. But what of God's love for us? Does it create a need for our love in God? (e.g. Parents may choose not to love their child, but if they love, they will long for a loving response.) For some, such a suggestion appears to demean the sovereignty of God.

For others, the biblical concept that "God is Love", meaning love is God's very nature, implies that in a sense God cannot help loving. To stop loving would be to cease being God. "Can a mother forget her nursing child? She may forget, but I will not."<sup>5</sup>

## LOVE

The danger is that we take our limited understanding of love, or need, or sovereignty and rationalise God into their image.

Even humans have responsibility for elements of our character: whether to be loving and honest, or unloving and without integrity. It is surely inconceivable that we should have such a moral responsibility and at the same time deny to our understanding of God the moral capacity to choose to love. Is it not possible that God sovereignly chooses to act in loving character, and so chooses to bestow love?

Abstract as it may seem, this question has real consequences for how we relate to and understand Jesus; and it affects how we will choose to love our neighbours and our enemies. If God cannot help loving, then we may be tempted to take that love for granted, even to assume that it is ours by right and not by grace, and to respond to the call to love by merely hoping one day to be sanctified enough to love like that. If God has no choice about loving, the cross itself becomes the inevitable consequence of God's self-destructive addiction to loving human beings.

But if, in Christ, God chooses to become vulnerable to the love and lovelessness of human beings, there is hope of a purpose, of a constructive outcome. One's love becomes valuable to God, like the poured out nard (*John 12*) and the commitment of Peter (*John 21*). As I read Scripture it seems that, at the most basic level, the child Jesus relied on the love of human parents for his survival. By becoming human, he – both God and Man – needed love, both human and divine. This is mystery. What we celebrate at Christmas meets its terrible and terrifying consequence at the cross. Love is truly costly, a matter of life and death. A price Jesus chose to pay. At last we are confronted with the price of our failure to love.

But we are also offered an alternative, an escape from the catastrophe of lovelessness. An opportunity to contribute to the happiness of God through our loving response to Jesus! His love for us, since he thereby makes himself vulnerable to us, also gives us the privilege of making a contribution to God's eternal happiness. (I can hardly breathe with wonder . . .)

To love us, Jesus made himself needy of our love. To love our enemies we will have to make them our neighbours and our brothers and sisters – people whose love we need. Isn't that the meaning of the Good Samaritan?

Such vulnerability is the ultimate self-giving. God's love for us has not remained at a safe distance. Rather, God has sovereignly chosen to create and to love creatures in such a way that we may be in intimate loving relationship with God for eternity. ("As the father is in me, I am in you . . . that you may be in me as I am in the Father . . . *John 15*.)

This is the love we live and breathe, whether or not we recognise it. It is the love that creates and sustains all our being, from the tiniest particle to the vastness of galaxies. It is the love God calls us to receive, to learn to appreciate and enjoy. Terrifying love. Unspeakable love. And yet God, in love for us, hopes to teach us to love like this. It's demanding love in that it calls us to carry a cross; yet it is not demanding like certain human loves which drain and sap us of our attentions and energies. God's love demands in order to make us grow, in order to heal us. The cliché puts it succinctly: God loves us the way we are; God loves us too much to leave us the way we are.

How then shall we love our neighbour as ourselves? How shall we love our enemy?

How shall we distinguish between tough love and cruelty?

How shall we distinguish between self-love and patriotism?

What is the difference between love and desire?

When is duty mere religiosity? And when is passion love?

When is our least passionate duty more loving than our passionate devotion?

The matter of love is the eternally significant factor in all our life<sup>6</sup> : our worship, our work, our prayer, our leisure, our families and our enemies. With so many books on self-help and on marital love and sex and “keeping the passion alive”, why is there so little on Love? Are sexual partners the only people we need to love?

Perhaps no words can make love happen except the words of the Lover himself: “I no longer call you slaves . . . I call you friends.” “No one has greater love than this: that he lays down his life for his friends.”<sup>7</sup>

Pro Tanto Quid Retribuamus. (What shall we give in return for so much?)

*The motto of the City of Belfast*

**Cheryl Reid**

Associate Minister at Gilnahirk Presbyterian Church and an ECONI Board member

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<sup>1</sup> For a thorough examination of different types of love, their strengths and pitfalls, C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, is an excellent starting place.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 7:47

<sup>3</sup> Mark 10:21

<sup>4</sup> 1 Cor. 13

<sup>5</sup> Isa. 49:15 This imagery is powerful in assuring us of God's love, but gets us no nearer to understanding how God comes to love us – whether by choice or of necessity.

<sup>6</sup> “Faith, hope, love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” 1 Cor. 13:13

<sup>7</sup> John 15:13

## LOVE

Read: 1 Corinthians 13

### Talk Outline

This is a rebuke to those who do not practise the most excellent way (cf. 12:31)

- No matter what our gifts, if we are not loving, we are nothing and nobody (v1-3)
- No matter what the situation, love is committed and enduring (v4-10)
- No matter what we think we know, love is the greatest sign of real maturity (v11-13)

### Questions

1. How necessary do you think God's love for us is?
2. What implications are there, in the author's opinion and in yours, that both God and we "choose to love"?
3. What does love look like in attitude and behaviour (v4-8)? Can you replace love with your name in the passage and read it out loud without shame? Is there a particular quality of love that Paul is revealing here, or a description that you find especially striking?
4. Do we struggle to love because we think of it primarily as an emotion? Can you make a distinction between passion, desire and love? What might this teach us about our commitment to others and to ideals, particularly when we don't feel passionately about them?
5. What do you think Paul is describing when he uses the phrase "childish ways" (v11)? In what ways should we be more "mature"?
6. All Christians are probably agreed on the importance of love. Would you have come to this conclusion from observing the contribution they have made, individually and collectively, to the peace process? If so, what can you as a Christian individual/group do to continue and increase this portrayal of love? If not, what can you do to make this other people's conclusion?

## Prayer

**Leader:** Out of judgement came mercy;

**All:** And God did not abandon the people.

**Men:** For the love that God bore them, coming again,

**Women:** For the hope that God had for them, bearing their pain.

**Leader:** Out of gentleness came strength;

**All:** And God spoke a word:

**Men:** To the outcast and stranger, making them welcome,

**Women:** To the sick and despairing, making them whole.

**Leader:** Out of freedom came faithfulness;

**All:** And God died on the cross:

**Men:** For the poor and the prisoner, the sign of deliverance;

**Women:** For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son,

**All:** That everyone who believes in him may not die, but have eternal life.

**Leader:** Out of death came life;

**All:** And God defeated evil:

**Men:** An empty cross and an empty tomb,

**Women:** A nail mark shown and a presence known.

**Leader:** Out of sorrow came joy;

**All:** And God sent the Spirit:

**Men:** Coming like fire to all people and ages,

**Women:** Coming to birth in the water of life.

**Leader:** Out of difference came unity;

**All:** And God's people were called:

**Men:** Called to receive him in bread and wine,

**Women:** Called to be free in the power of love.

**Leader:** For when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be filled with power;

**All:** And be witnesses for Christ to the ends of the earth.

**Leader:** Out of love comes celebration;

**All:** And God's Kingdom is among us:

**Men:** Where peace is the means of making us one,

**Women:** Where truth does not stumble and justice is done.

**Leader:** Out of change comes possibility;

**All:** And God's new creation is begun:

**Men:** Promise of splendour and signal of worth,

**Women:** Source of all goodness, renewing the earth.

**Leader:** Out of freedom comes responsibility;

**All:** And God calls us to discipleship:

**Men:** In our compassion, making love known,

**Women:** In our conviction, God's power shown.

**Leader:** You did not choose me, I chose you.

**All:** This, then, is what I command you: Love one another.

(The Iona Community, *The Iona Community Worship Book*, Wild Goose, 1991)

Extract: *For God and His Glory Alone*

# 1 LOVE

Ex 34:6f  
Lv 19:18, 34  
Dt 6:4f;  
10:17-19  
Ps 103:12; 137:8  
Jer 31:3  
Mt 5:43-48  
Lk 6:27-36;  
10:25-37  
Jn 13:34f  
Rom 5:6-8; 12:9;  
13:8-10  
1 Cor 13:1-13  
Gal 6:2, 10  
1 Pet 2:17; 4:8  
1 Jn 3:18, 23  
4:7-12

*"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" "...love your neighbour as yourself" "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love"*

GOD IS LOVE, and if we do not love, we cannot claim to know Him. This love is to be pre-eminent in the church, and is to be evident in our relationships with our neighbours, irrespective of their culture, religion and background. Distinctively, followers of Jesus are told to love their enemies.

Such love is not just an emotional feeling, but an active concern for the welfare and good of others. It must be shown in our attitudes and actions. In showing such love we reflect God's attitude to us. He showed His love by sending Jesus while we were still His enemies. We may find it difficult to love our enemies if they are terrorists, but we can begin by learning to love those of our neighbours who are from other traditions.

## STUDY

Read Luke 10:25-37. There are two questions in the passage (v 29 & 36). Notice the difference between the two. By turning the issue around, Jesus presents us with the challenge to be neighbours rather than to debate whom we ought to consider as our neighbours. In what ways have evangelicals failed to see the implications of what Jesus is saying to us on this matter? What needs to be done about it?

The key term for love in the New Testament is 'AGAPE'. It has been described as "the love of the cross" (Rom 5:8; 1 Jn 4:10). It is a love towards the undeserving and those who deserve the opposite - a love that reaches the "hard cases" (eg Acts 3:14-26 - those implicated in the death of Jesus; Acts 9 - Saul). What are the implications of 'agape' love in evangelism, social action and politics?



## NOTES



**Love**



**Forgiveness**

**Reconciliation**

**Peace**

**Citizenship**

**Truth**

**Servanthood**

**Justice &  
Righteousness**

**Hope**

**Repentance**

# Forgiveness

## Quotations

Love is an act of endless forgiveness, a tender look which becomes a habit.

*Peter Ustinov*

To err is human; to forgive, infrequent.

*Franklin P. Adams*

There is no revenge so complete as forgiveness.

*Josh Billings*

Forgiveness is almost a selfish act because of its immense benefits to the one who forgives.

*Lawana Blackwell*

The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.

*Mohandas K. Gandhi*

Always forgive your enemies; nothing annoys them so much.

*Oscar Wilde*

## Introduction

"Perhaps forgiveness is the last thing mentioned in the Creed because it is the last thing learned in life. Perhaps none of us can understand the forgiveness of God until we ourselves have learned to forgive."

*Joan Chittister*

Forgiveness is central to our understanding of the gospel, and quite easy to talk about, but becomes seriously difficult when we come to practise it. The author of the following reflection explores what it really means to forgive for someone who thinks they know.

In the parable of Jesus in Matthew 18, we are posed a huge challenge – do we truly know God's forgiveness without being forgiving ourselves?

## Essay

Forgiveness is a hard one, isn't it? It lies at the heart of the gospel, yet it goes against so many of our natural instincts. I vividly remember the first time I really made the connection between God's forgiveness of me and the consequent need to pass on some of that grace to others. A situation had arisen in which I had been hurt (nothing particularly unusual in that) but somehow this particular wound had tapped into previous events, where the damage caused had been much more serious. I didn't realise it at the time but the recent hurt was acting like a drill which had struck the black oil of old pain and grievance. Now it was welling up into the present: hot, sticky gouts of visceral anger bubbling from below. I was raging. What's more, I was *right* – how dare these people behave the way they had? So, when my hapless husband suggested the path of forgiveness, I turned to him and through gritted teeth uttered three words which shocked me deeply: "I don't forgive."

It was one of those moments when the contradiction between what you think you believe and what you actually *do* becomes sickeningly apparent. Now I didn't mean that I never forgave – that would be quite an achievement in 20+ years of marriage! I meant, rather, that when things went deep I was better at holding on to grievance than letting it go, better at burying things than dealing with them. You might want to say: "But that's normal. When you've been hurt, you want to hit back. You need to defend yourself from further pain and get your own back if possible". This is what feels right – it seems just: the perpetrator needs to suffer for what they have done. Only then can the pain they have caused diminish; only in this way can you hold on to your sense of yourself and the way things should be in the world. And if there's to be any chance of forgiveness or reconciliation, then the wrongdoer must own up to what they have done, apologise sincerely and mend their ways. Only at the end of such a process should forgiveness even be contemplated . . . shouldn't it?

This question brings us face to face with the complex nature of the issues and feelings that surround forgiveness. It only makes sense as part of a peacemaking process whose goal ideally is the healing of fractured relationships, the mending of what has been broken: both individually and communally, on occasion nationally. It involves issues of justice and identity (will I lose an essential part of myself if I let this go?), truth and honesty. For Christians, it means having the courage to take Jesus seriously in relation to the way we judge both ourselves and others (cf. planks and specks, *Matt. 7:1-5*); being willing, from a grace-filled perspective, to look at our own sin as well as the sin of others.

It was, after all, while we were still sinners that Christ died for us (*Rom. 5:8*). It was to mend his relationship with us that God took the initiative in sending Jesus to effect reconciliation. It was indeed God who paid the price. Is repentance necessary for full reconciliation and restoration of relationship to take place? Definitely. Is the other's repentance also necessary for the process of forgiveness to begin? Christians disagree about this, but I would say "no" because it seems to me that, with God, grace comes first. He makes the first move. Holding on to grievance puts obstacles in the Spirit's path. He can still operate, but with more difficulty.

If we are to take the gospel seriously in this (and other) areas, we really need to let Jesus' teaching, and indeed the whole pattern of his life, *in*; into the places where it hurts and seems too hard; into how we conduct our relationships and what we do when people wound us. We need to look at the way God acts, and pray for that to be reproduced at some level in us as individuals and Christian communities who are committed to learning, in Eugene Peterson's words, "the unforced rhythms of grace". Listen here to Jesus' answer to Peter's question about forgiveness:

Peter: "Lord how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"

## **FORGIVENESS**

Jesus: "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."  
(*Matt. 18:21-22*)

It's not hard to sympathise with the bemused disciple. To forgive a Christian sister or brother seven times seems challenging (and therefore commendable) enough, but seventy-seven times? No wonder he's shocked - such a demand must have seemed ludicrous. Is Jesus serious? The answer, of course, is "yes": Peter has just encountered afresh Jesus' radical attitude to restored relationships within His kingdom. Here, they are a priority. Here, Jesus wants his disciples to move to the rhythms of grace, not law; to reflect in their dealings with others the mercy which they have already experienced from God. And when we look at the Sermon on the Mount we see that this does not only apply to relationships within the Christian community. We are called to love our enemies (*Matt. 5:43-8*), not to condone their evil or gloss over their wrongdoing, but to transform it with good, as God does in us (*Rom. 12:17-21*). In the Beatitudes, God tells us that those who are peacemakers will be called the sons and daughters of God. Why? Because they are doing his work in the world. (*Matt. 5:9*)

Is this easy? No. Will it ever be perfect this side of heaven? No. But can we get better at it? Yes! Through the grace of God and with the help of others, we can learn, over time, to get better at letting grudges and grievances go and to build better relationships. Does this have any direct relevance to Northern Ireland? Of course. Here we have two communities which have hurt each other badly over a considerable period of time; two communities which (generally speaking) deal with their hurt by holding on to it, keeping alive the memories of wrongs inflicted down through the generations; holding on to grievance and woundedness as a way of holding on to a sense of identity - waiting for "the other sort" to change; waiting for "the other side" to see it from "our" point of view. Of course the gospel has something to say to this. It has everything to say to it because it shows us that change is possible. It gives us the hope, in Seamus Heaney's words, "For a great sea change on the far side of revenge." It gives us the faith to believe "That a further shore is reachable from here."

