## Whose Ministry of Reconciliation?

An Address to Illinois Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends

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There is an extraordinary section of George Fox's *Journal*, from the year 1648, sometimes described as the "flaming sword" experience, where he reports that he "came up into the state of Adam, which he was in before he fell." I would like to begin this evening with a short excerpt from that passage:

Great things did the Lord lead me into, and wonderful depths were opened unto me, beyond what can by words be declared; but as people come into subjection to the spirit of God, and grow up in the image and power of the Almighty, they may receive the word of wisdom that opens all things, and come to know the hidden unity in the Eternal Being.<sup>1</sup>

I think Fox's words have some bearing on the theme to which you've asked me to speak, and I hope to make that clear in what I say later in this time. For the time being, I want to simply hold before you the last part of what he says:

That we may "come to know the hidden unity in the Eternal Being."

Your theme, of course, is "Our Ministry of Reconciliation," coming from verses 18 and 19 in the fifth chapter of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. Friends, this passage is extremely rich theologically, and it is challenging to identify and relate all of the various elements to one another. There was likely some wisdom in your choice of just two verses as the basis for your theme. Scripture is sometimes like the intense, fiery green Japanese sauce known as wasabi—just a small amount on your sushi or udon noodles is more than enough to inflame your sinuses and make your eyes water. One verse, one sentence, perhaps one word only of the Scriptures is sometimes all that we need to flavor an entire hour, or day, or week of devotion to God. At other times,

however, we need more than that flavor. Understanding often requires searching, expansion, pursuit of not just a flavor, but a solid meal. So as I have been living with this passage for the past several months, turning it over in my mind and my heart, I have felt the need to go beyond just these two verses in trying to understand the ministry of reconciliation, what this likely meant to Paul, and what it might mean for you and for me.

So if you will permit me, I would like to expand the bounds of the passage in what we consider together this evening. I hope this is enough to feed upon, but not so much that we are overstuffed:

<sup>14.</sup> For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. <sup>15.</sup> And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. <sup>16.</sup> From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. <sup>17.</sup> So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! <sup>18.</sup> All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; <sup>19.</sup> that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. <sup>20.</sup> So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (2 Cor 5:14–5:20)

To begin with this passage, we can pick out a few key phrases or concepts: the conviction that Christ died for all, so that all might live for Christ; a change in perspective regarding Christ; a new creation; God reconciling Godself to the world in Christ, and giving the ministry of reconciliation; ambassadors for Christ, who make the appeal to be reconciled to God.<sup>2</sup> As I've said, there is a tremendous theological feast here. I am going to suggest that the two most important concepts of this passage—the main course—are first, reconciliation in several dimensions, and second, the new

creation.

But before digging in to these two important ideas, it might be helpful to have more context. Corinth, at the time of Paul's writing in the mid-to-late 50s, was a bustling and fairly young city. There had originally been a Greek city on this site, but the Romans destroyed it in 146 BCE. They then re-established a colony about a hundred years later. This new city, like the old, was a trade center because of where it was placed—an isthmus, or narrow strip of land, between the mainland of Greece and the Pelopennesian peninsula. There were ports on both sides of the isthmus that the Corinthians controlled; ships coming from both east and west would use these ports to transfer their goods from one side of the isthmus to the other. I think in some ways, Corinth was like Chicago—a crossroads, situated strategically between bodies of water, eager to make a buck off the trade that would naturally come its way. A "City of the Big Shoulders" for the first century CE.

Corinth had an overlay of Roman culture upon Greek. It was settled by Roman veterans who had been given their citizenship in exchange for military service, as well as freed slaves; these people had joined an existing Greek remnant of the earlier city. It was therefore a place of social mobility. Like any Roman city, it was a center for worship of many kinds of gods, and all the more because of all the travelers and traders passing through. Particularly prominent was the temple of Aphrodite, which dated from the classical Greek period, and was situated on a high place above the city.

