

RECONCILIATION

Popular definition: (1) to render no longer opposed; bring to acquiescence (stop fighting); (2) win over to friendliness (be nice).

None of the above suggests the kind of radical transformation that mends severely damaged relationships.

Old Testament

1. Acknowledgement that one has done something wrong
2. Public confession of one's wrongdoing both to God and to the community
3. Public expression of remorse
4. Public announcement of the offender's resolve not to sin in this way again
5. Compensation of the victim for the injury inflicted, accompanied by acts of charity to others
6. Sincere request by the offender for forgiveness from the victim – including the intercession of the victim's friends, and up to three requests if necessary
7. Avoidance of the conditions that caused the offense (perhaps even moving to a new locale)
8. Different actions when confronted with the same situation in which the offender sinned the first time
9. Injured party had a duty to forgive after the wrongdoer completed the process

New Testament

1. With Jesus as the reconciler the possibility of reconciliation precedes the repentance and confession of sins to God. God stands ready to forgive. Ideally this repentance and confession should flow out of gratitude to God.
2. The impact of one's reconciliation with God should be moral transformation in the lives of the believers.
3. This is more a continuing process of growth in grace. We are becoming new creations.
4. Christians following God's example, through Jesus, stand ready to forgive and when possible, reconcile.

Psychology

1. Reconciliation is the restoration of trust in an interpersonal relationship through mutual trustworthy behaviors.
2. Mutual reengagement – (1) requiring a readiness on the part of each person to take the other seriously, (2) to acknowledge violations to the relationship, (3) and to experience the pain associated with the acknowledgement. The goal is more than righting wrongs. It is to bring us to a deeper place of trust and commitment.
3. Both the offender and offended contribute to the outcome. (1) Both offer appropriate repentance. (2) Both agree on appropriate restitution. (3) Both open the door of future relationship.

4. Forgiving and repenting can happen without another but reconciliation involves mutual processes between wrongdoers and injured parties.

True Reconciliation Defined

Reconciliation is an active commitment to the restoration of justice and trustworthiness by both injured party and transgressor so that their relationship may be transformed. *Transformation* is the goal of reconciliation. It is more than the cessation of negativity, the introduction of goodwill, or the balancing of ledgers – although these may be part of the larger process. Reconciliation involves a metamorphosis of persons and their transactions. Reconciliation is not a return to the comfort of the way things were previously. Instead it involves courageous reengagement between victim and transgressor so that the nature of commitment, power, and resources within the relationship is transformed. Injured parties forgive and invite the other into deeper levels of intimacy.

Efforts at reconciliation are sustained by commitment. There are two kinds of commitment – constraint and dedication. Constraint commitment functions when external factors prevent partners from leaving (e.g., I would leave, if I could leave, but I can't.) Constraint operates on a basis of duty. Sacrifice for the sake of the relationship is seen as an obligation rather than a privilege. Conversely, dedication commitment is active when partners know they can leave, but they choose to stay (e.g., I could leave, but I won't.) Dedication operates on a basis of love. In this case, willingness to sacrifice for the sake of the relationship is seen as a gift rather than a chore. Each type of commitment helps sustain reconciliation. Constraint commitment motivates initial repair attempts, but if it is not transformed into dedication, then increased intimacy and full reconciliation are unlikely.

The substance of reconciliation is restoration of trustworthiness. Partners collaborate to transform acts of betrayal into covenants of truthfulness. Both extend grace and mercy to the other as they rebuild their moral foundations. Each partner seeks to be found faithful in the task of restoring fairness, truthfulness, and trust.

From a review of biblical texts, confession and repentance culminate in seeking God's forgiveness (Ps. 51; 2 Cor. 7:8-13, 9:13; James 5:16; I John 1:8-10). Confession involves admitting one's wrongdoing to another. Obviously, one can admit to doing wrong without any intent to change. On the other hand, change itself is at the heart of repentance. Repentance is often pictured as a 180 degree turn – a drastic move in the opposite direction. Repentance refers to the radical turning away from anything that impedes one's turning toward a committed relationship with God. In the gospels, "repentance involves acknowledgement of one's sinfulness...as well as a new and holy pattern of daily behavior in relation to others.... Thus it is clear that repentance...does not simply consist in a "change of mind," but in a transformation of the entire person."

SHAME VS. GUILT

Shame is an extraordinarily painful negative evaluation of the global self in response to an interpersonal situation. Shame-prone persons feel diminished

and powerless. They are focused on another's negative evaluations of them (real or imagined) and are motivated to avoid, hide and escape, or externalize blame and strike out with defensive anger.

Guilt, on the other hand, is experienced as less painful than shame and evokes negative evaluations of particular behaviors without spilling over to a negative evaluation of the self. Guilt-prone persons feel tension, remorse, and regret. They are motivated to confess, apologize and make amends.

Shame-prone wrongdoers may reject repentance as a repair strategy. Instead, they are more likely to deny any personal responsibility for the harmful action by laying the blame at the feet of the injured party, or they may abandon the relationship entirely. Shame-generated reaction could explain long-term estrangements between family members when one relative commits a serious wrong against another. Conversely, guilt-prone transgressors will embrace repentance as a way to make amends.

Some Observations:

1. Dedication to reconciliation is accompanied by dedication to Christ.
2. The decision to pursue reconciliation prior to reestablishment of trust is most helpful.
3. Decisions to reconcile and demonstrations of trustworthiness are reinforcing patterns.

Reconciliation needs to become the *central organizing principle* and a priority. Organization around reconciliation includes: (a) terminating contact with persons, places and things that threatened the relationship; (b) participating in activities that reinforced the relationship; and (c) investing substantial amounts of time talking about the relationship and being together. This increases the transgressor's motivation to maintain trustworthy behavior and increases the injured party's desire for deeper connection with the wrongdoer.

Victims and wrongdoers describe a *growing up process* that includes holding themselves accountable for their own hurtful behaviors, recognizing the humanity in their spouse, and developing forbearance toward one another. Many persons stated that they *did now know themselves* prior to their moral violation and that coming to terms with their thoughts, feelings and values was an important turning point toward reconciliation. Interpersonal transparency and honesty became characteristic of their conversation.

Reconciliation happens within *community*. Successful reconcilers found a community in which they could nurture their relationship. Community took the form of church, family, friends, mentors, and even Christian counselors. In addition, participants actively pursued multiple resources to help them with restoration. For example, attending conferences and retreats, reading books, studying Scripture, and participating in programs like Alcoholics Anonymous. Couples do not reconcile in isolation.

Marital reconciliation involves sincere repenting and forgiving, willingness to communicate on both sides, and commitment to reconciliation itself. Reconciliation is not for the faint of heart!

(Excerpts taken from "Thinking About Reconciliation," by Virginia Todd Holeman.)