

THE HARMONY OF RECONCILIATION

Jamie Buckingham



It has been thirteen years since the Brevard Baptist Association refused to seat our church messengers at the annual associational meeting. That, of course, was tantamount to being kicked out of the denomination.

There was a lot of pain which surrounded the break. I said, at the time, I did not want to leave the Southern Baptist Convention. My roots went deep. I had graduated from a Baptist university and a Baptist seminary. I had pastored three Baptist churches and had been active in the denomination at all levels. In fact, the very house in which I had grown up had been donated by my

father to the Florida Baptist Convention and was now the Florida Baptist Retirement Center. My entire life was centered around the Southern Baptist Convention and the thought of being kicked out was almost unbearable.

Determined To Self-Destruct

But now, as I look back at my actions and attitudes, it seems I did everything possible to force the associational executive committee to take the action they did. I was like a man bent on committing suicide who says

with his mouth he wants to live but does everything possible to get folks to hate him so that eventually one of them kills him.

The years preceding that painful schism had been tumultuous. I began my ministerial career as the pastor of one of the largest churches in South Carolina. Even though that church grew numerically, I was spiritually empty. I took my family and church through eight years of heaven and six months of hell. In the end the deacons demanded my resignation.

My wife and five small children followed me back

to my home state of Florida where I accepted the pastorate of a much smaller church. I didn't adjust well. Full of bitterness, I was determined to "show them" I was not a failure by proving myself in areas where Baptists acknowledge instant success—numerical growth, financial growth, and a building program.

It took fifteen months before the new church recognized they had a sawdust-filled dandy as a pastor. Again I was fired. This time a small group of wounded people left the church with me. Together, in a storefront situation, we formed the Tabernacle Baptist

Church. We immediately applied for membership in the Association and were accepted. But as Vance Havner once quipped, "it doesn't do much good to change labels on an empty bottle." My problem was not the wineskin. My problem was the absence of new wine.

When you do not know you are empty there is no need to search for that which fills. Outward success can be a man's greatest enemy—and failure can be his greatest friend. For years I had hidden my emptiness behind the mask of outward success. But when the mask was ripped away I had no choice but to admit my failure. My Baptist friends had no answers for me. In fact, most of them felt it safer to stay away from me. What mother would take her child to a contagious physician?

Camping at the Brook Jabbok

But there were other voices speaking—voices I had been warned against. These were voices from the Pentecostal camp saying, "You don't have to remain empty. You can be baptized in the Holy Spirit." In my former vocabulary those were words of heresy. But my ability—and my desire—to judge the theology of others had disappeared during my personal purging. Now, for the first time since seminary, I was cleansed from my sophomoric attitude of theological superiority. I started listening to simple laymen who had not been taught that the gifts of the Holy Spirit were not for today. These "unlearned ones" accepted the Bible at face value. I, too, held to the position, at least intellectually, of following the biblical pattern in my personal life and for my church, but that pattern had never been integrated into my life. Now, through personal suffering and public humiliation, I was finally open to all God had for me.

I will not use the space here (I've done so in both *Risky Living* and *Where Eagles Soar*) to relate all that happened when I finally reached my own Brook Jabbok (Genesis 32:22-32). Like Jacob, however, I emerged from that "dark night of the soul" walking with a limp, a sure sign that I had been touched by God. But, there were still some missing elements.

As I later discovered, there were some evil spirits which needed to be cast out. One of them, a suicidal spirit, began to manifest itself publicly. In looking back, I realize this spirit of self destruction had been around for a long time. It had led me into a foolhardy type of open immorality which left church authorities with no choice but to dismiss me. (It was only by

the grace of God someone didn't try to discipline me with a shotgun.) This same spirit caused me to arrogantly defy authority, to lie when everyone around me knew I was lying, and to refuse all offers for help. Even after the Holy Spirit began to take control of my life, that evil spirit stubbornly held on, causing me to act in ways which set up my fellow pastors to react against me.