The young Corinthian church would therefore have included former believers from all sorts of pagan religions. Like all of the churches that Paul established, there

were Jewish Christians in this fellowship as well; the book of Acts, in chapter 18, mentions that members of the local synagogue became convinced of the Gospel through Paul's ministry there.

It is likely that the fellowship at Corinth was also economically diverse, with both rich and poor members. The church was probably organized in household units, rather than having a central meeting-place—you might think of each household being a small Preparative Meeting or worship group, making up a Monthly Meeting with all the others. In Roman society, there was a complex set of social obligations that centered on the head of the household; heads of household were the patrons for everyone under their care. The more wealthy the household, the more people a head of household would have had depending on him or her. The influence of these patrons often carried over into leadership roles in the church.

So the Corinthian church appears to have been a heterogeneous fellowship composed of Jewish and Gentile converts, women and men, rich and poor, that was to some degree decentralized, but also with some significant differences in power between its members; all of this in the midst of a diverse, energetic society. (*Does that sound like a recipe for conflict to you?*) It's probably not surprising that this church had its problems.

Indeed, Paul tries to address a number of conflicts in I Corinthians, over things like loyalty to different leaders and how to treat meat sacrificed to idols. And as we read II Corinthians, it becomes clear that there is significant conflict between the Corinthian church and Paul himself. It is difficult to establish the sequence of events precisely, but

it appears that Paul both visited Corinth and wrote to the church between I and II Corinthians. In II Cor 2:1, he refers to a "painful visit" that he paid to them. It sounds like it was painful for both them and him. He also mentions having written them a letter "out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears" (2:4)<sup>3</sup>; he seems to hope that his letters will have a better chance of improving the situation than his being there in person.

(Have you ever felt that way? Maybe there's been someone about whom you think, "I just can't stand seeing them, if I have to be in the same room with them I'm going to explode, or they're going to explode, or one of us is going to burst into tears—I'd better write them a note instead, I might be able to get my point across that way..." I think that might be how Paul felt. Perhaps the Corinthians felt something like that too.)

It's not entirely clear what the source of all this pain is. Paul does mention a member of the congregation that has been punished by the majority, in 2:5-10. He counsels the church to forgive this brother, and says that he has forgiven him himself; but maybe there was some lingering conflict over that. Church discipline, as we know from the history of our own Society, can be painfully divisive. Elsewhere there are hints of people in the group whose teachings Paul opposes, likely itinerant ministers in competition with him: he speaks of "those who take pride in what is seen rather than in what is in the heart" (5:12) and a group of "super apostles" who "preach... a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached" (11:4, 5).

Remember that this relationship between Paul and the Corinthian church isn't just a recent acquaintance—Paul was the *founder* of this fellowship. So this epistle is in

large part Paul's impassioned plea to the Corinthians, to win them back to him. In much of the letter, Paul is alternately praising and chiding his audience; he says he "speak[s] as to children" (6:13; [NEB: "may a father speak so to his children?"]). Thus, in this context, the reconciliation will be with God and with Paul as well.

In this passage there is both the verb "to be reconciled" and the noun "reconciliation." These come from the same Greek root word, katallaso ( $\kappa\alpha\tau\alpha\lambda\lambda\dot{\alpha}\sigma\sigma\omega$ ). Altogether there are only about a dozen occurrences of this root in the New Testament, all of them Paul's, in Romans or in I and II Corinthians. Most of the time, Paul uses this word to refer to making things right with God—coming out of a state of hostility into right relationship.

Katalasso would likely have been understood with a few other meanings as well in Paul's day. First—and this is likely the original meaning—it was an economic term, meaning to exchange or trade. There's a sense of evening things up. So we still use "reconciliation" in English in much the same way, when you talk about reconciling your checkbook with your bank statement. Second, it would have been understood as a political term, referring to the way that warring states made peace; again, the English word has much the same meaning today. This kind of reconciliation was a major part of the work of ambassadors. Paul acknowledges this when he states, "we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us," because God has "entrust[ed] the message of reconciliation to [them]" (5:20,19).

