

# Sketching the elements of a Christian theology of change

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Reconciliation is a biblical concept, wherein God reconciled himself with humanity through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The concept of reconciliation remains complicated in nature, and for the church to be an agent of reconciliation, prescriptive elements such as confession, repentance, forgiveness, restoration, restitution, mercy, truth, justice, peace and reconciliation will be discussed. The elements needed for the church to be an agent of change are action-driven and include a vision for change, the acceptance of responsibility, the acceptance of failure, repentance, confession, forgiveness, action towards change justice, peace and mercy, and reconciliation. The aim of this article is to describe a possible process for reconciliation through change agency by using the biblical perspective of the concept as a foundation. The research will then focus on different perspectives of change and the church's role as a change agent to bring about positive change in the transformation of existing and persistent forms of injustice that are problematic in society. Many theories of change exist; I will briefly refer to some theories of change and will then move on to sketching the elements that are necessary for the church to fulfil its calling as a change agent towards reconciliation as a core biblical principle.

## Introduction

It is true that the concept of reconciliation causes a diverse reaction because the concept itself depends on the social contexts in which it is defined and applied. This is also true when we look at the complicated nature of reconciliation (Schreiter 1998:13). Over the years, there has been confusion regarding the concept of reconciliation, and thus there is no agreed-upon definition for the concept, and it became trivialised and sentimentalised (Schwöbel 2003:167).

For the purpose of this article, I define reconciliation as a biblical concept, wherein God reconciled himself with humanity through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 5:17–19 and Rm 5:1–11). In this reconciliatory act of God, we find that there are four relationships that are in need of reconciliation and that is between God and man, between individuals or groups of people, between man and nature, and the reconciliation of individuals with themselves. These relationships became distorted during the fall of man and it is in these very relationships in which the church needs to play an important role to make change possible through reconciliation. The need for reconciliation is found everywhere, namely, in the family, the church, the workplace and society. It is the church's calling to act against all forms of social injustices, such as racial and gender discrimination, acts of violence, sexual harassment, poverty and HIV and/or AIDS. In the South African context, much is needed to be done to reconcile broken relationships and it is the task of each Christian and the church to be agents of change in order for society to be reconciled as a whole. Both concepts of reconciliation and change are core biblical teachings. The social meaning of reconciliation has to become a reality in the life of the church so that the church can act against the many social inequities. The role of the church as a change agent is the result of God's reconciliatory action in history.

It is the contention of the author that the nature of reconciliation in the Bible is prescriptive and directive, whilst change is the action that the church needs to take to promote reconciliation. This article will show that there are elements that play a crucial role in the achievement of reconciliation, and in my framework for the church as an agent of change and reconciliation I will point out that there are prescriptive elements and elements that need action to achieve reconciliation. For the church to be an agent of reconciliation, prescriptive elements such as confession, repentance, forgiveness, restoration, restitution, mercy, truth, justice, peace and reconciliation will be discussed. The elements needed for the church to be an agent of change are action-driven and include a vision for change, the acceptance of responsibility, the acceptance of failure, repentance,

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confession, forgiveness, action towards change justice, peace and mercy, and reconciliation. It is clear that there are overlapping elements in the two concepts: reconciliation and the church as an agent of change. For example, the prescriptive element of repentance is a prerequisite for forgiveness, and the prescriptive element restitution is a prerequisite for the action towards change. The framework will receive special attention in the last section of the article.

Next, the literature review will summarise the main perspectives on the terms 'reconciliation' and 'change agency'. Through the use of a social constructionist approach, the key concepts that can be used to construct a framework for reconciliation will be identified and discussed. It will be shown how these biblical concepts can be practically implemented by the church to ensure a positive, constructive and sustainable change in society.

The aim of this article is threefold: firstly, it will offer a brief account on the various perspectives of Christian reconciliation; secondly, it will focus on perspectives of change; and, lastly, it will focus on the church's role as an agent of change towards a biblical foundation for reconciliation.

## Literature review

### Perspectives on reconciliation

Briefly, the word *Katalasso/katallage* is a concept that Paul used in his writings and it mainly refers to the divine or human relationship that is God's initiative through Christ and it signifies change or exchange (Gunton 2003:14). The word *katallage* was used in a differentiated manner. Gunton (2003) explains:

Colossians 1:20–22 and Ephesians 2:16 employ the curious expression with a double proposition *apokatalasso* ... The root of the word signifies a change or an exchange and is used by the classical Greek authors in a metaphysical sense for exchanging enmity, wrath and war with friendship, love and peace. (p. 16)

The online Bible commentary *Precepts Austin* defines and describes reconciliation as follows:

The Greek word *katallage* means reconciliation and is used only by the apostle Paul in four passages. In Romans 5:11 Paul says believers have 'received reconciliation' (which implies that it is a gift). In Romans 11:15 Paul uses *katallage* to describe 'the reconciliation of the world' as a result of the majority of the Jews rejecting salvation in the Messiah ... Now as a result of our salvation (and reconciliation) to God by grace through faith, all believers have the priceless privilege of the 'ministry of reconciliation' (2 Cor 5:18) and the powerful provision of reconciliation because we have 'the word of reconciliation' (2 Cor 5:19). In all four uses of *katallage*, God is portrayed as the Reconciler and sinners as the ones reconciled. Men are the ones who broke the relationship with God as recorded plainly in Isaiah 'But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear.' (Is 59:2) In sum, reconciliation with God is not something we do, but something God provides and we receive.

According to Manickman (2007):

Paul is the principal resource for the concept of reconciliation. Some form of '*katallassein*' or '*katallage*' derived from the word *allaso*, which means 'exchange, or change'. Paul uses the word in three ways: first, the restoration of relationships between human beings and God (Rom 5:11; 2 Cor 5:18–19); second, reconciliation between two estranged groups, the Jews and the Gentiles (Eph 2:11–20), and third, cosmic restoration (Col 1:15–22) or the eschatological consummation when God will reconcile all things through Christ. (p. 329)

These words indicate the way God relates to us as the 'other', and how we relate to other individuals or groups of people. This takes place through a process of overcoming alienation in order for us to be in solidarity with the other in the process of making peace and restoring broken relationships (Gunton 2003:15).

In 2 Corinthians 5:17–19 (NIV), we read:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! 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 people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

This passage points to the mandate given to the church towards reconciliation (Els 2007:35). Over the years, three theories of reconciliation have been used: those of Irenaeus (158 AD), Anselm (1108 AD) and Abelhard (1130 AD).

The victory over the devil theory of Irenaeus (*Against Heresies*, V.17.1, 544) holds that the devil must be reconciled, but why? Irenaeus addresses the question of why Jesus had to come to earth and states that Jesus had to conquer sin, destroy death, and give life to man. Irenaeus contends that man lost his life because he was obedient to the devil and if God had accepted this disobedience, he would have lost against the devil. Through Jesus' coming to earth, the devil was defeated and humans rescued and given back life. Thus, through Jesus' death as a ransom, victory was obtained over darkness, sin, death and the devil. This coming of Jesus is the fundamental aspect of the reconciliatory work of Jesus Christ<sup>1</sup> (Meiring 2005:51; Els 2007:34).

Anselm's theory of objective reconciliation, also called substitutionary conciliation, (from above) is based on the premise that God is the one who reconciles, and because his wrath was provoked, and his honour was offended, someone had to pay. Because no human being could bear the wrath of God through death on the cross. His death paid the penalty for our sins so that we are saved from the wrath of God.<sup>2</sup> God offered his reconciliation with the human race through compensation or satisfaction through Jesus Christ. God himself facilitated reconciliation (Meiring 2005:53; Els 2007:36).

1. Acts 10:38; 1 John 3:8; 1 John 5:19; m1 Corinthians 4:4.

2.1 Thessalonians 1:10; Romans 4:15; Romans 5:6–10; Ephesians 2:3.

Abelhard's theory of subjective reconciliation states that man became estranged from God and not God from man. Through the life and death of Jesus Christ, this estranged life changed through the love of God for Jesus Christ. It is Jesus who showed how to love and respond to love as representative of the Father and the Father's love for us.<sup>3</sup> This theory postulates that Jesus' death revealed God's love for his creation and in his reconciliation act God seeks a response from human beings (Meiring 2005:56; Els 2007:37).

Although the word 'reconciliation' does not appear in the Old Testament, it is reflected in God's 'covenant' relationship with his people, whilst terms such as 'forgiveness', 'restoration', 'atonement' and 'repentance' are used to explain broken relationships and the healing thereof; between God and human beings, and between human beings themselves (Els 2007:18). What do we mean when we speak about forgiveness, restoration, atonement and repentance as tools of reconciliation?

Forgiveness, according to Jones (1995:5), is not the 'absolution of guilt', because the 'purpose of forgiveness is the restoration of communion, the reconciliation of brokenness' and it functions in both the spiritual and social spheres. Forgiveness is grounded in God's mercy and because he is a merciful God, he made it possible for us through Jesus to receive forgiveness. In Luke 1:50, we read about God's mercy: 'His mercy is on those who fear Him from generation to generation', and in Luke 1:78, we read that: 'By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from high will break upon us ...' God's forgiveness is a divine act that liberates us from sin through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Matthew 5:23–24, as part of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5–7), is the only other reference in the New Testament to reconciliation as restoration that we find outside the writings of Paul. Here, Jesus commands that one has to reconcile with one's brother or sister before one can make any offerings. This means that any offering from a person who wronged another is inappropriate to God. The use of the word 'reconciliation' in this passage is from a horizontal perspective, thus from human to human (Davies 1993:53).