Which brings me back to where I started in this article, to my "Damascus Road experience". There I was, an advocate of peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland, well-versed (as I thought) in the relevance of the gospel to conflict situations, saying that I didn't forgive; that, in effect, my response to serious personal conflict was to put up the shutters, adopt a position of unassailable moral righteousness and surf the tidal wave of anger. A shock, indeed, though you will note, not unrelated to the normative behaviour of the community I grew up in! The incident certainly prompted considerable soul-searching, ultimately beginning a redemptive process of change which involved travelling into some dark places and bringing them (kicking and screaming) into Christ's light.

This journey continues today and has a name, I think. It's called Christian discipleship – in all its ups and downs, struggles and joys. Life touched by the grace of God.

**Janet Morris**

Teacher in Bangor Institute and Belfast Bible College and former member of ECONI Central Co-ordinating Group

With acknowledgement to the work of:  
L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness*  
Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*  
Various works of Jean Vanier

Read: Matthew 18:21-35

### Talk Outline

We are called to be abundantly forgiving (v21-22)

- God's forgiveness does not ignore justice (v23-26)
- But God's forgiveness is overwhelmingly merciful (v27)
- We do not know that forgiveness unless we practise that mercy (v28-33)
- So if we are unmerciful with others, God will be just with us (v34-35)

### Questions

1. Is the other person's repentance necessary for the process of forgiveness to begin? What are the stages of the process of forgiveness?
2. How might I "lose an essential part of myself" in forgiving others? Is this a good/bad thing?
3. What did the servant ask for from the master and what did he receive? What does this teach us about God's forgiveness?
4. How do the servant's actions with the fellow servant compare? Should he never have demanded what he was owed, or did he get it wrong only when he refused mercy? What might we draw from this about the relationship between justice and forgiveness?
5. What is the main focus of this story as an illustration of the kingdom of God? Is it primarily about God's anger when we don't forgive, or his compassion that should lead us to forgive? Or something else?
6. What do these combined thoughts about process, identity, mercy, justice and anger at unforgiveness teach us about our understanding of forgiveness in Northern Ireland? Can we be involved in actions of forgiveness and not just words? (cf. v27, 30-31)

## **FORGIVENESS**

### **Prayer**

Holy God,

You have called us to live holy lives  
in all our relationships,  
and especially among those who are our enemies.

We thank you for the example of Jesus who,  
though he was shamefully abused,  
did not retaliate or offer threats  
but trusted himself to your justice.

Forgive us for those times  
when we have dishonoured the gospel  
by meeting insult with insult,  
or abuse with abuse.

Forgive us for believing the worst about our enemies  
or bearing false witness against our neighbour.

Forgive us for being apathetic in the face of injustice  
and silent when we should have spoken out.

Teach us how to forgive in an unforgiving world.

AMEN

Extract: *For God and His Glory Alone*

## 2 FORGIVENESS

Mt 5:7; 6:9-15;  
7:1-5; 18:21-35  
Mk 11:25  
Lk 7:36-50;  
11:4; 23:34  
Jn 3:16  
Rom 3:9-18;  
3:23-25;  
5:16-21;  
7:15-20;  
12:17-21  
Eph 1:7; 2:8;  
4:29-32  
Col 1:13; 3:13  
1 Tim 1:12-16  
Tit 2:11-14  
1 Pet 2:18-25;  
5:10  
2 Pet 3:9  
1 Jo 1:9-2:2;  
3:8

*"For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."*

THE ROOT CAUSE of the Ulster problem is that we are sinners. We have, like all humanity, a natural inclination to live without God and to rebel against His will. Pride, bitterness and bigotry have the same root cause as racketeering, kidnapping and murder. They are the inevitable consequences of our rebellion against God's purpose for our lives, which is to love and to be loved. All of us have sinned and deserve God's condemnation.

Yet there is complete forgiveness with God. It is not that He treats our sin lightly. The cross of Jesus reminds us how seriously God regards sin. He has borne the pain and cost of the forgiveness that we are invited to receive through the Holy Spirit.

By God's grace those who, through faith, acknowledge their need of forgiveness and accept His salvation in Christ, receive the gift of new life. In Jesus Christ we are completely accepted by God.

Through His amazing grace, God has done everything necessary for the salvation of His enemies. Believing in Christ and repenting of what we have done is our proper response to such grace. It is not the prior condition - for when we were still sinners, Christ died for us. In parable and in teaching us to pray, Jesus shows that we must now follow this model. We are to forgive others as we have been forgiven - **unconditionally**.

In a situation that demonstrates humanity's inhumanity and despair, it is our responsibility to be agents of such forgiveness. This will mean that:

- We take sin and its consequences seriously. To forgive is not to say 'it doesn't matter'.
- There will be an expectation of pain in offering forgiveness. It is not easy to forgive, especially when there is 'justifiable anger'. Nevertheless, we are

called to leave the judgement to God and instead to offer mercy as we have received mercy. It is those who acknowledge that they have been forgiven much who in turn forgive much.

- Those who are offered forgiveness, including terrorists, will experience what it means to be forgiven only when they are truly sorry for what they have done and have a genuine change of heart and mind. However, whether this reaction is present or not, we are commanded by Christ to offer forgiveness unconditionally.

#### STUDY

Read Luke 23:34 and 1 Peter 2:18-25. The key to understanding how Jesus could utter the words in Luke 23:34 is found in 1 Peter 2. How valid is the observation that a refusal to forgive others is an expression of a lack of trust in our Heavenly Father and His care for us?

It would appear that an essential ingredient of politics in Northern Ireland is a long memory for the wrongs of the past. In what way would political aspirations and expressions be changed by taking seriously passages such as Matthew 6:14-15, Mark 11:25 and Colossians 3:12-14?

One of the key words for forgiveness in the New Testament is 'APHESIS'. Its associated verb, 'APHIEMI', was used in everyday language to speak of letting go of something - a ship's mooring or an arrow from a bow. The idea is that when God forgives us He lets go of our sins and does not hold them against us. They become part of the past, they no longer colour His attitude to us either in the present or in the future. Psalm 103:12, Isaiah 43:25 and Micah 7:19 are Old Testament parallels. Why do we find it so difficult to let go of the past? What does such difficulty say regarding our understanding of God's forgiveness?





## NOTES

**Love**

**Forgiveness**



**Reconciliation**

**Peace**

**Citizenship**

**Truth**

**Servanthood**

**Justice &  
Righteousness**

**Hope**

**Repentance**

# Reconciliation

## Quotations

Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one getting burned.

*Buddha*

It is easy enough to be friendly to one's friends. But to befriend the one who regards himself as your enemy is the quintessence of true religion. The other is mere business.

*Mohandas K. Gandhi*

If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility.

*Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*

Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral.

*Paulo Freire*

There would be no society if living together depended upon understanding each other.

*Eric Hoffer*

## Introduction

"Reconciliation should be accompanied by justice, otherwise it will not last. While we all hope for peace it shouldn't be peace at any cost but peace based on principle, on justice."

*Corazon Aquino*

This essay explores the journey leading towards reconciliation. It suggests that, following Christ's example, our sights must be set on the creation of a new human community, one healed and renewed by God's ongoing transformation of our lives and broken relationships.

In Luke 15:11-32 the younger son takes his inheritance and departs for another country, severing his family ties. When he returns, destitute and seeking only his father's pity, much to his surprise and to the indignation of the elder brother he is received back into the family as a son.

Where is the justice in this story? In the case of the elder brother, could it be that an outward appearance of obedience and faithful service belie a heart more concerned with his brother's failings and his own perceived righteousness than with seeing wounds healed and the family reunited?

## Essay

War weariness and not the embrace of reconciliation is the primary driver of the peace. Not the voice of the cynic but an honest recognition that in the difficult task of peacebuilding reconciliation remains an elusive goal. Is a tolerant coexistence the best we can expect from communities where wounds run deep and hatred is kept alive by the insistence that “we” are different to “them”?

No one finds it easy to live in the tension that exists between the call to solidarity with our people and the call to embrace the diversity of others. It is the choice between obedience to the ancestral voices of our traditions and obedience to the voice of God. At a deeply spiritual level it is the tension between remembering the hurt of our people at the hands of others and healing the wounds that threaten to overwhelm us all in a cycle of vengeance.

For the Christian this is at the heart of our call to discipleship. To follow Jesus is to declare ourselves under a new loyalty to the kingdom of God and committed to a new currency of reconciliation that enables us to embrace diversity and celebrate our common humanity in the grace of God.

Lessons in reconciliation often come not from our success but our failure. Reflecting on our struggles towards reconciliation in Ireland to better understand how we can be a people of reconciliation, three pictures come to mind. Reconciliation as a place, a pilgrimage and a process.

In Psalm 85:10 we read, “Truth and mercy will meet; justice and peace will kiss each other.” For John Paul Lederach this is a crossroads where four characters meet – truth, mercy, justice and peace. Each of them has to be present to bring their unique contribution. This place is called reconciliation.

Such reconciliation is a place in the past, that point where God's truth and mercy, justice and peace meet and embrace in the crucified Christ. But it is also a place in the future when Jesus returns to fulfil the desires, aspirations and longings of all the peoples and cultures of our world. A new city with a tree of life the leaves of which are for the healing of the nations.

Yet reconciliation is also a place in the present and that place is the church, God's people, a new human community where Jesus is Lord. Forgiveness is the cure for vengeance, reconciliation the alternative to fear and hostility. This is the hardest challenge. For reconciliation is not simply what we aspire to as Christians; it is what we are as community.

Luke tells us of Jesus, weeping over Jerusalem crying out: “If you, even you had only recognised on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes” (*Luke 19:42*). The implication is that it is possible to know what makes for peace. It may be hidden but it can be discovered. And that discovery involves us being willing to embark on a journey, for the second picture of reconciliation is that it is a pilgrimage.

It is a pilgrimage from hurt to healing that begins with Jesus in the place of lament. “Reconciliation in the evangelical sense”, says Annemie Bosch, “is not built on forgetting but on remembering.” To begin the journey we must acknowledge our wounds and grieve for the hurt of our people, as did Jesus and Jeremiah before him.

But Jesus our healer has a more disturbing lesson for us. Here, as the victim, Jesus weeps over the wounds of the victimiser. The city that is about to crucify him will see judgement for their inability to recognise the time of their visitation from God. For Jesus this is a cause not of delight but of lament.

## RECONCILIATION

The hardest part of reconciliation is our ability not only to grieve for our own wounds but also to acknowledge the wounds of our enemy and weep for their hurt. Furthermore a test of true Christian reconciliation is that the initiative for reconciliation begins with the victim. It is God who is in Christ reconciling a world that has rebelled and rejects the divine rule. Jesus, the truly innocent victim, becomes the vehicle for the reconciliation of the truly guilty party.

"In Christian reconciliation", says Bosch, "we always have two parties – the perpetrator who remembers his guilt and therefore repents and the victim who remembers his suffering but in spite of this forgives." The reality in the sinful complexity of our conflicts is that we can be both perpetrator and victim, called to repent and forgive based on a profound remembering of the hurts of both.

Division and conflict are found not in constitutions or lines drawn on a map, but in the hearts and minds of people. Paul's declaration in Romans, "be transformed by the renewing of your minds", gives us our final picture. God is in the business of transforming hearts and renewing minds. Reconciliation is a process, an ongoing transformation at the heart of our being and communities that results in God's will being done on earth as in heaven.

At the centre of this process is repentance. When Jesus came his essential message was "Repent, for the kingdom of God is near." Repentance in a community must begin with God's people. It must start with an acknowledgement that for too long we have created God in our own culture-bound image and have been paralysed in our effectiveness in response to the idols which have nurtured the conflicts of our world, tending but not healing our wounds.

Furthermore Jesus calls us into new relationships with all those around us, relationships built on love, agape, that committed act of the will to give ourselves for the good of others. And Jesus specifically calls us to *love our enemies*. It is on this basis that we can begin to build trust and work for justice (Luke 6). It is in this that we fulfil the law of God (Luke 10) and it is the offence of this that is the stumbling block to faith (Luke 4).

Jesus was not an escapist. He faced the realities of his context. He accepted the legitimate expression of cultural, political and national preferences. Jesus did not deny these, but redefined them (Luke 9). This involved Jesus in taking risks. The embrace of the prostitute, the touch of the leper, the friendship of the tax collector, the service of the centurion. He challenged the vested interests of privilege and power that militate against walking in the way of peace.

This vision is a vision for the church. The people of God are called to be a place, to be on a pilgrimage and to be part of a process, the common theme of which is reconciliation. This is our responsibility in a broken world. We must avoid the danger of expecting society and the wider community to live as though it was the redeemed church. We must be passionate in our commitment to ensure the church is not allowed to live as though it was the unredeemed community. As those who in Christ have been reconciled to God we share a new reality, the revolutionary potential of the kingdom of God in which all things are being made new.

David W Porter  
Director of ECONI

Read: Luke 15:11-32

### Talk Outline

Reconciliation between people and God:

- The guilty son (v11-16) comes to his senses (v17), recognises his sin against his Father (v18) and humbles himself (v19)
- The injured Father sees his son a long way off (has he been watching and waiting?) and runs to meet him with compassion and acceptance (v20). He exalts his humble son (v21-23)
- Reconciliation means what is lost being found and what is dead being made alive (v24)

Reconciliation between person and person:

- Cannot happen while there is jealousy and bitterness (v25-30)
- Involves the truth about both parties (v31-32)
- Needs people to see first and foremost the joy and celebration of God when the lost are found and the dead made alive (v32)

### Questions

1. As you read the story, with which of the characters do you feel the most sympathy? Why?
2. Both sons share a sense that the younger son has broken some of the basic rules for the ordering of civil life - he has done wrong and dishonoured his family (v18-19 & 29-30). What consequences do each expect should follow from his actions? What actually happens in verses 20-24? How is this different from their expectations?
3. Reconciliation with one son has meant the alienation of the other. Can you identify with what the elder son is saying? Does the welcome given by the father make a mockery of justice?
4. Do you agree that truth, mercy, peace and justice must meet in order for reconciliation to take place? To what extent are they present/absent in the father/son relationships in the story? How do we bring them to bear in our relationships in our churches and in our society?
5. Does doing something wrong make you a bad person? Have we created a culture – Christian or secular – which doesn't permit people to make mistakes, or put the past behind them? Is an apology ever enough? How can we release others from their guilt as the father does in this situation?
6. How would you describe reconciliation? Is there a "right time" for it?

## RECONCILIATION

### Prayer

"He has destroyed the barrier; the dividing wall of hostility"  
*Ephesians 2:4*

Almighty God,

You stand above all the nations,  
You take no side in petty ethnic squabbles,  
You are not interested in arguments but in people,  
You care not about territory or tradition,  
You wish only for justice.

Forgive us Lord for harbouring distrust  
and encouraging suspicion,  
for dealing in half-truths and lies.

We pray for your church,  
that we would not be sucked into one side or other,  
but be able to stand in the gap  
as a living powerful witness  
of how Christ the reconciler can bring together  
those whom tradition and politics would seek to drive apart.

AMEN



Extract: *For God and His Glory Alone*

## 3 RECONCILIATION

Mt 5:23f  
Rom 5:9-11  
2 Cor 5:11-6:2  
Gal 3:26-28  
Eph 2:14-18  
Col 3:11

*"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."*

THE GOOD NEWS emphasises reconciliation. By His death Christ not only has reconciled us to God, but also has healed our divisions and abolished the barriers which separated us from one another. This ministry of reconciliation is the calling of all who follow Christ, and should therefore be visibly demonstrated. To fail to do so in a society that desperately needs the reconciling power of God is a denial of our discipleship.