Here is where we can begin to answer the question stated in the title of this

message. Whose ministry of reconciliation is this? One curious feature of this part of II Corinthians is Paul's use of the first person plural: "the love of Christ urges *us* on"; "we are convinced that one has died for all"; "we regard no one from a human point of view"; "God...has given *us* the ministry of reconciliation," etc. This isn't just a "royal we;" he does switch to singular in places (e.g., 5:11b), but it's not always clear why. So who is the "we" here? It's possible that he is referring to himself together with Timothy, whom he lists as his co-author in the initial greeting to the church (1:1). Some commentators suggest a wider sense of "we;" perhaps Paul and the other apostles, or the Christians in Macedonia, from where he is writing, or all the members of the mainstream churches who (apparently) see things as Paul does. Such usage makes sense with regard to our passage, but not with other parts of the letter where he seems to be speaking more personally (e.g., 1:8–11).

Regardless of exactly who "we" is here, it is clear that it does *not* include the Corinthians at present. There are places where it seems like Paul might be including the audience in his statements about ministry, but not in 5:20: "we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." So one implication seems to be that one needs to be reconciled to God before one can in turn bear the ministry of reconciliation to others. Paul is actually making a fairly stark statement about where the Corinthians are—we might expect this in his public preaching to the unconverted, but not in counsel within the church.

And indeed, Paul's language is often quite stark. We may feel that it does not speak to our conditions. Do we truly find ourselves in a state of hostility towards God?

Do we really need to be reconciled, because we are at odds with God's purposes? Reconciliation is fundamentally about overcoming alienation. In my own experience, any time that I say, "not thy will, but mine be done, O Lord," I am in a state of alienation. Any time that I seek to move ahead without waiting on God, I have alienated my will, my mind, my heart, from God's will, God's mind, God's heart. Remember Fox's words: "as people come into subjection to the spirit of God... [they may]... come to know the hidden unity in the Eternal Being." "Com[ing] into subjection to the spirit of God" means that I have to give up something of myself—whatever part I cling to most stubbornly, whatever part I would reserve outside of God's control—in order to begin to move towards that hidden unity. Isaac Penington and Robert Barclay and others of the first Friends described this process as allowing Christ to be formed in us. I can't allow Christ to be formed in me, if there is so much of me in there that there is no room for Christ.

However, the ultimate source of our reconciliation is not in or of ourselves. Its beginning is God's doing, through Christ. The evening-up (*katalasso*) begins with God's gracious action towards us. This is the work of God: *the new creation*. The way that verse 5:17 has been translated most often (at least as far back as the King James Version), is: "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, **he/she is** a new creature..." This rendering is frequently quoted by those who proclaim "new creation" as individual transformation in Christ. In fact, the Greek is much more terse and open-ended; there is neither the personal pronoun "he" nor the verb "is" preceding "new creature," so that the Greek is more literally something like, "if anyone is in Christ, (*bang!*) new creation" (consequently, "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation" is more apt). This reading does *not* negate the importance of an individual's salvation, but it does open the

possibility of a broader significance.<sup>5</sup> We might say that if anyone is in Christ, *all of creation has become new* because of this new thing that God has accomplished, reconciling the entire world to Godself, through the death of one for all. The new creation here thus has a global or even cosmic significance. One commentator also suggests that there is a third dimension, which is new creation being found in community, or of our being saved in and for community.<sup>6</sup> I am not going to try to say much more about that dimension this evening, because I hope that Ken and Katharine Jacobsen will address it in what they bring later on this week.

But Friends, where is this new creation? Alienation, injustice, misery, are still all around us. We continue to live in a broken world, creatures and creation alike divorced from our Creator. Here I recall Fox's words yet again: we are to know "the hidden unity in the Eternal Being." The new creation has indeed been established, and as we "come into subjection to the spirit of God, and grow up in the image and power of the Almighty," we shall see it more and more clearly.