Don't Leave Out The Part About Love

Paul warned of the rasping results of speaking in tongues, prophesying, or performing miracles apart from the soothing

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balm of love. In my excitement over the discovery of the reality of 1 Corinthians 12 and 14, I forgot the necessity of manifesting 1 Corinthians 13. Arrogantly and brashly, I tried to force my fellow Baptist pastors into my newly discovered wineskin. Publically—from the pulpit and in our church newsletter—I chided them for not recognizing the validity of the gifts of the Spirit as the norm of church order, for denying the right of individual Christians to manifest the gifts, for clinging to the old wineskin of congregational authority, for glorifying Baptist tradition over Biblical theology. . . and for not recognizing as valid a dozen other new revelations I had received. Now, in looking back, I pray, "God deliver us from the self-righteousness of those who have just lost weight, just quit smoking, or just been baptized in the Holy Spirit."

Had these revelations come from a man who did not carry the scars of sin, had they come from someone filled with love, had they come from a "successful" pastor rather than one operating out of a

tiny store front. . . who knows whether they would have been received. In my case, however, the executive committee of the association simply reacted by telling me—and our little church—to find fellowship elsewhere.

I was angry. And bitter. Although we were still, technically, a Southern Baptist Church, being denied membership in the association meant we could no longer participate in the denomination at the local or state level. It also meant I would become not only a non-Baptist, but I knew from experience I would become a non-person to the denominational authorities.

I met with some of the leaders of our little church. We agreed we should not fight the inevitable, but should instead be willing to be a seed which falls into the ground and dies. We had no choice but to become what I dreaded becoming—an independent church.

Hindsight, of course, always produces a clearer picture than foresight. I now realize God had a better plan for me—and for the Tabernacle Church—than I could see at the moment. In fact, being dismissed from the association and the accompanying loss of all denominational status turned out to be the finest thing which could have happened to us. It opened us to both a community-wide and a world-wide ministry. Set free from the yoke of congregational authority—and the accompanying fickleness of committee restraints—I was encouraged by my elders to respond to the growing number of invitations to communicate the gospel through both writing and speaking around the world. Such a ministry would never have been possible in the old wineskin. But that did not heal the wounds of the past—it simply made the pain bearable.

I have a number of friends who have gone through denominational divorce who seem to feel no regrets. Now after all these years of seeing God open doors that would have never been possible otherwise, I have no regrets either. However, although I no longer desire to be numbered as a Southern Baptist, I still experience pangs of sadness when I think of the separation. My desire for the reconciliation grows stronger each day. Yet, at the same time, I have learned to distinguish between reconciliation and restoration.

Reconciliation is Not Restoration

Restoration means returning things to their original state. Reconciliation means

making things right. There is a difference.

When I think about this, I am reminded of the time, as a second year student at Southwestern Seminary, when I decided to take piano lessons. I had taken piano as a boy but dropped out in favor of football, girls, Saturday afternoon movies, and any other reason I could conjure up for not practicing. Even so, the deep yearning to play the piano remained. Across the years I continued to play, but my limited ability restricted me to the white keys. I never had learned to play on the black keys. I was pretty good when it came to "Silent Night" or the "Marines' Hymn," which were written in the key of C, but all the other tunes had to be transposed to that key to fit my ability.

My seminary piano teacher worked with me for a year before she finally gave up. "You've gone too far," she said. "I'll never be able to restore you to the place of beginning again." The habit patterns had become furrowed into my mind like the grooves on a phonograph record—never to be changed.

For most of us it is impossible to turn back the clock and have it the way it was. But while restoration may be impossible, we can experience reconciliation.

A couple in our church went through a nasty divorce several years ago. The divorce was her idea. She wanted out of the marriage. Recently she came to one of the staff pastors indicating she wanted her marriage restored. But things had gone too far. Her former husband had remarried. Yet while restoration was impossible, reconciliation was not out of the question. With the aid of her pastor, and our psychologist, she has now started to work trying to build a relationship. In the process she will hopefully find peace with God.