As Evangelicals, we must accept our share of the blame for any way in which we have contributed to the alienation felt by many of the minority community in Northern Ireland. We have allowed our differences to be turned into barriers, and at times we have been active in that process. Such humanly constructed barriers are caused by our arrogance and attitudes of superiority. They not only mar our community life, but also restrict the effective sharing of the good news.

### STUDY

Read Matthew 5:23-24. Whether the grievance held against us is well founded or not, Jesus expects His disciples to be the initiators of reconciliation. Equally, just as God initiated our reconciliation with Himself, so He expects us to initiate reconciliation with those who we believe have wronged us (2 Cor 5:18-19). What steps could you take to aid reconciliation in your community?

What are the implications of Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 5:16 that "from now on we regard **no-one** from a worldly point of view"?

## NOTES

**Love**

**Forgiveness**

**Reconciliation**



**Peace**

**Citizenship**

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**Hope**

**Repentance**

# Peace

## Quotations

Non-violence leads to the highest ethics, which is the goal of all evolution. Until we stop harming all other living beings, we are still savages.

*Thomas Edison*

We make war that we may live in peace.

*Aristotle*

I like to believe that people in the long run are going to do more to promote peace than our governments. Indeed, I think that people want peace so much that one of these days governments had better get out of the way and let them have it.

*Dwight D. Eisenhower*

If man does find the solution for world peace it will be the most revolutionary reversal of his record we have ever known.

*George C. Marshall*

If you want to make peace, you don't talk to your friends. You talk to your enemies.

*Moshe Dayan*

## Introduction

"A parting of the ways is clearly not yet peace. Much more than just the absence of hostility sustained by the absence of contact, peace is communion between former enemies."

*Miroslav Volf*

Peace or *shalom* is not the natural state of things in a fallen world and has to be deliberately created first of all by God and emulated by God's children. This essay reflects on the goal of peace and on our own readiness for the costly pursuit of peace. The passage from Ephesians raises issues of difference, hostility and distance, as they exist within the body of Christ.

We are not good at dealing with conflict and often seek to avoid it at all costs. It can be hard enough to make peace with those closest to us and with whom we have most in common. How then do we begin to dismantle the hostility we harbour towards those who are "different" from us especially if by keeping ourselves to ourselves that very distance creates a comfortable illusion of peace at the cost of true *shalom*?

"Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God."

*Matthew 5:9*

## Essay

Peace can mean many things; the end of hostilities; a time without war; a period of rest; tranquillity and stillness; an inner sense of contentment. All of these important ideas arise in the Bible.

However, in the Bible plot-line, peace has a fundamental role in describing the beginning and the end. Peace is the state which God creates – the wholeness, rightness and perfection of relationships between God and humans, humans and humans and in creation.

And this peace is the state to which God is working to bring the world; in which God will live with his people; in which there is no sadness or sin or suffering; for which all creation is groaning.

This is the true peace of the Bible, and the peace which the angels announced with the birth of Christ. For at root, this Hebrew *shalom* can be understood, not just as wholeness and perfection, rightness in relationship, but as paying the price, buying back, redemption. To be at peace with someone, in the sense of *shalom*, means that there is sacrifice, there is cost.

Biblical peace, first and foremost, is the establishment of eternal wholeness in relationship between God and humans through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. To this extent peace is the message of the Bible as it expresses between Genesis 3 and Revelation 22 how God does and will bring peace from the state of “unpeace” that the world is in.

As God is the God of Peace, and Christ is the Prince and Preacher of Peace, Christians, who are in Christ, are to be peacemakers and servants of peace, peace loving and full of peace by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is this gospel of peace which drives us to action, fitting us with shoes of readiness. But ready for what?

Paul tells us that it is a “struggle . . . not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” (*Eph. 6:12*)

In other words, the gospel of peace gets us ready for a fight. This is not a fight of violence, bloodshed and death. As Paul has said, it is not a struggle against flesh and blood. So this, if nothing else, warns us against any kind of condoning of, loose association with, even apathy about any such action in Northern Ireland.

It is not a call to law-breaking, disobedience, anarchy or even revolution as such – it must be held in tension with Paul's instructions elsewhere.

But it is a call to stand, and stand actively, against the devil's schemes – schemes which bring about hostility, envy, hatred, doubt, fear, chaos; the ways of the world which emphasise fulfilment, identity and true peace in anything but Jesus Christ.

For the soldier of Christ, it is a call diligently to do right in the eyes of everybody; powerfully to repay good for evil; positively to live at peace with all around us. It is a call to “turn from evil and do good; . . . seek peace and pursue it” (*1 Pet. 3:11*). It is a call to fight against human injustice, and offer instead the message of a God of true justice who will restore real peace.

In the light of this active call to God's peace, what is the plight of political peace in Northern Ireland? What relation does it have to this “spiritual peace”? Can we entrust peace to our secular

## PEACE

governments? Has the Belfast Agreement brought any sort of peace? Is it peace worth fighting for?

It will be necessary for our concern for godly peace to affect our conception of political peace. This may mean allowing the rulers of society power and responsibility to fight for peace. Luther was clear that the state should use the “power of the sword”, as he called it, to restrain evil. He held that Christians in the world needed the protection of the secular government to “bring about external peace and prevent evil deeds.” Calvin also recognised that civil government,

has its appointed end, so long as we live among men, to cherish and protect the outward worship of God, to defend sound doctrine of piety and the position of the church, to adjust our life to the society of men, to form our social behaviour to civil righteousness, to reconcile us with one another, and to promote general peace and tranquillity.<sup>1</sup>

The world will not be receptive to a message of peace if those proclaiming it are marked by their apathy and conflict. We are told first to turn from evil, that is, to repent of any such sinful attitudes in ourselves, and then to pursue peace (*1 Pet. 3:11*). We should always be ready to give a reason for the hope we have, implying that we live in such a way that people want to inquire of us where we get our hope of peace (*1 Pet. 3:15-16*). Christians need to be involved in activities that encourage such questioning to occur:

It is not easy for the message of peace to be heard amongst the hostility and warring of the world, amongst its bitter arguments. The Lord's servant is not to be embroiled in foolish arguments, but to pursue peace and instruct with kindness and gentleness. Rather than being those who shout the loudest, Christians in Northern Ireland need to work to make our context quiet and “peaceful” enough for our message of peace to be heard faithfully and clearly.

Too often the offer of peace, and our involvement in it, seems to be conditional on others somehow deserving it, and properly paying for it. Certainly the establishment of peace involves justice and the judgment of sin as exemplified in Christ, and this will ultimately need to be a part of the “peace process”. But God offered his Son, the Prince of Peace, to the whole world while we were still sinners knowing that many would not recognise or accept him. If we follow God's example, our attitude may well need to change in order that we ceaselessly work for peace notwithstanding the reaction and response.

Since creation, and man's inability to follow God without messing it up, it is noticeable that the achievement of peace has involved cost and sacrifice. Just as peace-making is not optional for the children of the God of peace, neither is the suffering that will come with it. Pursuing peace is costly, but it is a calling if we follow Christ.

For do we have a saviour who remained in heaven to enjoy the fellowship of the Trinity? Or one who came to a broken, agitated, distrusting and apathetic world to proclaim, live for, work for, die for, restore and hence offer peace even to those who rejected him out of a love for his Father and the world?

### Ben Walker

Volunteer Research Assistant with ECONI and part-time lecturer at Belfast Bible College.

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book IV, 20, 2

Read: Ephesians 2:11-22

### Talk Outline

- The state of “unpeace”: without Christ, aliens and strangers to God’s promises, possessing no hope (v11-12); even objects of wrath (cf. 2:3)
- The Peacemaker – Christ: Came to bring reconciliation between man and God, through his death which unites Jew and Gentile. The peace he preached means we have access together to the Father by one Spirit (v13-18)
- The state of peace: being fellow citizens and the dwelling place of the Lord (v19-22)

Therefore, since Christ has achieved this cosmic peace can we:

- Be hostile to our fellow member’s in God’s household?
- Let anything (hostility, division, arguments) get in the way of proclaiming the peace we know to those who are, like we once were, “without God in the world” (v12)?

### Questions

1. Do a quick brainstorm on “peace”. How does the Hebrew term *shalom* differ from ways in which we commonly use the word peace?
2. What does it mean to have an attitude of “readiness for peace”? How might we help nurture such readiness - in our own lives, in our church and our community?
3. In Ephesians, two groups whose identity and heritage are very different are declared one in Christ. What range of diversity exists within the church and within your local congregation? How do we deal with difference and with those who differ from us? What practical steps can we take that might enable us better to understand, value and celebrate difference within the body of Christ?
4. With whom do we find it hardest to make peace? What are the things standing in the way of us making peace with these people or groups? Can these hostilities be put to death by Christ? What role has forgiveness?
5. Identify some of the “dividing walls of hostility” in our society. What can be done in our society and the wider world to break down the walls which stand in the way of *shalom*?
6. To think about: what types of costly action might be required of us to bring hostilities to an end in our family, church or community?

## PEACE

### Prayer

"Let us go that we might walk in his paths . . ."  
"They will beat their swords into ploughshares"  
*Micah 4:2-3*

Lord,

We praise you that your rule knows no borders  
nor your love no ethnic nor tribal limits.

We praise you that through the incarnation of  
your son Jesus Christ  
we have the one true Prince of Peace,  
and the government is on his shoulders.

Forgive us for the times our words and actions  
have reflected the divisions of the earth  
rather than the unity of the kingdom of heaven.

Enable us to play our part  
in creating a community of peace  
where all can live securely.

Help us transform a culture of death and destruction  
into a culture of peace and productivity  
as we learn your ways  
and seek to walk in your paths.

AMEN



Extract: *For God and His Glory Alone*

## 4 PEACE

Ps 34:14;  
37:11, 37  
Pr 16:7  
Is 9:6; 32:17;  
52:7; 53:5  
Mt 5:9  
Jn 13:34f  
Rom 12:17f  
Eph 2:11-22  
Heb 12:14  
Jas 3:17f

*"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God."*

HAVING FOUND PEACE with God and with each other, followers of Jesus are, by definition, peacemakers. The impetus for peacemaking lies in our doctrine of God and in our experience of His grace.

We are to live at peace with all people as far as it depends on us. This implies and demands, firstly, the rejection of violence, whether in the form of action, word or attitude, in all our relationships in the community. It also requires the embracing of actions, words and attitudes which constructively contribute to peace. In following this way, we must not associate ourselves with the use or threat of violence and paramilitary force, even under the guise of self-defence.

### STUDY

Romans 12:18 and Hebrews 12:14 place a great responsibility upon Christians to "make every effort" to live at peace with others. What does "making every effort" imply in Northern Ireland? Can there ever be a time when we can assume that we have fully satisfied this command?

What was David's attitude to Saul in 1 Samuel 23, 24 & 26? What was the effect of David's consistent approach (1 Sam 26:21)? What lessons can we draw from this?

## NOTES

**Love**

**Forgiveness**

**Reconciliation**

**Peace**



**Citizenship**

**Truth**

**Servanthood**

**Justice &  
Righteousness**

**Hope**

**Repentance**

# Citizenship

## Quotations

To have doubted one's own first principles is the mark of a civilized man.

*Oliver Wendell Holmes*

There would be no society if living together depended upon understanding each other.

*Eric Hoffer*

He who would make his own liberty secure must guard even his enemy from oppression; for if he violates this duty he establishes a precedent that will reach to himself.

*Thomas Paine*

If a man be gracious and courteous to neighbours, it shows he is a citizen of the world.

*Francis Bacon*

Bad officials are elected by good citizens who do not vote.

*George Jean Nathan*

So long as governments set the example of killing their enemies, private citizens will occasionally kill theirs.

*Elbert Hubbard*

To try to improve society is not worldliness, but love. To wash your hands of society is not love, but worldliness.

*Sir Frederick Catherwood*

## Introduction

"A society grows great when old men plant trees whose shade they know they shall never sit in."

*Greek proverb*

The implication of the proverb is that great citizenship is doing things, not for one's self, but for the sake of others. This resonates strongly with the way of the kingdom of God.

The following essay develops this theme, concerned with what it means to be a good neighbour. It gives a striking example of someone who in faith and love modelled good citizenship even to those who had wronged him. Paul has this notion in mind too when he writes to the Romans and urges them, out of honour for God, to be obedient and loving citizens.

## Essay

Our lives are interconnected in myriad ways with the lives of people who are outside the circle of family, friends, colleagues and neighbours. How we live affects the lives of our neighbours. We contribute to the welfare and well-being of all in society; indirectly through taxes, for those of us in paid employment; and through the support and direction (or lack of it) we give to those charged with provision of services for the whole of society. Yet we think of politics and government as remote and impersonal, unless of course we are affected ourselves. The challenge for Christians is to see politics, and our involvement in it, as part and parcel of our discipleship – loving our neighbour as ourselves.

So who is our neighbour? The story Jesus told challenges us to include not just the person who may attract our sympathy but also the outsider, the one we exclude. Jesus lived this out in his own ministry, time and again recognising, affirming and setting as a standard the faith of those who were considered to be outside the community of faith at that time. So from his life and from his teaching our view of our neighbour is stretched to include those with whom we would not normally identify ourselves.

The early church faced this as they struggled with how Gentiles like us could share the faith, and its dramatic and successful growth in the Roman world was largely the results of the efforts of one man, Paul, who saw no-one as beyond the reach of God's care. The attitudes of Jesus and Paul are totally in line with the care God instructed the embryonic people of Israel to have for the welfare of the alien and stranger in their midst. In our private and individualist society, our citizenship is an opportunity to pay attention to the needs of the marginalised, the powerless and the alien and stranger in our midst. Since we are willing to give our money to Christian and other organisations involved in such care shouldn't we also be willing to use the power we have as citizens to focus the use of our collective financial resources for the good of all?

Are we thankful for the opportunity and responsibility we have for contributing to others lives? Do we pray for wise and careful governance so that all may benefit but especially those on the margins of society? Do we discuss with God how we can be more responsible citizens, more loving neighbours? When we lay claim to our rights as citizens, do we also ask how we can ensure that these rights are available to all other citizens?

So, more specifically, what might being a good citizen involve? Let us look at a powerful successful country in early biblical times. It was a sophisticated, technologically advanced society. Wealthy, stable, well-ordered it had a highly developed government and justice system. Individuals had a comfortable, indeed luxuriant, lifestyle. Its religion was powerful and adhered to all by all, but God was not included. It was confident and complacent. It seemed secure but in fact it was heading for disaster. It was totally dependent on one natural phenomenon and therefore very vulnerable.

God knew, God cared and therefore He acted. He dropped a strong hint of the impending disaster to the country's ruler. The ruler had a choice – did he or didn't he pick up on God's nudge? He did, he sought guidance and he took advice, he recognised ability, he set in place measures that would and did avert the disaster. He accepted God's offer of help.

God's human partner in the situation also had a choice – would he accept that God cared enough about this "God-less" society to want to save it? He did, so he got involved, first by giving advice. He had a further choice – would he use his abilities and energy to help this country prepare for and avert the disaster? He did and it took 14 years.

## CITIZENSHIP

This man had a painful past. He could have been bitter and vengeful towards his family and towards this country where he was an alien. He had been unjustly treated on more than one occasion, costing him many years in prison. But he chose to create a better future for these people who had wronged him, who didn't recognise his God or share his faith. It involved taking his eyes off his pain and sense of injustice and seeing God's perspective and accepting the opportunity he had to help God achieve His purposes. This was his faith and it was reflected in the names of his children: "It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and my father's household" and "It is because God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering."