It was in the time of the Early Church Fathers that the concept of atonement emerged. In his work, *Christ Victor*, Aulén (1970:81) has classified the doctrine into classical theory, Latin theory and humanist theory. According to classical theory, humans are subjected to the powers of evil, are at war with the good, and are awaiting God's wrath. As humans cannot compete with evil, Jesus is the ransom for human lives struggling against evil. The Latin theory of atonement holds the view that Jesus' death, as an ultimate human sacrifice, is the sacrificial substitution for the sin of humans against the wrath of God. The humanist theory emphasises the personal relationship between God and humanity, and the advocates of this theory emphasise the social realm of reconciliation. For example, one view holds that atonement is much more than

3.1 John 3:16; 1 John 4:9–10.

being freed from sin, it is the complete transformation into the image of God (Ritschl 1902:357).

For repentance to take place, we have to embody forgiveness and repentance. John the Baptist in Luke 3:8 and Matthew 3:8 made it clear that conversion, baptism and forgiveness of sin are elements closely linked to the process of reconciliation. We see that repentance must be visible and the fact that one belongs to a certain religious community does not render one forgiveness. Jesus himself made it clear that forgiveness is obtained through repentance (Lk 17:3–4 and Mt 18:21–22). Breytenbach (2005:84–95) says that one receives grace after repentance, but it has to go hand in hand with a change in the way one thinks.

McCarthy (1994) states the following on the idea of reconciliation in the Old Testament:

There is no single specific term in Hebrew or Aramaic to express the concept of reconciliation in the Old Testament, even though the underlying reality itself is caught in a variety of shades through terms such as shalom, atonement and renewal of covenant. Through many and varied images one of the connecting threads permeating very different Old Testament narratives, stories, psalms, and lament is that the human condition is one of limitation and misunderstanding, alienation and estrangement. Not only is the situation on the horizontal level in interpersonal relations of every kind but the Bible makes it very clear that this situation is but symptomatic of a more fundamental disorder and estrangement between human beings and God. (p. 93)

For Robinson (2011:21), the word 'covenant' used in the Old Testament explains God's relationship with his people.<sup>4</sup> Biblical scholars such as Barth and DeGruchy say that it conveys 'an element in a legal ritual in which two partners accept a mutual obligation' (Barth 2004:24) and, because humans were created in God's image, they share an intimate link with each other and God (DeGruchy 2002:48). Reconciliation therefore rests on this understanding of the creation, as it explains the actual call for the restoration of humans with one another and with God when and where separation occurs (DeGruchy 2002:48).<sup>5</sup> According to Mosala (in Landu 1987):

The term Greek *καταλαγή* is an inclusive, not exclusive, term. Mosala in his semantic analysis of the Greek verb, *καταλλάσσω* (to reconcile) is technically a composite term, in which the prefix Greek *κατά* (to, for) is followed by the Greek verb *ἀλλάσσω* (transform and change) in which reconciliation should be understood as 'transformation or changes'. (p. 23)

According to DeGruchy (2002:51), the Greek word *katallassō* (reconciliation), as it appears in the New Testament and mostly in the writings of Paul, means 'to exchange', which derives from the word 'the other', and if read together it means 'an exchange with the other'. It has to do with the way in which God relates to the 'other' in a process of overcoming alienation and to restore peaceful relationships.

4. Examples of God's 'covenant' with people in the Bible are Adam (Gn 1:26–2:3), Noah (Gn 9:8–17), Abraham (Gn 12:1–3; 17:1–14; 22:16–18), Moses (Ex 19:5–6; 3:4–10; 6:7) and David (2 Sam 7:8–19).

5. For example, the conflict between Cain and Abel (Gn 4); Jacob and Esau (Gn 30); Joseph and his brothers (Gn 37).

There are two other perspectives of reconciliation that need to be mentioned: the vertical and horizontal dimensions of reconciliation. The vertical dimension of reconciliation refers to God's relationship with us and the horizontal dimension of reconciliation refers to our relationships with other human beings.