So God's new creation, the hidden unity that Fox speaks of, is an invitation into the ministry of reconciliation. The new creation makes it possible for individuals to be reconciled not just to God, but also to one another. Those who have experienced what Thomas Kelly might have called the two dimensions of reconciliation—vertical towards God, horizontal toward our fellows—can then become reconcilers: ambassadors, bearers themselves of the ministry of reconciliation.

But how do we make this ministry our own? I think there are as many ministries of reconciliation in the world as there broken situations, and as many ministers of

reconciliation as there are people willing to listen for and answer God's call. The more keenly we hunger for God's hidden unity, the more sensitive we will be to the degree of alienation at hand, if we were not already painfully aware of it.

I believe that our experience at the Chicago Fellowship of Friends included the ministry of reconciliation. Many of you visited us, worshiped with us, helped us work on our perpetually-falling-apart meetinghouse; you supported us financially and in prayer. All of you who were connected to us in any of these ways will remember what Cabrini-Green, the community we were in, was like: a public housing project that was almost entirely African-American, where something close to 75% of the residents were under the age of 21. There was a great deal of gang activity in the neighborhood, and our meetinghouse was on the border between the turfs of two rival gangs. Because there were so many young people in the community, our ministry had to be youth ministry. And because there was so much violence and hopelessness, it could not help but be a ministry of reconciliation.

So, our building was a place where youth from rival gangs could coexist, learning about the Gospel in a safe zone. There, they were invited to reconciliation with God in an environment that could lead to reconciliation with others. It didn't always happen the way we thought it might, but there were many young men and women who, when they were shown an alternative to the street life, found they could experience the love of God. And once they began to know that love, they found that they could love their neighbors as well.

I know that many of you hold the work of Friends Peace Teams and the African

Great Lakes Initiative close to your hearts. The committed work of David Zarembka and many other Illinois Yearly Meeting Friends has enabled this ministry to flourish in a number of countries in East Africa. I look forward to what Florence Ntakarutimana has to share with us this week about her work in Burundi. And I know I don't need to tell you how much more important the work of AGLI and the new Friends Church Peace Team has become in the wake of the events in Kenya at the beginning of this year.

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Back in January when I first began thinking about this message, I was struck by something David Zarembka posted on one of the AGLI websites. It was a letter from Malesi Kinaro, a Kenyan Friend that some of you know. She wrote during the first weeks of the troubles in Kenya. I think her letter tells us a little more about the ministry of reconciliation. I'm sure some of you have read it before, but if you will indulge me, I'd like to read a few excerpts:

In the midst of the chaos many of us became paralyzed. Then we remembered that we are peace makers. So putting on my hat as member of an organization called "Friends in Peace and Community Development" we called each other and began to look at ways we could use our experience in dealing with crisis situations... We went to the IDP [Internally Displaced Persons] camp that had 3,000 people near us. We were asked to identify ourselves so we went and wrote letters of introduction. Then we printed T shirts whose front reads "Friends in" and the back reads "Peace". The first day we wore them we were scared because things were still tough here in Kakamega so we put on shirts to show only part [of the T shirts]. We went to the IDP camp and started talking to those displaced to see what they needed most.

We then wrote to the Red Cross giving them figures at the IDP [camp]. We wrote to a coalition of churches based in Nairobi that is helping displaced people. Then we wrote to as many churches around Kakamega as possible. On Sunday we distributed these letters. I was invited to preach at the Friends Church Amalemba and did I pour out my heart!

Anyway now we are wearing our T shirts very openly. Some churches have contributed funds and AGLI gave us some funds so we were able to join the Red Cross in distributing food...