Joseph wasn't a citizen of Egypt, yet he worked for the well-being of all its people. Central to his motivation was his understanding that God cared enough for this people to want their well-being. How would we have acted if we had been in Joseph's position? How big is our view of God?

God is good to all, has compassion on and loves all He has made (*Ps. 145:9, 13, 17*). He cares particularly for the oppressed, the hungry, prisoners, the blind, those who are bowed down, the alien, the fatherless and the widow (*Ps. 146: 7-9*). As disciples we are to be like-minded and have no limits to those to whom we are to do good. We have the opportunity to do so using the time, the money and the rights and responsibilities we have as citizens in a wealthy democracy. Are these the "talents" we are to put to use and for use of which we will be judged? (*Matt. 24:14-30*) Are our fellow-citizens and the stranger and alien in our midst the needy ones that we either help or ignore and thus incur Christ's pleasure or His wrath? (*Matt. 25: 31-46*)

Citizenship is about using all our gifts and resources and "encouraging" government (of whatever state of which we are citizens) to use the resources they have for the good of all, including the marginalised and the outsider. Put simply, citizenship is about being a good neighbour.

### Ethel White

Research Scientist in Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, lecturer in Queen's University, Belfast and Chair of the ECONI Board

Read: Romans 13

### Talk Outline

Citizenship is the God-given opportunity and God-ordained responsibility to contribute to others' lives.

- Regarding the state: to do good and obey those in authority as God's servants for the sake of good, Godly governance. (v1-7)
- Regarding fellow citizens: to love them as neighbours as our fulfilment of the law (v8-10)
- Regarding ourselves: to live lives that honour Christ, doing all we can for his sake, not what we can get away with for our sake (v11-14)

### Questions

1. "Since we are willing to give our money to Christian and other organisations involved in such care, shouldn't we also be willing to use the power we have as citizens to focus the use of our collective financial resources for the good of all?" Discuss whether you think this is true, and if it has any implication for our view of taxes – are they a way by which we fulfill the commandment to love our neighbour as ourselves?
2. What are legitimate and illegitimate ways for Christians to "encourage" the government to "use the resources they have for the good of all"? Are there occasions when it would be right to challenge, or even oppose, civic authority?
3. Paul must have heard something about the church in Rome which caused him to write the first few verses of chapter 13. If he was around today, might he be hearing the same things about us, or are we good subjects of the governing authorities?
4. The words "is due" are mentioned four times in verse 7. Are these a get-out clause ("only if you think it is due") or a command ("recognise that it is due")?
5. How is love the "fulfillment of the law" (v10)? Is it just about avoiding doing wrong, or are there positive things we can do? Give some practical examples, particularly for Northern Ireland.
6. Read verses 11-14. Would you agree that "What makes people good Christians makes them good citizens" (*Daniel Webster*)?

## **CITIZENSHIP**

### **Prayer**

#### **Leader:**

God beyond borders,  
We bless you for strange places and different dreams;  
For the demands and diversity of a wider world;  
For the distance that lets us look back and re-evaluate;  
For new ground where broken stems can take root,  
Grow and blossom.  
We bless you for the friendship of strangers;  
The richness of other cultures;  
And the painful gift of freedom.

#### **All:**

Blessed are you, God beyond borders.

#### **Leader:**

But if we have overlooked the exiles in our midst;  
Heightened their exclusion by our indifference;  
Given our permission for a climate of fear;  
And tolerated a culture of violence;

#### **All:**

Have mercy on us,  
God who takes side with justice.  
Confront our prejudice;  
Stretch our narrowness;  
Sift out our laws and our lives  
With the penetrating insight of your Spirit  
Until generosity is our only measure.

AMEN

(Iona Community, *The Pattern of our Days* (ed) Kathy Galloway, Wild Goose, 1996)



Extract: *For God and His Glory Alone*

## 5 CITIZENSHIP

Ex 20:4  
Mt 22:21  
Acts 5:29  
Rom 13:1-7  
Eph 2:19  
Col 2:8  
1 Pet 2:13-17;  
4:12-19

*"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."*

AS CITIZENS OF HEAVEN, our primary loyalty is to the Lord Jesus Christ. All other loyalties are secondary and must be judged by the values and priorities of this one. It is idolatry to equate God with any one culture or political ideal. It is quite wrong to require allegiance to any of them as evidence of allegiance to Him.

There is no room, therefore, for the identification of either Unionism or Nationalism as being particularly expressive of Christian faith. For too long Ulster Protestantism has passed without question as biblical Christianity when, in many particulars, it owes as much to culture as it does to Scripture. Seldom is it admitted among us that one can be a true Evangelical and not be a Unionist.

There are Evangelical Christians living on this island whose culture is British and whose political preference is for a continued link with Britain. Equally there are those whose culture is Irish and whose political preference is for a united Ireland. From the biblical viewpoint both are legitimate preferences.

Although our true citizenship is in heaven, we are still commanded to be good citizens. Respect for and obedience to government and the law is our normal Christian duty. If we were commanded by the state to act in a manner contrary to the Word of God, nonviolent disobedience would be necessary. But as this situation does not apply in the province at this time, our responsibility as citizens is to submit to the duly constituted government and rule of law.

Correspondingly, the government of any state has a responsibility to restrain and punish evildoers. In this it is entitled to the support and involvement of its citizens in the impartial enforcement of the law, in the administration of justice and in the encouragement of law-abiding behaviour and good citizenship.

### STUDY

From the following passages list the priorities and principles of Christian citizenship: Matthew 5:13-16; 22:15-22; Romans 13:1-7; 1 Timothy 2:1-2; Titus 3:1-2, 8; 1 Peter 2:13-14; 4:12-19.

## NOTES

**Love**

**Forgiveness**

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**Citizenship**



**Truth**

**Servanthood**

**Justice &  
Righteousness**

**Hope**

**Repentance**

# Truth

## Quotations

I am not sincere, even when I say I am not.

*Jules Renard*

Your assumptions are your windows on the world. Scrub them off every once in a while or the light won't come in.

*Alan Alda*

The secret of life is honesty and fair dealing. If you can fake that, you've got it made.

*Groucho Marx*

The truth is rarely pure, and never simple.

*Oscar Wilde*

There are two kinds of truth, truth that lights the way and truth that warms the heart.

*Raymond Chandler*

The fact that astronomies change while the stars abide is a true analogy of every realm of human life and thought, religion not least of all. No existent theology can be a final formulation of spiritual truth.

*Harry Emerson Fosdick*

A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes.

*Mark Twain*

Men occasionally stumble over the truth, but most of them pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing ever happened.

*Sir Winston Churchill*

Truth-tellers are not always palatable. There is a preference for candy bars.

*Gwendolyn Brooks*

## Introduction

"The truth that makes men free is for the most part the truth which men prefer not to hear."

*Herbert Agar*

The Bible tells us that the "truth that sets men free" is actually a person, Jesus, the "Truth". The author of the following essay wants to reclaim the notion of "biblical truth" from certain misconceptions and help us to understand that through "biblical truth" we should be encountering and in relationship with this person, the "Truth".

In Ephesians, Paul is concerned for truth that shapes and builds the unity of the body, not expressed in a way that is unlovingly divisive or unnecessarily confining.

Throughout this study the pressing question is: Are we willing to hear when we are challenged that, for all our talk of "truth", we have too often failed to represent faithfully the "Truth"?

## Essay

### Truth in Scripture

"Biblical truth", by which I mean the vision of truth which we gain from the scriptures of both the Old and New Testaments, is comprehensive in its reach and wide-ranging in its scope. It is certainly much more than the rather static and cerebral concept to which it has been reduced in much of our thinking.

The Hebrew root *'amn*, specifically the common noun *'emet*, carries the connotation of reliability and trustworthiness. We see this in Psalm 119:142 where it is applied to the law of God. It can also have the straightforward meaning of truth as opposed to falsehood – a certain statement is factually true (1 Kgs. 10:6) or has been investigated and its veracity established (Deut. 13:14). However, significantly by far its greatest usage relates to truth as a characteristic of Yahweh. In Exodus 34:5-7 God performs his, to date, greatest act of self-revelation as he passes in front of Moses on Sinai proclaiming, among other things, that he is a God who "abounds in faithfulness". Truth therefore in Old Testament parlance was not so much conceptual or factual but personal, often paralleled with the strong word *hesed* "covenant love" (Ps. 108:4). This is reflected later in Paul's words to Timothy regarding God's inability to be faithless (2 Tim. 2:13).

Another aspect of the word's meaning concerns moral righteousness and integrity. It is important to realise that this link between truth and faithfulness and moral uprightness does not necessarily imply sinlessness or perfection, since two of the characters specifically referred to as exhibiting this truthful integrity are David (1 Kgs. 3:6) and Hezekiah (2 Kgs. 20:3). As fallen sinful human beings it is still possible, under grace to reflect something of God's *'emet*.

The fact that truthfulness is an integral part of Yahweh's character can be seen again in the Ten Commandments where, just as God's love of fidelity is reflected in the 7th commandment, his love of life in the 8th, so his commitment to truth is reflected in the command not to bear false witness.

His people of course failed in this area as they did in all the others, so much so that by the time of Hosea God could utter the stinging criticism that there was neither faithfulness (*'emet*), love (*hesed*), nor knowledge of God in the land. The singular absence of these three key qualities was to prove the unpromising context in which One would arise who would take the concepts of truth, love and God-knowledge to a whole new level.

The main New Testament term for truth is *alethein*, and again this covers everything from straightforward factual truth (1 Tim. 2:7; Mark 5:33) and the absolute truth of God's word (Eph. 1:3) to the same sense of dependability and uprightness that we saw in the Old Testament as indicative of the character of God (Rom. 3:7). John is particularly fond of the term (both *alethein* and the well-known word *amen*). To him it refers to ultimate reality: Jesus is full of grace and truth (John 1:14) and specifically says he is the truth (John 14:6; see also 5:33; 8:32). The extent to which the concept of truth was central to the ministry of Christ can be seen in the fact that a mammoth 78 times in the Gospels Jesus uses the phrase "I tell you the truth", including the characteristic idiom in John "Truly, Truly I say . . ." (*amen, amen*).

### Proposition or person?

If we look at the wide range of usage within the New Testament we can see without doubt that truth is often clearly presented in a propositional form. As such, it can be suppressed (Rom. 1:18,25) rejected (Rom. 2:8; 2 Tim. 4:4; Titus 1:14) denied (Jam. 3:14) set forth (2 Cor. 4:2) spoken (2 Cor. 12:6; Eph. 4:15) believed (2 Th. 2:12) "walked in" (2 Jn. 1:4) and known (Titus 1:1; 1 Jn. 2:20-21).

However, it can also be rejoiced with (1 Cor. 13:6) live in us (2 Jn. 1:2 cf. 2 Cor. 11:10), acted against (2 Cor. 13:8), obeyed (Gal. 5:7; 1 Pet. 1:22), loved (1 Tim. 3:15; 2 Th. 2:10 – where it is paralleled

## TRUTH

directly with God himself), and belonged to (*1 Jn. 3:19* where it is paralleled with the Spirit cf. *John 4:24; 1 Jn. 5:6*). In addition people can be “loved in the truth” (*3 Jn. 1*) and the truth can actively bear witness (*3 Jn. 12*).

Whilst not denying the basic propositional component of truth, these other references force us to broaden our understanding and begin to see truth as something more personal and dynamic. How, for instance, is it possible to rejoice with or act against a concept; or love, or obey, or belong to a proposition? It seems that the New Testament writers, and John in particular, are taking seriously the statement of Christ where uniquely, and alone in history, he makes the existential statement “I am the truth”, and are therefore indeed seeing Him as the fullness of God’s revelation.

Scripture therefore, while attesting its own veracity, trustworthiness, reliability, truthfulness etc. (*John 17:17; 2 Cor. 4:2; Ps. 119 passim*), is not only the locus of truthful statements, but also the place where we encounter the One who is the epitome of truth, and where we learn how to order our lives so that we can “walk in” that truth; i.e. to so make it part of constitution that not just what we say but how we live reflects the utter trustworthiness of our God. In fact, Paul’s famous statement in Ephesians 4:15, often translated “speaking the truth in love”, is more accurately to be rendered “truthing in love”. Truth is not only to be verbal, but visible.

### “Biblical Truth” – and beyond!

For many years, for many people, the phrase “biblical truth” has been synonymous with doctrinal or creedal statements. As such it has been, for some, a buzzword of (a certain type of) orthodoxy and, for others, a quasi-fundamentalist slogan to be avoided. In the light of the biblical material surveyed above, I would suggest that the phrase needs to be retained and reclaimed. In popular usage the two terms are almost equal in value, and the emphasis is on the truth statements contained in the Bible. In reclaiming the term, let me suggest that the word “biblical” should qualify the word “truth” and that the emphasis should be on the type of truth, the approach to truth, the understanding of truth, which the Bible itself encourages. A truth that is both propositional and relational, that does not exclude statements of fact or reality but which goes beyond them to include an encounter with the Truth Himself. To hold to our faith convictions firmly but to do so in a way which does not belie those very convictions. In short, to “truth in love”. This is surely what is presented to us as the only type of “biblical truth”.

### Truth for our time

Any attempt to ascertain the appropriate place of this type of “biblical truth” in our Northern Irish context will involve the asking of serious questions regarding the way in which this concept has been abused in the past, as well as tentative suggestions for the way forward.

### Looking back

Specifically the following questions may prove helpful:

- In what ways might the condemnation of Hosea 4:1 be true of our land today?
- How big a part does the development of Godlike character play in our traditional approach to standing for the truth?
- In what ways has our concern for truth been expressed and pursued individualistically, (i.e. outside of community, dialogue and relationships)? How is this manifest in the way we deal with those with whom we disagree? How has this undermined “biblical truth”?
- What might a more relational, community-based pursuit of truth look like in our context?

- In what ways have we paid lip service to the truth but failed in being pro-active in making our society more truthful?
- In what ways has our concern for truth only been partial? In what ways, and why, have we been afraid of the implications of acknowledging the truth in “the other side”? How might seeing truth as more personal than a list of doctrines threaten us?
- How have our attempts to proclaim the truth been negated by our less than truthful methods? What role have half-truth, misrepresentation, false witness, unhelpful generalisations and stereotypes played in our religious and political development in Northern Ireland? How can we behave more truthfully in these areas?
- If “biblical truth” still includes the articulation of true statements and the exposure of false ideas and doctrines (see above), then how can this be pursued in a way which is faithful to the character of God? Is there a difference between “Truth”, “biblical truth” and our formulations of the truth? If so, how can we avoid equating them all?
- Is there any significance in the fact that while we often employ the popular idiom “standing for the truth”, the biblical image is not static but dynamic: “walking in the truth”? (Ps. 26:3; 86:11; 1 Jn. 1:6; 3 Jn. 3) What would it mean for us to walk in the truth in a conflictual or divided context?

### **Looking ahead**

The role of truth in a post-conflict situation has been highlighted most obviously in recent years with the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa and the call in some quarters for a similar one to be held here. Similarly, the pursuit of the Omagh bombers through the civil courts, the Bloody Sunday enquiry and the calls for other tribunals to be set up to investigate past atrocities, have put the quest for truth to the forefront of the political agenda. While Christians should support and agitate for anything which uncovers and enhances truth and which exposes duplicity and deception, we must recognise that the discovery of facts alone does not constitute truth, in fact can turn truth into a weapon. If we pursue the relational, community-based vision of truth espoused above, there may be times when the desire to establish facts may need to be subordinated to the greater goal of repairing and restoring community. On some, though certainly not all occasions, a blow-by-blow account of the facts may not contribute in any way to this greater cause.