Unison or Harmony?

Reconciliation, in its pure form, means to "settle or resolve an issue and restore harmony."

Restoration, on a horizontal level, is akin to justification on the vertical level. Justification, in a theological sense, calls for the creation of a situation as it was before the break came. As long as there is any memory of the cause of the division, justification is impossible. Theologically, to be justified means: it is "just as if I'd never sinned."

Justification, therefore, can never take place on a horizontal level. While man can forgive sin, he cannot forget it. Only God can actually forget the cause of

division. [*"And their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more"* (Hebrews 10:17).] Yet, while horizontal relationships can never be fully restored, Christians can be reconciled to each other. The key to understanding this is the difference between unison and harmony. When a relationship is restored, we sing in unison. When it is reconciled, we sing in harmony.

My friends who went through divorce will never be able to sing the same note. But they are discovering, because they are willing to work at it, that it is possible to have a harmonious relationship—one of friendship, mutual respect and appre-

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ciation for each other. While restoration is out of reach, reconciliation remains a viable, indeed an enviable, possibility.

To be reconciled there are some necessary steps to be taken. To start with, someone needs to say "I'm sorry. I was wrong. Please forgive me." This will not restore old relationships, but it will provide a bridge over which love can flow. And love is the necessary ingredient to create reconciliation.

In my situation with the South Carolina church I knew I would have to take the initiative. I began praying, asking God to provide the opportunity. It happened when I was invited back to that same small town to speak. The word spread throughout the community that I was going to speak on a Friday night. Many of my old parishioners attended the meeting, for despite the pain which accompanied our departure, we were deeply loved by nearly all the people—including those deacons who had pulled the switch on the day of execution. They were not malicious—they were simply doing the best they could in a bad situation.

That night, before I shared my testimony, my wife joined me on the platform. We said we wanted to speak a personal word to the members of our former church. More than two hundred of them were present, and in that small town, I knew the rest of the membership would get the message before noon the next day. With tears the two of us confessed our guilt—but we knew that as long as there was aught between us none of us could make spiritual progress. The first step toward reconciliation came in our asking our old friends to forgive us.

We were warmly received. In fact, the former chairman of the deacons who had been most adamant for us to leave, went out of his way to shower us with affection. He has, on several occasions since, visited us in our Florida home. Things will never be as they were. But we are flowing together in harmony. We are reconciled.

Play Together—In Harmony

Surely the same is possible for the many who are estranged from former churches and denominations. How can it be done? By someone taking the lead, admitting guilt, and asking forgiveness. It will also take a desire on the part of all, combined with mutual respect, and an understanding that God desires for all His children to play in the same orchestra, even if we play different instruments.

After thirteen years as a non-Baptist I no longer entertain the dream of restoration into the SBC fold. I have played on the white notes too long. But I do yearn for reconciliation. I want to play in harmony with those in my former denomination. While the note of F and the note of G may sound inharmonious when played side by side, when surrounded by supportive notes the resulting chord has a beautiful sound. Perhaps, as mutual friends begin to say a good word in the right places, reconciliation can begin.

I am in constant contact with a number of "ex" Southern Baptists. Some of them, like myself, were forced out of the denomination because they spoke in tongues. Others left because they were disillusioned with the structure. Some were excommunicated because of open sin in their lives—but have since repented and are now being used of God outside the denomination. While restoration of these men to their former posts is impossible—indeed, not even desired by most of us—it is wrong to let this spiritual talent trickle off into other reservoirs. Surely we have all grown up enough that

we can begin to major on our contributions, respect our differences, learn from one another, and walk together in harmony—reconciled.