We hope that we shall soon begin some healing workshops... But at this time we must earn the right to be heard. Today as we walked around in our peace T shirts many people made comments like "WE also want to wear those T shirts. We want peace". We heard some young men say "These mamas really want peace. We join you." So just our T shirts are making a loud statement. I wish we had money to print more so that the highly negative atmosphere is replaced with the peace message. When we just arrived at the IDP camp, those waiting for food just read aloud ..."Friends". That too made a powerful statement.<sup>7</sup>

Malesi also mentions reaching out to the disenfranchised young men who perpetrated much of the violence. She writes of hearing their tremendous rage, of sometimes bearing the brunt of this anger, but of continuing to reach out, to try to understand, and to find a way to help. For me the most striking part of her letter is at the beginning of what I read, when she says, "many of us became paralyzed... then we remembered that we are peacemakers." In remembering this, and then putting on that T-shirt, Malesi became willing to bear the marks of peace in a chaotic and dangerous situation; to reach out past her own fear and see what people needed most; to become an ambassador for Christ. From what I have read, the work currently going forward is very much in this same spirit.

As some of you know, I've been involved for a number of years with Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT). I've been thinking some about in what ways CPT's work is a ministry of reconciliation; I've come to the conclusion that a lot of what CPT does is a different aspect of peacemaking—so reconciliation is not the only kind of peacemaking there is. Much of what CPT teams find themselves doing in the field is accompaniment of people who are threatened by violence of one sort or another: it might be Palestinian children trying to get to school when they have to walk past an Israeli settlement whose inhabitants brandish guns and throw rocks; it might be Colombian human rights workers

whose lives have been marked by paramilitaries; it might be First Nations people in Ontario attempting to assert their treaty rights against the encroachment of logging or mining companies. CPT workers by and large are not in these situations to try to mediate between or reconcile oppressor and oppressed; rather, we hope to strengthen local partners who are committed to nonviolence in such a way that they can seek such reconciliation themselves.

One example of this model that I think worked well was during the period when CPTers in Iraq were working actively with Muslim Peacemaker Teams. This is a group of primarily Shi'a Iraqi Muslims who started their own faith-based nonviolence organization. The CPT Iraq team trained them and helped them get started. In the spring of 2005, MPT and the CPT Iraq team decided to go to Fallujah to try and help the inhabitants of that city. As you may remember, Fallujah is a Sunni city that the U.S. targeted with two major offensives in 2004. The city was strangled by the U.S. and Iraqi forces occupying it well into 2005. MPT and CPT went to work with the Fallujah public works department, helping to clean up rubble from the U.S. bombings in the street in front of a mosque; after the work was done, the Shi'a members of MPT then went to the mosque for Friday prayers with the Sunni citizens of Fallujah.

Now, I've given you a number of examples that may seem a little exceptional, very out-there-on-the-front-lines. Much of the time, however, this work of reconciliation is a lot closer to home; sometimes it needs to begin right here on these benches.<sup>8</sup> There is another angle on reconciliation in the New Testament that speaks to conflict in the church, in Matthew 5:23–24: "...if you are offering your gift at the altar and there

remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to that person; then come and offer your gift." Here the word for reconciliation is different from what is used in II Corinthians: dialasso ( $\delta\iota\alpha\lambda\lambda\dot{\alpha}\sigma\sigma\omega$ ). It is similar in meaning, and comes from the same root word that means to exchange. *Dialasso*, however, has more of a sense of mutual reconciliation, of both parties needing to make right wrongs that have been done.

These are Jesus' words, from part of the Sermon on the Mount. Here I believe he is telling us something about worship, as well as conflict. Unreconciled conflict between us, it seems, is an obstacle to true worship. God does not want to meet us at our inward altars if we have not first been reconciled one to another. We have both a vertical and a horizontal fellowship, and both dimensions—vertical towards God, horizontal toward our fellows—need to be clear of obstructions in order for our fellowship to be true. So the ministry of reconciliation begins at home, so to speak.

I think of a time many years ago in Chicago when I was called upon to help mediate a conflict between two women who were part of the Fellowship of Friends. They had been having trouble with one another—mostly what I think you could call personality differences—but neither of them wanted to take the solution that people often resort to in a church conflict, which is walking out the door and never coming back. So they knew they needed some help. All I really did was listened to both of them, and then asked them each to listen to the other. I asked them each to try to hear what the other person was saying, and see if they could understand how that might be true in the other's experience. It took some prayer, and a couple of hours on the phone.