What must at all costs be avoided is a never-ending sequence of investigation that never looks beyond the facts nor addresses the crucial issue of how we live with the truth. Or, in other words, how truth in the factual sense can aid truth in the deeper sense of lifestyle, where “brute facts” are balanced by other truths such as grace and forgiveness.

Into a context where many have defined their identity, organised their strategies, prioritised their activities, ostracised their opponents, and justified their actions in the name of defending the truth, we do well to remember that the Truth we serve calls us to vocal and visible proclamation, not to defence. He is more than capable of defending Himself.

### **David Montgomery**

Associate Minister at Knock Presbyterian Church and a member of ECONI

## TRUTH

Read: Ephesians 4

### Talk Outline

- We are one in the body of Christ – there should be humility, gentleness and love (v1-6)
- There is Christ-ordained diversity in the body (v7-11) so that we might be taught (v11) and therefore active (v12) to become mature (v13)
- “Truthing” therefore is about building, supporting and growing together (v14-16)

Truth is not:

- About sensual preference (v17-20)
- To be separated from lived holiness (v21-24)
- To be spoken in anger, bitterness, malice or slander; which will grieve the Holy Spirit (v26-27, 30-31)

But is:

- To be expressed with the benefit of others in mind (v25, 29)
- To be expressed with Christlike kindness, compassion and forgiveness (v32)

### Questions

1. In his section *Looking back*, the author poses some searching questions. Choose two to think about or discuss as a group.
2. What does Paul see as being the main attributes of a Christian calling? (v1-3) Does the unity which Paul speaks of in v3 mean the same as unanimity, uniformity, union?
3. How does the concept of “truth” fit in with this calling and what should characterise our conveying of it? (think about these short passages . . . v4-6, 11-13, 15, 21-24, 25-27, 29-32)
4. Paul seems to suggest that foolish arguments are a lack of maturity (v14). How should we handle the grey areas where we differ?
5. The phrase in verse 15 is translated by the author as “truthing in love” and by the amplified Bible as “let our lives lovingly express truth”. Do we too often make the assumption that we communicate only with our mouths (and just possibly with our ears!)? What might this say about conveying the truth of Jesus in Northern Ireland?



## Prayer

*Given that the subject is Truth, this prayer comes in the form of a creed, expressing the living power of God*

We believe in one God,  
Who gave birth to the cosmos and to us,  
Creating, out of nothing but his will,  
A world of rocks, plants and human longing;  
Whose eyes will not fail to cry for it all.

We believe in one God,  
Who redeems the waste of all things good,  
Weaving, from the griefs of our freedom,  
New and un-hoped for things;  
Whose mercy will not fail  
To heal it all.

We believe in one God,  
Who lives among all people in all places,  
Calling us from our despair and sleep  
To live out Easter in our generation;  
Whose love will not fail  
To hold us all.

(Sophie Churchill, *Dare to Dream* (ed.) Geoffrey Duncan, Fount 1995)

## 6 TRUTH

Ps 25:4-5; 26:3;  
43:3; 51:6;  
119  
Pr 23:23  
Zc 8:16  
Mt 22:16  
Jn 1:14, 17;  
4:23; 8:32;  
14:6, 16;  
16:13; 17:17  
Eph 4:15, 25;  
6:14  
Phil 4:8  
2 Tim 2:15  
1 Jo 3:18-20

*"Jesus answered, 'I am...the Truth...'"*

COMMITTED TO BIBLICAL FAITH, we must constantly discern and apply the truth of Scripture to our lives and our community. This involves commitment to biblical truth not only in word, but also in action and attitude. Biblical truth manifests itself in the fruit of the Spirit in character and not in doctrine alone. Jesus, in all of His being, is Truth.

There is no place for bigotry, prejudice or hatred: we must recognise good and truth where they exist in other traditions. Sectarianism arises when we make an absolute identification between our formulations of the truth and *the* Truth, and then only accept others as Christians if they accept our formulations. Often it is those of us who claim to be evangelicals who have displayed such un-Christlike attitudes.

We must have the humility to see that the Truth of the Gospel is far greater than any of our formulations, because at present we see through a glass darkly, not yet face to face. This does not mean that we consider creeds and confessions unimportant, nor that we condone any doctrines that we regard as false. As those who are zealous for Truth, we consider such formulations not as ends in themselves but as means of perceiving 'the Truth' in Christ.

### STUDY

*In the light of John 4:9 it is significant that Jesus takes time with the woman of Samaria, uses Samaritans to illustrate correct moral attitudes, (Luke 10:25-37; 17:11-19) and strongly rebukes James and John in Luke 9:51-56. If Jesus will not accept the popular stereotypes of his day surely evangelicals must challenge the stereotyped images, myths and half-truths of our own day.*

*Try to identify the types of images that Protestants have of Catholics and vice versa. How would Jesus deal with such ideas? (This kind of exercise is best accomplished by people of different traditions coming together and explaining sensitively how they think about each other, rather than as an exercise in speculating out of ignorance.)*



## NOTES

**Love**

**Forgiveness**

**Reconciliation**

**Peace**

**Citizenship**

**Truth**



**Servanthood**

**Justice &  
Righteousness**

**Hope**

**Repentance**

# Servanthood

## Quotations

Service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on earth.

*Muhammad Ali*

The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.

*Mohandas K. Gandhi*

He profits most who serves best.

*A. F. Sheldon* (motto for International Rotary)

Freely we serve because we freely love.

*John Milton*

## Introduction

"Everybody can be great . . . because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love."

*Martin Luther King Jr*

Servanthood is so clearly part of Christian life that we often overlook its implications. Yet three things become clear from this study. First, servanthood is often costly; second, servanthood is something all Christians can do; and third, we have a model for our own practice in the life and words of Jesus.

The opening reflection challenges us to see the radical nature of servanthood that calls into question the values of the world in which we live. The following passage for study from Mark's gospel brings us into an encounter with the Son of Man who came not to serve but to be served, and with disciples and would-be disciples as they face the challenge of Jesus' call to follow him.

Servanthood is costly, but Jesus is our model.

## Essay

There is a hymn that begins: "Brother, sister let me serve you, let me be as Christ to you".<sup>1</sup> This strikes at the heart of servanthood: being Christ-like. Paul says as much in Philippians when he writes: "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus." (*Phil. 2:4-5*).

The thing is, it is not just a particularly holy thing to do. Being a servant is not to be thought of as an added level of wondrous lowliness and humility or deep piety. We shouldn't think of service as the way of "Saints" alone, but of all saints – all Christians. Servanthood is *the* way of the kingdom. It is for you, says Paul, "if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ . . . any comfort from his love . . . any fellowship with the Spirit . . . any tenderness and compassion . . ." (*Phil. 2:1*).

We see the same thing in Mark. Jesus states: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." The implications for all his followers are spelled out not just in the preceding verses but in earlier chapters: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." (*Mark 8:34*); "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all." (*Mark 9:35*).

Sure enough, you would have got this message just reading Isaiah 40 onwards. The Lord's way is to work through his suffering servant – the person and the people.

But servanthood can only follow a secure identity rooted in that person, Jesus, and his achievement in making us children of God. Jesus did not "grasp equality" with God, yet was secure in his relationship with his Father. We cannot serve while we are grasping at an identity which rests on earthly reward or appreciation, or the hope of being moved up the pecking order from apprentice-servant to servant-in-charge. Only with our hope, our trust, our identity held firmly in our relationship with God and in nothing else are we able to "make ourselves nothing" and serve without thought of esteem, repayment or recognition.

This means understanding that the reward for service is not found in the world. Whatever thanks people give us; however great it is to receive praise and honour; whatever the world encourages us to think we deserve as recompense for the sweat and tears we have put in, Christian servanthood must look to Christ for its meaning and reward. It is "encouragement from being united with Christ" (*Phil. 2:1*); gladness and rejoicing that we are like-minded, "one in spirit and purpose" (*Phil. 2:2*); delight at hearing those words: "Well done good and faithful servant" (*Matt. 25:21-23*), sharing the master's happiness. On one hand this is a terrifically hard thing. It is the crunch of being aliens in the world and understanding our completeness in Christ alone. But on the other hand, it means that we don't have to rate ourselves by the esteem, or lack thereof, that the world gives us. God is pleased with our service when we offer ourselves as spiritual sacrifices (*Rom. 12:1*; *Heb. 13:16*). Everybody is able to be a "good and faithful servant" in the eyes of the Father: It doesn't depend on what our "position" is in life or even the church. It relies on our response to what God has given each of us to do; to the opportunities he sets before us.

Not only does Christ call us to servanthood, but he also enables us to serve, that we may enable others to serve too. When Jesus asks that amazing question "What do you want me to do for you?" (*Matt. 20:32*) he is offering the most amazing service to the two blind men. Now it may seem obvious that they choose to be healed. But this means that no longer will they rely on the service of others around them as before; no longer can they be tempted to root their identity in their constant incapacity to see or help themselves; healing means there is no longer any reason not to

## SERVANTHOOD

serve others and follow Christ, which is what they did. Because we have been and are being made whole by Christ's service for us, our responsibility, without excuse, is to set about following him and serving others. We neither need nor should think of ourselves as unable. It may be tempting and easy to let others be the servants, but we have no reason not to be. And serving others means enabling them to serve too; not being a crutch for their dependency, but a facilitator for their own life of service.

However, this is not to detract from the importance of being served. In fact it emphasises the need to let others be servants as part of the kingdom way and to be one in the spirit and purpose of the church. As the hymn continues: "Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant, too." Peter had to learn to have the grace to let Christ wash his feet. We also need to get rid of our self-help pride and let Christ serve us through others.

A servant-community is a powerful revelation of the message and purpose of God in the midst of a society that is vying for individual rights, recognition and power, and in which self-assertion is the recommended route. The servant attitude that puts others first out of love for them rather than self is wholly antithetical to the way of the world. What an impact Christian servanthood, faithfully practised in community, would have on a society that is searching for meaningful identity, purpose and love, where community serves the individual, rather than the individual serving the community. If we could embody in our churches that Christ-like servant-heart that longs to offer true healing, identity, unity and purpose, surely we would have an effect on our hurt, lost, fractured and uncertain society.

### Ben Walker

Volunteer Research Assistant with ECONI and part-time lecturer at Belfast Bible College

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Gillard, *Brother, Sister, Let Me Serve You*



Read Mark 10:13-52

### Talk Outline

Servanthood is the way into the kingdom by Jesus (v45) and the way of the kingdom, as exemplified by the King, the Son of Man (v43-45)

- Servanthood means setting aside pride and position (v13-16)
- Servanthood means setting aside material self-dependence (v17-31)
- Servanthood means setting aside worldly ambition (v32-42)
- Servanthood means accepting the amazing service of Jesus (v45-51) and following him (v52)

### Questions

1. In a world which rests on earthly reward or appreciation do we have to live differently in the church and in society? If not, how can we bring the servanthood values of the church into that society?
2. "Serve without thought of esteem, repayment or recognition." Is this a good description of your church or of your life?
3. For the rich man (v17-22) the challenge to serve was costly, not just in terms of his wealth but also his reputation. What might the cost be for contemporary Christians in responding to the call to serve? What has it cost us?
4. James and John (v35-40) aspired to greatness in the kingdom of God, but their ambition had blinded them to the nature of true greatness. Why do you think James and John thought this way, despite having spent so much time in the company of Jesus? Can our ambitions for the kingdom of God also blind us to the way of service?
5. Bartimaeus (v46-52) was dependent on the service of others to survive. He was vulnerable, but he also knew where he stood. When he met Jesus he was healed and he "followed him in the way". Is it easier to be served than to serve? Can a relationship of service become one of exploitation? How can we ensure that service is about empowerment rather than dependency?
6. At the core of this passage is Jesus teaching in verses 42-45 regarding the nature of service. Is this your experience of Christian leadership in the community or in the church? In what way might your church look different if we were all able to live to Jesus' model?

## **SERVANTHOOD**

### **Prayer**

Lord Jesus,

In a world of selfishness greed and power  
we thank you for the way you have overcome the world.

Expecting you to come in displays of strength  
we find you in the weakness of a baby.  
Expecting you to demonstrate your glory  
you come concealed in the flesh and bone of a man.  
Expecting you to assert your power  
you submit to insult and humiliation  
and hang meekly on a cross.

In you we see the nature of God  
and learn the power of compassion  
and the strength of weakness.

Help us to live in the light of your life  
and your ways in the world.

Teach us to serve rather than expect service  
and show us the freedom of following you  
that the world may believe.

AMEN

Extract: *For God and His Glory Alone*

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Is 42:1-4;  
52:13-53:12  
Zc 3:8-10  
Mt 20:25-28  
Mk 10:45  
Lk 9:51-55  
Jn 13:1-17  
Rom 15:17f;  
16:17f  
1 Cor 9:19-23  
2 Cor 4:5; 8:9  
Phil 2:5-11

*"Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant..."*

AT THE HEART of our understanding of Jesus is the concept and attitude of the Servant. The community of His followers consists of those who serve, instead of rule; who suffer, instead of inflict suffering; whose fellowship crosses boundaries, instead of reinforcing them.

Living like this involves the setting aside of status and power, and the giving of ourselves in sacrificial love. The towel (which Jesus used in washing His disciples' feet) and not the sword, is our symbol of service. By loving in this way we take up our cross and follow Him.

To serve others is to desire to understand, with compassion, their anxieties and to place their needs before our own. We confess that often we have celebrated our cultural and political traditions, such as the anniversary of events, both recent and ancient, in a triumphalistic manner. This is inconsistent with the mind of Christ, the Servant-King.

Our commitment to a particular political ideology may be for self-centred reasons, such as economic or social advantage, without consideration of the hurts, anxieties and needs of the rest of this divided society. Such a commitment would be a denial of the way of Christ.

### STUDY

Read John 13:1-17. Notice the basis for Jesus' confidence which enables Him to carry out a menial and demanding task in front of His disciples (v3 & 4). Is it true that we celebrate anniversaries in a "triumphalistic manner"? Is the inability to humble ourselves before others a sign that we lack the strength and security of Jesus? How can we learn to live like Him?

Was Paul misguided in becoming "all things to all men", "a slave to everyone" for the sake of the gospel? (1 Cor 9:19-23) If not, how ought we to follow his example (Phil 3:17)?

## NOTES

**Love**

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**Citizenship**

**Truth**

**Servanthood**



**Justice &  
Righteousness**

**Hope**

**Repentance**

# Justice & Righteousness

## Quotations

Self-righteousness is like body odour. It is difficult to smell your own.

*John Dunlop*

I have always found that mercy bears richer fruits than strict justice.

*Abraham Lincoln*

Justice is the bread of the nation; it is always hungry for it.

*François de Chateaubriand*

Children are innocent and love justice, while most adults are wicked and prefer mercy.

*Gilbert K. Chesterton*

Justice is always violent to the party offending, for every man is innocent in his own eyes.

*Daniel Defoe*

Though force can protect in emergency, only justice, fairness, consideration and cooperation can finally lead men to the dawn of eternal peace.

*Dwight D. Eisenhower*

Justice is the firm and continuous desire to render to everyone that which is his due.

*Justinian*

The love of justice in most men is only the fear of themselves suffering by injustice.

*François de La Rochefoucauld*

Justice and power must be brought together, so that whatever is just may be powerful, and whatever is powerful may be just.

*Blaise Pascal*

## Introduction

"If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"

*Alexander Solzhenitsyn*

Justice and righteousness can seem both simple and essential – some are evil and should be punished, some are righteous and should be rewarded. Yet, as Solzhenitsyn (a good man who endured unspeakable evil) reminds us, the demands of justice and righteousness must be worked out in a world where things are rarely so straightforward.