Remember... Others are Right Too

Last fall I was approached by an evangelical organization who wanted me to write a book designed to be given away in a nationwide evangelistic campaign. As we were negotiating the terms of the book I discovered the final editing would be done by a committee of mainline evangelicals who I knew would differ with me on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Yet, because I felt the Lord wanted me involved in the project, and because I have high regard for the president and founder of the organization, (even though we differ doctrinally), I agreed to go ahead and write the book.

In the past I had enjoyed good fellowship with these people. Our doctrinal differences had never been a problem—simply because we always operated in separate spheres of ministry and influence. Now, however, I was being thrust into their sphere.

"What we want," the publishers said, "is for you to create a turtle to go into our shell."

In other words, they wanted me to fit my theology into their terminology.

There was no problem in the chapters I wrote on the nature of God, God's purpose for man, or the chapters on the Bible. But when it came to those pages on the Holy Spirit, I ran into trouble.

Three times the editors sent the material back. They were unhappy with my inclusion of what they called "pre-Pentecost scriptures" on the nature of the Holy Spirit. They disagreed with the term "baptism in the Holy Spirit," deferring to Dr. Bill Bright's theology of the "infilling of the Holy Spirit." They were upset with my emphasis on the supernatural and miraculous, and of course any mention of the "gifts of the Spirit" was a "no-no."

After having re-written that small section three times I grew agitated. Sitting in front of my word processor, arranging and re-arranging words, I began to feel cheap, like I was compromising something precious. The terminology my editors insisted I use was terminology I had worked through fifteen years before. It did not seem right that I should have to placate what I felt was antiquated theology. I didn't mind popularizing the ma-

terial. In fact, I insisted on using a contemporary vocabulary rather than biblical "shop talk." But why, I fumed, couldn't we talk about the supernatural? After all, that was what drew the crowds at that first Pentecost. Had things changed since then?

In the midst of my frustration I realized I had developed a bitter spirit—similar to

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what I had when our church was dismissed from the association. Bitterness, according to Hebrews 12:5, not only causes you to miss the grace of God, but will cause trouble and defile many. How important it is for those of us in the communication ministry—writing or speaking—to be cleansed of all bitterness, lest we defile all those who read and listen. I asked God to cleanse me, and to give me insight into my sorry behavior and attitude.

As I sat in front of my word processor, staring at the green words on the black screen, I heard His quiet voice speaking

in my heart. "Now you know how I feel all the time," He said. "It's tough, communicating truth in words people will understand. Just remember though, while you are right—others are right too."

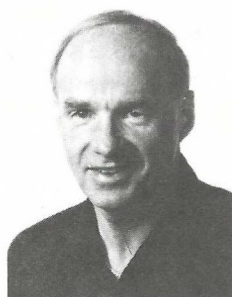
It was all I needed to hear. I had been majoring on the areas that separated me from my editors. There weren't many. But they loomed as unclimbable mountains between me and my destination of a completed manuscript. However, when I raised my eyes from the differences, stopped listening to the discordant sounds around me, and focused my attention on the Conductor, I began hearing the beautiful sounds of harmony.

I saw myself as a french horn in the symphony, playing an occasional melody, but losing the joy because the trombone section behind me was playing a different score.

How easy it had become, because I insisted on doing it my way, to categorize everyone else as wrong. The concept that I can be right, and my brother who believes differently can be right also, is too big for me to comprehend. But none of us has a corner on truth. The best I can do is focus on the Living Christ. My brother, who is also focusing on Christ, will be playing a different tune. But we will both be in the same key, using the same time signature. We will not be in unison, but we will be in harmony, "*speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love*" (Ephesians 4:15-16).

That's reconciliation.

Scripture quotations are taken from the New American Standard Bible.



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The Arthur S. DeMoss Foundation has distributed more than six million copies of his latest book *Power for Living*. Due to extensive research in the Middle East, he is recognized as one of the nation's leading authorities on the Sinai. This is reflected in his book, *A Way Through the Wilderness*. He and his wife, Jackie, have five children and five grandchildren.