It wasn't dramatic, and I didn't really even need to leave the house to do it. But after we spent that time listening to each other, they were able to coexist, and take part in the life of the meeting again together. This was a small piece of the work of reconciliation.

As people who have been reconciled to God, we too can be peacemakers like Malesi Kinaro, or the members of Muslim Peacemaker Teams, bearers of the marks of peace in the ministry of reconciliation. Remember that there are as many ministries in the world as there are broken situations; as many ministers as there are people willing to listen for and answer God's call. This call may come to you—this call *will* come to you, at some point. It may not be very big or dramatic; the key is to become available to God, to be willing to be an ambassador for Christ. Friends, let us make the ministry of reconciliation our own, by inviting others to reconciliation with God and with their fellow people. May you be able to do so here in Illinois Yearly Meeting, and wherever else God's new creation—the hidden unity in the Eternal Being—is being brought forth.

O, Word of wisdom that opens all things:
Be with us now
Give us a holy hunger for your new creation
Reconcile our hearts to your will
That we may be your reconciling ministers
Build us up in Your image and power
That we might know the hidden unity
That was, that is, and that will be in Eternity.

## Resources

- **Note:** Scripture quotations come from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.
- Fox, George. "A Journal Or Historical Account of the Life, Travels, Sufferings, &c. of George Fox." in *The Works of George Fox*. Vol. I, 67-437. Philadelphia; New York: Marcus T.C. Gould; Isaac T. Hopper, 1831, http://esr.earlham.edu/dqc/ (accessed 17th of Sixth Month, 2008).
- Hubbard, Moyer V. *New Creation in Paul's Letters and Thought.* Cambridge, UK, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Martin, Ralph P. Reconciliation: a study of Paul's theology. Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1981.
- Sampley, J. Paul. "The Second Letter to the Corinthians." Chap. 1, In *The New Interpreter's Bible*. Vol. XI. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000.
- Shillington, V. George. *2 Corinthians*. Believers Church Bible Commentary, edited by Elmer Martens, Willard Swartley. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998.
- Witherington III, Ben. Conflict and Community in Corinth: a socio-rhetorical commentary on I and II Corinthians. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995.



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## **Endnotes**

- 1 George Fox, "A Journal Or Historical Account of the Life, Travels, Sufferings, &c. of George Fox" in *The Works of George Fox*, Vol. I (Philadelphia; New York: Marcus T.C. Gould; Isaac T. Hopper, 1831), 85, http://esr.earlham.edu/dqc/ (accessed 17<sup>th</sup> of Sixth Month, 2008).
- 2 This outline is based on group discussion in Prof. Dan Ulrich's class, "The Gospel of Peace," at Bethany Theological Seminary/Earlham School of Religion, 9th of First Month, 2008.
- 3 This letter is apparently lost.
- 4 Apostles: V. George Shillington, *2 Corinthians* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 133; mainstream church: J. Paul Sampley, "The Second Letter to the Corinthians" In *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. XI (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 90, 91.
- 5 Shillington, 2 Corinthians, 130
- 6 Moyer V. Hubbard, *New Creation in Paul's Letters and Thought* (Cambridge, UK, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 133–187, esp. 171–187. Note that Moyer concludes that there is less support for the global or cosmic interpretation than for the individually-oriented one: the new creation "relat[es] to the new situation of the individual 'in Christ'. As long as the term 'individual' is not misconstrued *individualistically*, this interpretation should pose no difficulty for modern interpreters of Paul" (183; emphasis in the original).
- 7 Malesi Kinaro, "Update from Malesi Jan 8 There is hope," 8th of First Month, 2008, http://quakerservice.blogspot.com/2008/01/update-from-malesi-jan-8.html (accessed 27th of First Month, 2008).
- 8 I did not read the shaded section that follows in the presentation at Illinois Yearly Meeting.