In his reflection the author looks at this challenge through the eyes of the Psalmist who recognises the injustices of life but remains confident of God's vindication. The study questions take up these themes from Psalm 37. In a fallen world injustice will always be with us; but God will establish justice and righteousness and so we must "wait for the Lord" (Ps. 37:34).

## Essay

Which debate do you think is most likely to get the phone lines humming on BBC Radio Ulster's *Talk Back* programme? The justice of the Tony Martin case or that of the early release of prisoners? Or which of these disputes is most likely to test David Dunseith's patience: the righteousness of the invasion of Iraq as a pre-emptive action or righteousness of protestant clergy participating in the Loyalist Commission? Without wanting to make a value judgment as to the relative merits of either argument there is no doubt that those issues closest to home are going to raise the greatest ire.

It seems that, viewed from a distance, justice and righteousness make fascinating debating topics. But the more I feel the justice or righteousness personally (or more accurately the injustice or unrighteousness) the more difficult it is to remain rational about the matter and even the most liberal of liberal value systems can become stretched when illiberality serves my personal needs.

Theoretical or abstract discussions of justice and righteousness, whilst valuable, tend to skirt around the real heat and emotion generated when justice and righteousness becomes a personal issue. We seem to be hard-wired to expect retributive justice. And there is something inherently comfortable in righteousness gaining its just reward. Thus when the killers of my partner are released early, or my cultural or political identity is ridiculed, I demand justice and a recognition of the righteousness of my cause.

In the context of ancient Israel, Psalm 37 concerns itself with the most personal of justice and righteousness issues – the possession of the land. The recurrent theme in the psalm is about how tenure in the land can be sustained and how it may be lost.

The psalm itself emerges from a context in which its intended audience has shaped its life and faith round the settled notion that deeds invite appropriate consequences. Those who live faithful lives will be blessed, whilst the wicked will be punished. Righteousness will be rewarded and justice will be upheld.

The Psalmist, like the audience, has no problem in seeing a direct consequential relationship between moral behaviour and issues of security, wealth and power: The continued possession of land and the subsequent enjoyment of its wealth, status and power are not just economic or political privileges, but are intimately connected to intercommunity relationships and moral behaviour. This moral-relational web is characterised by justice and righteousness and held together by God's power to bless or withhold blessing.

What happens then to such a worldview when the wicked appear to possess or inherit the land? When the simple deeds-consequence model of the world begins to break apart what happens to people of faith who have learned to rely on that model and have shaped their faith life and their view of the world according to its dogma? When all public discourse is shaped by the deeds-consequence view of the world what is left for the righteous when it collapses?

It seems that those conditioned by the deeds-consequence model of the world were prepared to jettison dearly held beliefs about justice and righteousness in order to reassert their claims over against those who were perceived as wicked. In fact, the wicked are almost ignored in the psalm in favour of asking the righteous to calm down (Ps. 37:1,7,8) and to refrain from anger and wrath, which may be justifiable, but which if not carefully directed lead only to evil acts (v8).

Into such a context falls the admonition to "stay calm" with all the subtlety of a Victorian wardrobe. The fact that it does so three times in the opening eight verses simply compounds the shock. Do

## JUSTICE & RIGHTEOUSNESS

not fret or fly into a passion because the wicked seem to flourish. It is an instruction to those who are anxious over the apparent success of “those who do wrong” as if this success, by its very existence, will undermine the righteousness and sovereign power of God.

The psalmist makes the admonition in full recognition that real wickedness exists (v7, 21a, 35) and that often the deeds of the wicked are directed deliberately at the righteous (v12, 14). Yet the writer recognises that the just and righteous God sees (v7-10) and will act both to uphold the righteous and punish the wicked (v17-20). This is no encouragement to flee behind virtuous walls into pious enclaves. Rather it is an encouragement to resist the temptation to retaliate in like fashion (v8) for ultimately “there is a future for the man of peace” (v37) and a judgment for the wicked (v38).

The righteous are encouraged to “trust in the LORD and do good” (v3); to “delight in the LORD” (v4); to “commit *their* way to the LORD” (v5), with the result that “He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun” (v6).

Walter Brueggemann describes this psalm as “a profound act of determined hope.” He writes, “The psalm is a promise and guarantee of land for those who seem to have no means (except the claims of morality) whereby to acquire land and, therefore, is a critical assault on present land arrangements that are unjust and cannot be sustained. That is, the psalm is turned against the ‘wicked’ who now possess the very land that was promised to ‘the meek’ and will indeed be given to them.”

In the ferment of what passes for public debate in Northern Ireland’s civic space not many of us are genuinely willing to place our vindication in the hands of someone else, even if that someone is a Supreme Being. If our cause needs to be upheld, better to do it ourselves even if our methods are at best questionable or at worst a compromise of biblical justice and righteousness.

But God’s purposes in the world, which includes the establishment of justice and righteousness, are served best by a realistic acknowledgement of the true state of the society and the realisation that my actions alone are not going to change what is an essential characteristic of a fallen world.

That is not to say that I shouldn’t struggle against injustice and unrighteousness where I see it. But to think that my efforts alone can sort it out is to put myself in the place of Almighty God. The salvation of the righteous comes from God (v39). The revelation of my righteousness and the justice of my cause is his responsibility (v6), and he doesn’t need my help.

The instruction not to fret in the face of the extreme provocation of injustice and unrighteousness is not a comfortable one in Northern Ireland. The temptation is very real to establish justice and righteousness with the means by which they were overthrown in the first place. But it must be resisted by the righteous who hope for a better future where their righteousness will emerge with the suddenness and glory of the dawn, and where the justice of their cause will blaze like a noonday sun.

**Glenn Jordan**

Director of Care and Training Services at East Belfast Mission and an ECONI Board member



Read: Psalm 37

### Talk Outline

When the world around seems to give success and profit to those who are evil and practice wicked ways:

- Be assured that God is in control of justice and righteousness (v6, 12-15, 18-20, 34, 38-40)
- Do not fret though they seem to succeed for they will wither and fade (v1-2, 7-8)
- Do not try to restore justice and righteousness by their wicked ways (v8, 27)
- Trust and be content in the Lord and walk in blameless ways (v3-7, 16-19, 27-8, 34, 37-38)

### Questions

1. What kinds of issues have raised questions of justice and righteousness for you?
2. "We seem to be hard-wired to expect retributive justice." Is this true of our society in general? Is it also true of Christians? Is this a good thing or a bad thing?
3. "I have been young, and now I am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread." (v25) Is this just wishful thinking? If not, do you think you could say this?
4. "Refrain from anger; and forsake wrath" (v8). This would suggest that others see the wicked prospering, often at the expense of the righteous (v12, 14). Do you get angry when you see evil prospering? Some might argue that anger at injustice is a right and proper response. Why do you think the Psalmist counsels against it?
5. The righteous are encouraged to "trust" (v3), "be still" (v7), and "wait" (v7). This might suggest that our attitude should be one of patience and quietism in the face of evil. Do you think this is what the Psalmist is advocating? Is there ever a time when resistance is to be preferred to patience?
6. What relevance does this passage have to those of us who live in democratic societies where we share responsibility for dealing with the wicked? Would it be easier if the government had decided to release prisoners without asking us to endorse it or reject it?

## JUSTICE & RIGHTEOUSNESS

### Prayer

“Act justly, love mercy, walk humbly with your God.”

*Micah 6:8*

Lord,

Forgive us for our detachment from the plight of others,  
and our blindness to the sins of our own community.

Enable us to reflect the attitudes of our God  
who has no favourites,  
and to love those we have been conditioned to dismiss.  
*For we have not acted justly.*

Forgive us for pretending we desire justice  
when really what we seek is vengeance.

Enable us to seek the good of those who do us wrong  
and to bless those who persecute us.  
*For we have not loved mercy.*

Forgive us too, Lord, for our cultural or spiritual arrogance;  
for demanding our rights, while despising the rights of others.

Enable us to consider others better than ourselves.  
*For we have not walked humbly.*

Teach us the way of the cross we pray,  
and hasten your kingdom of justice and peace.

AMEN

Extract: *For God and His Glory Alone*

## 8 JUSTICE & RIGHTEOUSNESS

Gn 1:27  
Dt 32:4  
Jb 3:3  
Ps 82:1-4; 89:14  
Is 32:16f  
Sl 1:14  
Jer 22:13-17  
Am 5:24f  
Is 57:10-15, 18-24  
Mt 6:6  
Mr 4:23; 9:12f  
Lk 4:18f  
Rom 3:21-26

*"He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God". "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness..."*

IN AFFIRMING THAT HUMANITY WAS made in the image of God, we acknowledge that every person, regardless of nationality, religion, race, sex or class, has an intrinsic dignity, and should therefore be respected and served. Any form of exploitation, oppression or discrimination is a denial of that dignity and is an offence to God.

The God of the Bible is a God of justice. He requires that His people not only exhibit, but also spread righteousness in the midst of an unrighteous world. A healthy community is one in which the human rights of each individual are protected. In this context, the Christian ethic is not a defence of "my rights" but a concern for the rights of my neighbour. God's concern is expressed specifically for outsiders, the poor and those without power.

Because God is a God of justice, there cannot be anything other than a counterfeit peace when society is built on injustice. Any society which is influenced by Christian principles will be concerned with justice as a priority. Working for peace means working for justice. It means:

- That we are opposed to any form of religious discrimination in the workplace.
- That we strive to preserve a judiciary which is respected by the entire community so that justice is not only dispensed but seen to be dispensed with total impartiality.
- That we work for the removal of unjust structures and patterns in society and specifically those which hurt the poor and the powerless.
- That we expect those who enforce the law to be answerable to the same principles of justice as the rest of society.

**STUDY**

God made justice a key part of the message of the prophets in the Old Testament (Amos 2:6-11; Micah 6:6-8). The prophets warned the people that they could not turn a blind eye to wickedness or injustice and expect to maintain their relationship with God. If we take our love of and commitment to truth and justice as an indicator of our spiritual condition, what sort of spiritual condition are we in?



## NOTES

**Love**

**Forgiveness**

**Reconciliation**

**Peace**

**Citizenship**

**Truth**

**Servanthood**

**Justice &  
Righteousness**



**Hope**

**Repentance**

# Hope

## Quotations

He is the best physician who is the most ingenious inspirer of hope.

*Samuel Taylor Coleridge*

A misty morning does not signify a cloudy day.

*Ancient Proverb*

Hope is a waking dream.

*Aristotle*

In all things it is better to hope than to despair.

*Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*

Everything that is done in the world is done by hope.

*Martin Luther*

We are all in the gutter; but some of us are looking at the stars.

*Oscar Wilde*

Hope is believing in spite of the evidence, then watching the evidence change.

*Jim Wallis*

Hope is the thing with feathers

That perches in the soul,

And sings the tune without the words,

And never stops at all . . .

*Emily Dickinson*

## Introduction

"Hope is a state of mind, not of the world. Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously heading for success, but rather an ability to work for something because it is good."

*Václav Havel*

If we are involved in reconciliation work in Northern Ireland we walk along a precipice of hope, just one step away from falling into a state of hopelessness. We will need a spirituality that is more than wishful thinking. If we are not people of faith, hope and love we will easily succumb to debilitating feelings of frustration, disappointment or resignation.

This essay will help us examine how robust our hope is as we think about the nature of this hope and the promises and character of God. In the study we find Habakkuk concluding that in the middle of apparent or real disaster we can discover God to be the one who enables us to walk a difficult path with confidence.

Our concern for justice and righteousness will soon dissipate if not accompanied by a confidence in God's faithfulness.



## Essay

Hope forms the basis of a spirituality for the long haul. With hope we can have access to the abundant life to which we are called as followers of Christ. This is why hope appears with faith and love as one of the three marks of Christian character referred to by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:13.

As Christians our hope is from God and in God. Throughout the Old and New Testaments men and women of faith have placed their hope in the God who acts to liberate and save his people – from the exodus from slavery in Egypt to the overcoming of death in the cross and resurrection of Christ. Biblical hope is grounded in the promises of God, is nurtured by the stories of God's faithfulness and looks forward to the eternal presence of God in glory in the promised new heaven and new earth. In this way Christian hope becomes more than simply a wish or a wistful desire, it contains within it a strong sense of expectation and confidence that our hope will be fulfilled.

However, until that fulfilment we live with the tension between the "already" and the "not yet". In the meantime, faith, which is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things yet unseen (*Heb. 11:1*), enables us to discern the presence of God's providence in the world. The challenge to Christians in every age is, "How do we bear witness to God's promises and God's kingdom in a hope-starved world?" "How do we keep our own hope alive in the face of evil and death?"

Firstly, we need to know more about the unique quality of Christian hope. We live in an age and culture in which it is all too easy to confuse hope with psychological optimism. There is a thin line between optimism and pessimism: whether we regard the glass as half-full or half-empty tends to depend on how we feel, how much control or influence we think we have on our circumstances and how much we think they control us. Because a positive mental attitude or optimism depends on personal psychological resources it is susceptible to changes in our moods and our circumstances. When exposed to the pain, injustice and disappointment of life optimism either dissolves or requires the denial of the painful elements of reality. By contrast, hope is not sustained by our own effort. It is sustained by sharing the stories of God's action in the world which shape our relationship with God – without whom the circumstances of our world cannot be redeemed.

In true human style we often only become aware of the need for hope when life pushes us to the limits of our human resources in times of crisis or suffering. The Bible recognises a significant relationship between hope and suffering. Hope manages to hold together the experience of pain and suffering with a belief in the sovereignty of God; the bitter taste of present circumstances with the foretaste of God's kingdom of righteousness.

The redemptive possibility which is always at work in the world means that nothing and no one is beyond hope. We can recall how Job not only struggles with personal tragedy he also has to suffer the fatalistic attitudes of his friends. However, what makes the story of Job significant for faith is that he resists despair. The bottom line for Job is his assertion, "I know that my redeemer lives" (*Job 19:25*). In other words, he holds onto the promises of God. He bases this hope on God's history with his chosen people. Therefore hope is an act of resistance against the fatalism in the world which seeks to persuade us that God is dead.

Hope is not a form of spiritual escapism because it is not simply a matter of individual destiny. While hope has a deep personal dimension it is not merely a private concern. Hope looks toward the kingdom of God, therefore, hope is ultimately concerned for the whole of humankind and creation and it cannot stand aloof in the face of suffering and injustice. Hope for a new creation draws believers into the life of love and a concern for right relationship with our neighbour, our

## HOPE

enemy and the world we live in. Therefore the things we hope for should shape the way we live in the present.

The kingdom of God promises a radically different future for all who enter it. Christian hope demands that we are open to God's future which is already at work in our present circumstances. However, in our fearful desire for certainty and control we can resist the incredible newness of God's future and the surprising ways of the kingdom which are deeply subversive of the ways of the world. Jürgen Moltmann, author of *A Theology of Hope*, suggests that for many of us, for whom the world is a relatively comfortable place, hope may – paradoxically – bring a deep sense of disquiet rather than a sense of peace. This brings home to us the strong moral and prophetic dimension to hope which takes seriously the gap between the way the world is and the kingdom of God.<sup>1</sup> Thus hope calls us to radical discipleship – which is perhaps easier for those whose need for hope is most deeply felt and who have less to lose.

While we may be comfortable with a notion of hope which focuses on certainty of salvation, lurking in the back of the mind is the notion that hope should be handled responsibly and with care. Perhaps like a child with a Christmas wish-list, in order to avoid disappointment we tell ourselves we shouldn't hope for too much. Past disappointments have taught us to be cautious and timid with our hopes.

For many Christians, particularly within evangelicalism, the notion of certainty is a key element to faith. We tend to shy away from anything which might threaten that sense of certainty and therefore fear that disappointment may call faith into question. The danger is that in so doing we take our orientation from our circumstances by weighing up the evidence and calling things as we see them. But where is the evidence of things unseen, that which we hope for?

Welcoming in God's kingdom demands hopeful action in the world in response to God's call to radical discipleship. Do we perhaps harbour the fear that if we are caught up in the hopeful demands of the kingdom of God and truly become "prisoners of hope" then more will be required of us than we bargained on?

Maybe so. But what we stand to receive could be more than we ourselves dare hope for.

**Anna Rankin**

Resource Co-ordinator with ECONI

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<sup>1</sup> See Jürgen Moltmann, "Hope", in *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, (ed.) Alan Richardson & John Bowen, London, SCM Press 1989.

Read: Habakkuk 3

### Talk Outline

In chapter 1, Habakkuk cries out to God about the violence and injustice in the land. God replies that he is sending Judah's enemies to punish them. Habakkuk finds this surprising and wonders if it is fair, just or merciful, but waits for God in hope of an answer. In chapter 2, God shows Habakkuk in a vision the destruction of all those who are wicked (arrogant, greedy, extortionists, unjust, drunkards, lustful, idolaters etc.) in true justice.

In Habakkuk 3:

- Habakkuk recognises the awesomeness of God in his deeds (v2)
- Habakkuk asks and trusts that God will show mercy in his anger (v2)
- Habakkuk accepts that the judgement of his people will be bad (v3-15)
- But despite this trouble, he waits in joy and hope for the saving and strengthening of the Lord (v16-19)

### Questions

1. How do the things we hope for in the future shape our lives in the present?
2. What is the difference between hope and optimism?

*Read Habakkuk 3: 17-19*

3. How do we keep hope alive when everything around us spells disaster?
4. Are the high places in verse 19 places removed from trouble, or places of difficulty, doubt or fear?
5. Discuss the relationship between hope and patience.
6. What insight is Habakkuk given which would encourage us to keep on working for peace and justice in Northern Ireland?

## HOPE

### Prayer

"I watch and hope for the Lord, I wait for God my Saviour: My God will hear me."  
*Micah 7:7*

Lord God,

We thank you for how you have brought us  
to this point in our search for peace.  
Out of darkness and despair, you have given us hope.

In our land,  
where it is easier to glorify the past than build a future  
and where it is more common to despair than to hope;  
where cynicism trips more neatly of the tongue than encouragement  
and begrudgery more naturally than blessing,  
give us power by your Spirit  
to be catalysts of change and agents of renewal.

Implant within us the mind and heart of Christ  
and the discernment, flexibility and courage  
to admit mistakes and take risks in the task  
of bringing about peace, justice and reconciliation.

Above all, O God, give us Hope.

AMEN

Extract: *For God and His Glory Alone*

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Ps 2:42; 46:71  
Is 52:7  
Mt 16:24; 24:14  
Mk 16: 15f  
Lk 24:45-47  
Rom 8:24f  
1 Cor 13:13;  
15:1-11  
Th 2:13  
Hab 6:19  
1 Pet 1:3-4; 3:15

*"How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, 'Your God reigns!'"*

THE CHRISTIAN MESSAGE is a message of hope. We know that God is in control of this world and is working His purposes out in Christ. Therefore, whatever the political prospects of this island may be, as Christians we can view the future with hope - hope in God and not in nationality, politics or culture, important though these may be. History proves that the Kingdom of God can prosper, whatever the constitutional context.

God is bringing about His salvation. The task of the church is to make known the good news of the Kingdom of God. Jesus Christ, who died and was raised from the dead, now, as reigning Lord, offers forgiveness and the liberating gift of the Spirit to all in our land who repent and believe.

In spreading this message we must stress the cost of discipleship. All who follow Him must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow Him, living out the values of His Kingdom. Those who preach the good news must be marked by the cross, rather than be identified with any particular social, cultural or political system. However painful this may be it gives rise to hope, a hope that is based on Christ.

### STUDY

To what extent do we share the Psalmist's hope - Psalm 37 & Psalm 46 for example? Read Habakkuk. Habakkuk's difficulties stemmed from his inability to perceive that God was active in the situation. His concern for justice and righteousness was not matched by a big enough view of God's sovereignty. Is it true that we as Evangelicals share this weakness and, like Habakkuk, need to reaffirm that God alone is our strength?

Read Jonah. Jonah is a representative of God's people who knows God's grace, who can boast of his relationship with God and who can pray to Him in time of trouble. However, in this story, it is the heathen sailors and repentant Ninevites who appear in a better light than the prophet. They surprise us with their sense of what is right and their ready response to God's message. Yet Jonah wrote them off because they were not Israelites! In what ways has our stress on "heritage" and our strong sense of cultural identity cultivated a "Jonah attitude" in us?

## NOTES

**Love**

**Forgiveness**

**Reconciliation**

**Peace**

**Citizenship**

**Truth**

**Servanthood**

**Justice &  
Righteousness**

**Hope**



**Repentance**

# Repentance

## Quotations

Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.

*Blaise Pascal*

It is foolish to lay out money for the purchase of repentance.

*Benjamin Franklin*

True repentance is to cease from sinning.

*Ambrose of Milan*

It is much easier to repent of sins that we have committed than to repent of those that we intend to commit.

*Josh Billings*

## Introduction

"Most people repent their sins by thanking God they ain't so wicked as their neighbors."

*Josh Billings*

Hopefully this reflection will lead us to a greater appreciation of the grace of God when as Christians and as church we are prepared to acknowledge that we have done wrong or failed to do what was right. Repentance is rarely popular unless we are demanding it of another group or community. We tend to take it personally but the call to repentance in the Bible is often to a community or to a nation. This is challenging to us in Northern Ireland as we struggle to acknowledge the collective wrongs of the past but demand individual acts of repentance from members of the other community.

We reflect on a chapter from the book of Jonah where we see this reluctant messenger disappointed with his own success in calling people to repentance and resentful of the extent of God's mercy shown to an undeserving people. We may find ourselves thinking about prejudices in our own lives that block good and gracious thoughts about the other side and prevent us from doing those things that we ought to have done. When we repent we may discover the kingdom of God to be very near.



## Essay

Repentance is a little like housework – few of us enjoy it, it consumes our time, we prefer others to do it, it makes us see just how filthy we are, and no sooner have we finished than we need to start all over again. And yet, the word “repentance” probably conjures up more horrific images than even housework does. Our images of repentance might be of the man, complete with sandwich board, grizzly frown upon his face, KJV Bible in his left hand, megaphone in his right, shouting at an uninterested crowd about their eternal state and how to dodge the fires of hell. Such people are often viewed as dinosaurs and, unfortunately, their language, of which “repentance” is a part, has tended to be relegated to the archaic. But, despite such negative associations, the concept of repentance is worth preserving – in fact it is necessary that we do so, for Christ calls both the church and the world to repent.

We have left undone those things which we ought to have done and we have done those things which we ought not to have done.<sup>1</sup>

Only the self-righteous have nothing to repent for. All of us mere mortals most assuredly do. And yet our repentance frequently amounts to little more than thanking God that we aren't as sinful as some other person, just like the Pharisee in Luke 18:9-14, blinded to his sin and therefore to his need of repentance. In this case a person's religion has caused self-righteousness and arrogance. Now, of course, we aren't as explicit as the Pharisee but such an attitude is a strong undercurrent through the Church today.

Lies, brutality, abuse, theft, destruction, hatred, murder, torture, lust, gossip, arrogance, oppression, failure to defend the poor and failure to fight for justice are but a few things in the catalogue of nasties that have at some point or other, and even now, been a part of that establishment which many of us identify with – the Christian church. We have much of which to repent – things done and left undone, wrongdoing and wrong non-doing, actions and inaction.

But what is this thing called repentance? One of the central features of biblical repentance is “turning.” This turning is two-dimensional. The first dimension is a turn *away from* sin and that which hinders our relationship with God and with others: hatred, self-righteousness and cruelty. The second dimension is a turn *towards* God – living in right relationship to Him, obeying His commands and seeking to be more Christ-like. Too often repentance is conceived in terms of ceasing some action, attitude or behaviour, thus portraying an obsession with “turning from” and neglect of “turning towards.” Repentance is not merely about not doing wrong. It is about doing right. Not doing wrong does not necessarily amount to doing what is right. Repentance involves both negative and positive aspects of reorientation and we should hold on to both.

Turning from sin will involve recognising some act, or failure to act, as a sin and acknowledging our guilt and culpability for it. These acts of moral conscience naturally lead us to remorse. Desiring to be free from the sin sets us on a path to reorientation of our lives, or at least of some aspect of our lives. We make an act of will, consciously deciding to avoid the sin in the future. Alas, being human we are a frail bunch. Like so many things we need God's help in repentance. Perhaps this partly explains why in some instances repentance is described as a gift from God to us, rather than simply something originating in our own being. Sometimes we need assistance to see the gravity of sin or help to avoid that sin, or both.

Repentance is therefore a struggle. “I'm sorry” does not amount to genuine repentance, although it is often confused with repentance in common parlance. The words “I'm sorry” are often just that

## REPENTANCE

– words – little else. Often we utter such words because it might yield practical benefits to us, for instance, in helping us to escape due punishment. Repentance is a more costly business and not so easy. It is a process over time, one that actually *changes* us.

This process is one in which “fruits of repentance” should grow. This should hardly surprise us once we realise that repentance is not just a change of mind but also a surrender of our will to God and a change in our behaviour – a “turning to” as well as a “turning from.” Isaiah 1:16-17 provides this fuller account of repentance:

Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing what is wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.

This indicates that repentance begins within us and is then evidenced in actions and behaviour, a ceasing of wrongdoing *and* a doing of right. Jesus speaks in such terms also and emphasises action, works and behaviour much more than a certain contingent of Christianity would care to admit. There is a clear tendency within sections of Evangelicalism to elevate doctrinal purity over Christian living. What I call “believe, only believe” theology has played a part in destroying the true concept of repentance which, according to Paul, is proved “by their deeds” (Acts 26:20). It is erroneous to think that since we belong to a certain religious tradition, or hold certain beliefs, we are exempt from growing “fruits of repentance” in our lives (Luke 3:8), as if mere belief itself was the fruit of repentance. Such a position is arrogant, self-righteous and superficial – not to mention contrary to the gospel. It must be remembered that the holding of certain mental propositions and beliefs does not amount to an act of repentance. The words of A. W. Tozer are apposite:

Where real repentance is, there is obedience; for real repentance is naturally sorrow for past failures and sins, it is determination to begin now to do the will of God as he reveals it to us.

When Christ called people to repent he meant more than simply “start believing this and that”. Christian life, therefore, is not simply about believing in Jesus and accepting the grace of God. It involves living a transformed and continually transforming life in which we are actively involved with God.

The biblical narrative provides us with pointers as to what “fruits of repentance” are, such as those mentioned above in Isaiah. In Luke 3:11-14 it appears to be linked to sharing material possessions with those less fortunate, honest social practices, developing good inter-personal relationships, and living in a godly way regardless of one’s station in life. In Zacchaeus’ act of repentance for cheating people of money he pledges to restore them four-fold. Zacchaeus’ action was reparation for damages, an act of love towards those he had offended against. Such actions would raise eyebrows today, yet they clearly stress the importance of action in repentance.

Although repentance is extremely important for both church and world, does the church really want it for either? Since repentance will necessarily involve meekness, humility, acknowledgement of weakness and of wrong, we must ask are such things characteristic of Northern Irish Christianity, and of Evangelicalism in particular. If not, then does the Church really want to live a life of repentance at all?

Regardless of what the church does with repentance for itself, does it really want others to repent? Listening to some preachers it is easy to get the impression that judgement is more desirable than repentance. Such a desire has a long history, stretching at least as far back as Jonah. Jonah was sent

to call the people of Nineveh to repent for their sins to avoid God's judgement. One sea storm and a giant fish later we find Jonah on his way to give his fire and brimstone message. The people accept his message and repent, thus avoiding God's wrath. You would expect a preacher to be happy that people not only listened but also accepted the message. Not so with Jonah. He wanted judgement to fall. Ironic, since he had been in the same boat (quite literally) earlier in the story – disobedient, suffering judgement, repenting, and experiencing God's grace. Did he think he deserved God's grace more? Did he consider the sins of others to be worse than his own? Is the church today suffering from a bad dose of Jonahitis?

**Stephen Graham**

Former Research Assistant with ECONI

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<sup>1</sup> Prayer of Confession, *Common Worship*, Church of England

## REPENTANCE

Read: Jonah 3 & 4

### Talk Outline

In the first two chapters of Jonah we see the prophet called by God to preach to the Ninevites and yet, as a reluctant evangelist, he disobeys and runs the other way. However, caught up inside a fish, he realises God's saving grace and vows to make good on what the Lord has asked him to do.

The final two chapters might be summed up like this:

- Jonah is given a second chance to do what God wants. (3:1-4)
- The Ninevites repent by throwing themselves on God's mercy and turning from their evil ways, and God relents. (3:5-10)
- But this is not the end of the story – Jonah has not yet fully repented from his attitude to that of God – the concern for all people to repent rather than face judgement. (ch. 4)

Two striking lessons:

- It is easier to call for others' repentance than it is to repent ourselves
- God calls us all to repentance, which means being reliant on his mercy and saving grace and changing our attitudes and ways to his, not a continuing self-justification (cf. 4:1-3, 9)

### Questions

1. How does repentance impact our future as well as our past?
2. Can you envisage a situation when judgement might seem preferable to repentance?
3. What motivates us towards repentance?
4. Which aspect of God's character are we particularly dependent on as penitents?
5. How might repentance by the "other" have a destabilising effect on our group?
6. What are some of the things that we might need to repent of as a faith community in Northern Ireland?

## Prayer

Lord,  
 You know that we love you  
 And we know what you ask us to do . . .  
 But for those times when we have been too busy;  
 When we have been hard-hearted;  
 When we have been lukewarm;  
 We say sorry  
 And ask for your forgiving love.  
 Prepare us for your way, O Lord.  
 YOUR KINGDOM COME, YOUR WILL BE DONE.

Lord,  
 You know our good intentions  
 And we know your will . . .  
 But hold us back long enough to listen to those in need,  
 And to learn from them,  
 And to learn of our own need.  
 Where we think we are sent, make us ready to receive;  
 Where we are keen to teach, make us ready to learn.  
 Prepare us for your way, O Lord.  
 YOUR KINGDOM COME, YOUR WILL BE DONE.

Lord,  
 You know our deepest desires  
 And we know the vision of your kingdom . . .  
 We bring before you those elements in our lives  
 In need of your transforming power:  
 That which we misuse or neglect;  
 That which we most reluctantly let go of;  
 That which we believe is not good enough.  
 Inspire us and disturb us to examine our deepest desires.  
 Prepare us for your way, O Lord.  
 YOUR KINGDOM COME, YOUR WILL BE DONE.

Lord,  
 You know our potential  
 But what is your purpose for our lives?  
 In our uncertainty  
 And in the knowledge of your faithfulness,  
 Prepare us for your way, O Lord.  
 YOUR KINGDOM COME, YOUR WILL BE DONE.

(Iona Community, *The Pattern of our Days* (ed.) Kathy Galloway, Wild Goose, 1996)

Extract: *For God and His Glory Alone*

# 10 REPENTANCE

2 Ch 7:14  
Ps 51:17  
Jed 2:12f  
2 Cor 7:10  
1 Jn 1:8f

*"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."*

THE ONLY WAY we can become a community of hope is if we come to God (and to one another) in humility, penitence and repentance. Many in Northern Ireland are caught in a face-saving exercise, but there can be no face-saving at the cross. The essential nature of repentance is losing face.

We need to say we have been wrong - not merely that we have been the victims of history. We all need to ask for forgiveness from God and our neighbours, repenting and seeking the way of nonviolence and the way of the cross as the effective means of change in our land. However difficult it may be, we as Christians are committed to Christian means as well as Christian ends.

Specifically, some of us need to acknowledge and repent

- Of the prejudice which can see no good in the culture of the other side;
- Of our failure to strive for practical discipleship with the same enthusiasm as for doctrinal purity;
- Of the idolatry that equates political and cultural loyalties with loyalty to God;
- Of the attitude that requires allegiance to "our side" as evidence of our allegiance to Christ;
- Of helping to foster divisions by our reluctance to meet, talk with and build friendships with those of different ecclesiastical and political traditions;
- Of actions, attitudes and words which have served to perpetuate violence.

## STUDY

*Psalm 51, written in the light of the events of 2 Samuel 11 & 12, indicates clearly that wrong attitudes and behaviour constitute sin against God. Until David, under Nathan's ministry, stood in the shoes of the victims of his injustice he was incapable of either recognising his sin or repenting of it. Discuss the implications of this story.*



## NOTES



**LIVING**  
*for*  
**GOD'S GLORY**  
*in a*  
**DIVIDED WORLD**



**SERMON**

**LITURGY**

**SONGS**

# Dreams and Visions

**Living for God's Glory in a Divided World**

## **SERMON OUTLINE**

"Shine like Stars"

*Philippians 2:1-16*

### **Dreams and visions**

Many of us have dreams and visions . . .

- Sometimes they are pipe-dreams or day-dreams with no hope of fulfilment – e.g. playing sport for our country
- Sometimes they are dreams that express our heartfelt desires, or visions of how we would like things to be, or how we think things will be – e.g. our house, our business

Dreams give us inspiration and a goal, especially in tough times. They can be self-obsessed, self-gratifying and unrealistic. But when they are godly visions, they inspire and activate for God's good.

An illustration: Martin Luther King – 40 years ago said "I have a dream":

- A vision of equality and freedom
- To give hope, inspiration and a goal in the midst of difficulties and trials: "Let us not wallow in the valley of despair. I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, I still have a dream."
- This dream/vision also meant something had to be done – people would need to be together and active in achieving this dream. It saw men and women work together on and in the earth for the glory of God

## Dreams and visions in the Bible

Dreams and visions play a big part in the Bible – dreams and visions that God give to people.

- Sometimes in mystical, unconscious ways – Jacob, Samuel, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Joel, Peter, John.
- Sometimes in less exotic, but no less meaningful/spiritual ways – Nehemiah – a vision to rebuild Jerusalem.

Any survey of the dreams and visions that people have in the Bible will show that they are not daydreams. They are not there for a pleasant experience, or solely to give optimism for the future. They never seem to give much immediate gratification for the dreamer, but instead call for immediate action. They each demand a response in the present, while holding out certain fulfilment in the future.

## Paul's dream and vision

In Philippians, Paul has a vision and a dream:

- He has a God-given vision that ultimately every knee will bow before Jesus to the glory of God (v10-11) – what a fantastic sight this will be! And the work needed for the fulfilment of this vision has been done by God. The work of Christ in making himself a servant, becoming obedient to death on a cross, and being exalted by God is the work which guarantees the fulfilment of this vision.
- But Paul has another vision, or dream. He has a dream that, as Christians wait for the fulfilment of this vision, they would shine like stars in this crooked and depraved generation (v15-16) – Paul knows that the generation in which he lives does not know God's love, or forgiveness, his truth or his justice, his peace and his hope. He has a dream that Christians would shine like stars in this generation, that they might see the light – see God's glory, see Christ shining from their lives.

And Paul suggests that, while Christ has done the work to make the first vision happen, we have a contribution to make towards the fulfilling of the second dream of his. He has a dream that we would shine like stars, and we are to catch that vision and work at it ourselves, otherwise it becomes a pipe-dream for Paul. Perhaps you think it is totally unrealistic? How on earth will Christians shine like stars?

Paul is no daydreamer, reclusive visionary or feel-good talker. Paul knows this dream can and will be realised. He wants nothing less. And he knows it involves a response now, here in the present. Shining like stars is not something that will just happen. It is a dream to be worked for – and it is hard work. He himself runs and labours, and has no intention of it being for nothing (v16).

ECONI entitled this resource *Dreams and Visions*, that we may understand what it is to be inspired and hopeful to shine like stars in this generation, or as we've put it "live for God's glory in a divided world". This collection of reflections and Bible studies is designed to inspire and envision people to live out the life that thinks biblically and builds peace in this world, by returning with fresh vision and insight to the biblical principles that ECONI began with and continues. These are for longer thought and perusal than a sermon can give, but let's reflect on them as we look at the two responses Paul tells us must be made to this dream.

### Two things to make it happen

They come in the verses before – in effect Paul is saying, if you do these two things, you will fulfil my dream of shining like stars.

#### 1. Being One

*Phil. 2:1-2* – Paul's emphasis in the opening verses of the chapter is that if there is anything Christian about you – if you are at all encouraged or compelled by Christ, his love, his Spirit – then be like-minded, have love and be one in spirit and purpose. This is not a call to bland uniformity, but to recognise and demonstrate the oneness that there is in Christ (*cf. John 17:20-23*)

This oneness means humility on the part of everyone:

*Phil. 2:3-4* – “in humility consider others better than yourselves . . . look to the interests of others”

*Phil. 2:5-11* – “attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus”

*Phil. 2:14* – “Do everything without complaining or arguing”

Are we humble and as one in our bid to shine into this generation?

- Have we tender, compassionate, comfort-giving, sacrificial love for each other?
- Do we rejoice in the truth with and not against each other?
- Are we willing to forgive the hurts that we have caused each other?
- And are we willing to repent of the ways in which we have hurt each other?
- Are we willing to be reconciled where sinful attitudes have parted us?
- Do we encourage each other in the hope that we have as one body in Christ?
- Do we willingly and cheerfully partake of the responsibilities and burdens we have as citizens of the church?
- Do we speak and live in peace with each other?
- Are we looking out for the interests of justice, fairness and righteousness for our sister/brother?
- Are we humbly willing to serve not counting the cost, or our appearance to others?

If the answers are no – what can we be doing about it? We must be one in trying to live out these biblical principles amongst ourselves if we are to approach the world with them with any integrity . . .

#### 2. Being active

*Phil. 2:12-13* – “continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose”

*Phil. 2:16* – “hold out the word of life”

God works in us, and it is for us to work this out – to be motivated and active according to his good purpose. Our arena for this is the world, the generation in which we live. They are the people to

whom we hold out the word of life. This dream of shining like stars is not achieved by retreat, or merely by good thoughts and good theology, but by acting and by holding out life to others. Hence we take our biblical principles and hold them out to the world in action, according to God's good purpose.

- Will we show love to this generation that comes from God, is sacrificial, and is committed to action, not love that is self-absorbed and conveyed in unproved words?
- Will we speak of truth, embodied in Christ Jesus, that is not spun, twisted or destructive, but is real, reliable, vibrant and life-giving?
- Will we live out forgiveness of others in the way we speak of them and address them, and in our commitment to understanding their point of view?
- Will we repent of the things we have said and got wrong as Christians, so that people will know we are committed to truth and a change for the better?
- Will we actively pursue reconciliation between those who have great differences but are ultimately all made in the likeness of God?
- Will we speak of the hope that we have in us which is not of this world, but compels us to be involved in this world?
- Will we take up the responsibilities we have as citizens to play a part in a society that we made influence it for the good, rather than shun without regard?
- Will we endeavour to seek a peace in society that enables the gospel of peace to be preached?
- Will we press for fairness, justice and what is right for those who are oppressed and mistreated, whatever their background?
- Will we serve, not counting the cost, nor our appearance, but with the interests of others first?

We have been given a dream to fulfil – to shine like stars in this generation. Do we share that dream? Are we committed to making it a reality?

## **WORSHIP**

### **LITURGY**

#### **Affirmations and prayers of commitment**

**Leader:** As followers of Jesus Christ living in Northern Ireland, we are drawn together by our relationship to Jesus Christ and our commitment to biblical faith. As those who emphasise conversion to Christ, we affirm that its fundamental meaning is a change of allegiance.

JESUS CHRIST IS LORD.

We are to be like Christ; our minds transformed, and our character shaped by the values of the kingdom that Christ initiated and demonstrated throughout His life on earth. We are marked by that way of life, which is like no other.

**All:** "For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing." (2 Cor. 2:15)

We confess that far too often our attitudes, values and actions have been but an imitation of society and not the character of Christ. May we truly be the fragrance of Christ.

IN YOUR MERCY O LORD, FORGIVE US AND RENEW YOUR CHURCH.

**Leader:** We acknowledge the suffering and distress that have resulted from violence and community strife. We recognise the difficult paths that lie before us as we try to rebuild relationships and communities in this land. We ask for courage as we learn to live alongside those who committed murder and those who condoned violence. We ask for grace and mercy as we remember the pain and hurt of our past.

Together we face the challenge of examining before God our effectiveness in making kingdom values evident, not only in our individual lives, but as members of our community.

**All:** "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." (Matt. 6:14-15)  
O God, the cross of Jesus reminds us how seriously you regard sin. You have borne the pain and cost of forgiveness and we receive that forgiveness through the Holy Spirit.

Through faith, we have acknowledged our need to be forgiven and have claimed the gift of new life. As we are forgiven, we know that we must forgive.

We seek your help O God to be agents of forgiveness in the face of pain and justifiable anger. We seek to offer mercy as we have received mercy so that the transforming power of forgiveness would be a defining characteristic of your church in this place.

IN YOUR MERCY O LORD, FORGIVE US AND RENEW YOUR CHURCH.

**Leader:** We affirm that our confidence is in God alone.

As citizens of heaven our primary loyalty is to Jesus Christ, all other loyalties are secondary. We are called to be good citizens toward all our neighbours. It is a divine obligation, part of our obedience to Christ and the debt of love we owe; it is part of our evangelistic

responsibility and an act of worship we offer to God. We worship a God who is good to all; He has compassion on and love for all He has made. God cares for the oppressed, the hungry, prisoners, the blind, those who are bowed down, the alien, the fatherless and the widow. As disciples we are to be like-minded and have no limits to those to whom we are to do good.

**All:** "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" (*Matt. 22:21*)

We recognise that both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are passing entities. Only the kingdom of God remains. Jesus gathers the Christian church from all ethnic backgrounds and nationalities. We ask you O God, to show us how we can be more responsible citizens and more loving neighbours. As we lay claim to our rights as citizens, we also ask how we can ensure that these rights are available to all other citizens.

IN YOUR MERCY O LORD, FORGIVE US AND RENEW YOUR CHURCH.

**Leader:** We declare that Christ initiates reconciliation.

By His death, Jesus not only has reconciled us to God, but also has healed our divisions and abolished the barriers that separated us from each other. This ministry of reconciliation is the calling of all who follow Christ.

As Christians, we have allowed our differences to become barriers, sometimes intentionally and at other times by our apathy and indifference. We have not always recognised the signs of brokenness in our own lives, our churches, our community and in the world around us. We have sometimes been slow to respond to that hurt and brokenness.

Christ came to a messy world and in the face of chaos do we engage or retreat? Are we trapped in the church and lost to the world?

**All:** "Words like Jewish and non-Jewish, religious and irreligious, insider and outsider, uncivilized and uncouth, slave and free, mean nothing. From now on everyone is defined by Christ, everyone is included in Christ." (*Col. 3:11*)

In your presence O God, we say together that Jesus has destroyed dividing walls of hostility and that there can be no room for arrogance and superior attitudes in our lives or in our churches.

We say together that there is no place in the body of Christ for bigotry, prejudice or hatred. Therefore, we ask for humility as we discern and apply the truth of scripture to our lives and our community.

We pray we would be able to stand in the gap as living powerful witnesses of how Christ the reconciler can bring together those divided by tradition and politics.

IN YOUR MERCY O LORD, FORGIVE US AND RENEW YOUR CHURCH.

## WORSHIP

**Leader:** We commit ourselves to the building of a new society.

At the heart of our understanding of Jesus is the concept and attitude of the Servant. People of faith are recognised as those who serve, instead of rule; who suffer instead of inflict suffering; whose fellowship crosses boundaries, instead of reinforcing them.

A servant-community is a powerful revelation of the message and purpose of God in the midst of a society that is vying for individual rights, recognition and power; where self-assertion is the recommended route. Christian Servanthood faithfully practised in community would significantly impact a society that is searching for meaningful identity, purpose and love. Yet the Body of Christ is often distracted from this call to love and serve others and has failed to shape society.

**All:** "Our attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant." (*Phil. 2:5-7*)

Teach us, O God the way of love. May your love which transforms us, shape every thought, attitude, word and action we take. Let our concern for the welfare and good of others define this church in this community. Make us a people who care for those without power, the poor and the outsider.

IN YOUR MERCY O LORD, FORGIVE US AND RENEW YOUR CHURCH.

**Leader:** We share responsibility for the future.

As we face an uncertain future, what is our vision for this society? The Christian message is a message of hope. We know that God is the Sovereign Lord and is working His purposes out in Christ. Therefore, whatever the political prospects of this island may be, as Christians we can view the future with hope. Hope in God, not in nationality, nor politics, nor culture.

The task of the church is to make known the good news of the kingdom of God.

**All:** "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, 'Your God reigns!'" (*Is. 52:7*)

We will continue to praise you, O God, for the glorious joy of being born into a living hope with an inheritance that is eternal.

We will call upon your grace to help us work out what it means to be faithful witnesses and to act Christianly in the world.

We will be marked by the cross of Jesus rather than be identified with any particular social, cultural or political system.

We will be courageous and remain true to our calling, to persevere in the face of temptation, suffering, disappointment or fear.

Any by your grace and mercy O Lord, we will play our part in the renewal of your church, so that the good news of the kingdom of God will be made known through us.

AMEN.



**SUGGESTIONS FOR SONGS IN WORSHIP**

(Listed alphabetically by first line)

At the name of Jesus	MP 41
Be Thou my vision	MP 51
Father hear the prayer we offer	MP 132
From heaven you came	MP 162
I want to serve the purpose of God	MP 859
Jesus all for Jesus	SH2000 63
King of Kings, Majesty	MP 1000
Let there be love	MP 411
Meekness and Majesty	MP 465
My heart is full	MP 893
O Lord, the clouds are gathering	MP 509
Purify my heart	MP 921
Restore O Lord	MP 579
Salvation belongs to our God	MP 924
Take my life and let it be	MP 624
Thy hand O God has guided	MP 705
Who can sound the depths of sorrow	MP 766

MP – Complete Mission Praise 1999/2000

SH2000 – Spring Harvest 2000 edition

## NOTES





When ECONI began by publishing *For God And His Glory Alone*, it was billed as “an invitation to ask God what kind of people we should be and how we should live as Christians in Northern Ireland”.

Fifteen years on, with all that has happened since and all that the future now seems to hold, our latest publication, *Dreams and Visions*, has the same aim. It returns with freshness and insight to those original ten principles of love, forgiveness, reconciliation, peace, citizenship, truth, servanthood, justice & righteousness, hope and repentance,

These study materials, which include Bible study outlines and personal essays seasoned with perceptive reflection and prayerful response, seek to inspire Christians to live for God's glory in a divided world. Clergy, group leaders and anyone concerned with encouraging biblical peacebuilding will find this an envisioning and practical resource.



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