In Romans 5:1–11, we find reference to vertical reconciliation. Briefly, this passage states that we are justified by faith and therefore we have peace with God. We have access to this peace through Jesus and we may believe in the hope of sharing in the glory of God because of Jesus' suffering. Suffering, says Paul, produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope.<sup>6</sup> This hope does not disappoint us because of God's love that he gave to us. Because of our weakness, Jesus Christ died for us through God's love and saved us from the wrath of God through his blood. When we were God's enemies, he reconciled us with him through the death of Jesus Christ. As God has reconciled us with him and saved us through the death of his Son, Jesus Christ, therefore we may boast in God for receiving reconciliation with him. God initiated this vertical reconciliation through the death of his Son, whilst we were still sinners, but now we are able to be in communion with God (Steyn 2005:123–133).

2 Corinthians 5:18–21 points to horizontal reconciliation. Briefly, the passage states that in Christ, we are a new creation and that everything became new with God's reconciliation with us through Jesus Christ. God gave us the ministry of reconciliation and entrusted us with the message of reconciliation. As ambassadors of God, we are commanded to be reconciled with God on behalf of God.

Using Psalm 85:10: 'Truth and mercy have met together; peace and justice have kissed', Lederach developed a model of reconciliation in which he makes use of the elements of truth, justice, mercy and peace. The four elements, according to Lederach, meet in the concept of reconciliation (Lederach 1992:13–14), and he describes the four elements as follows:

- truth with concepts such as transparency, revelation and clarity,
- mercy with concepts such as acceptance, forgiveness, support, compassion and healing,
- justice as equality, right relationships, making things right and restitution, and
- peace as harmony, unity, well-being, security and respect (Lederach 1997:30).

Lederach (1997:31) points out that there can be a contradiction between these four elements, although they are, in fact, interconnected. He elaborates by saying that truth without justice is not possible for someone who has experienced violence. Without justice, those who experience violence fear for future acts of violence. On the other hand, justice without truth ignores someone else's memories of suffering which may result in future conflict. After truth and justice, mercy is

6.Romans 5:4.

important not to produce a culture of impunity, but one that holds perpetrators accountable for their deeds. People need peace to rebuild relationships. Although certain contexts may place emphasis on one of the elements, the four elements are equally important. I concur with Els (2007:36) that although reconciliation theories have riches in themselves, no one can explain all the levels thereof.

## Perspectives on change

What is change, what does it mean for the church today and how do we link it with reconciliation? Many theories of change exist and I will briefly refer to three theories of change, whereafter I will move on to sketch the elements that are necessary for the church to fulfil its calling as a change agent. These are the theories of Lewin (1947), Lippitt, Watson and Wesley (1958) and Malina and Pilch (2013). An account of the change agent theory of Malina and Pilch will receive special attention through an article written by Van Aarde and his views and application thereof on Colossae.

Lewin developed a three-step change theory. According to Lewin, behaviour is dynamic and a force that works in opposing directions and facilitates change. The first step in Lewin's theory is the unfreezing of the existing status quo. The second step is a movement towards new levels of equilibrium through persuasion that will enable individuals to work towards new and relevant information that will support change. The third step of this theory is refreezing to ensure that change will not be short-lived and to stabilise the new equilibrium by balancing the driving and restraining forces (Lewin 1947:5–41).

Lippitt's change theory focusses on the role and functions of change agents' responsibilities to self-change. It has seven steps: to identify the problem, to appraise the scope for change to assess what the resources are and what motivates change, to identify the objects that need change, to select clear role identification so that change agents will understand their roles, to maintain the change, and to facilitate the termination of a change agents' role once change is successfully implemented (Lippitt et al. 1958).

The change theory of Malina and Pilch as social scientific model suggests the following: change creates awareness of a need for change; exchange information, identify and explain the problem; motivate change; initiate change; stabilise and prevent discontinuity of change; and terminate the relationship after successful implementation (Malina & Pilch's 2013:235–238). Van Aarde (2017) uses this theory to demonstrate how the theory can shed some light on Paul as a change agent in Colossians:

- Van Aarde states (2017:6) that Paul<sup>7</sup> creates an 'awareness for the need for change'; thus, he makes them aware of their problems, namely, the anxiety they experience because of the problems amongst themselves. These problems arose from the fact the non-Judeans became

7.Colossians 1:12, 29; 2:13; 3:18.

aware that they are now part of the Christian religious privileges previously reserved for the Judeans.

- Van Aarde (2017:6) points out that by the 'exchange of information in the group'<sup>8</sup>, the members became aware that they received liberation from darkness and sin and that they are now part of God's Kingdom.
- Van Aarde (2017:6) states that individuals were 'motivated to embrace change' through Paul's views on the death and resurrection that are grounded in the baptism of Jesus Christ. The baptised individual is already in heaven and shares in the liberation and in the church as the body of Christ.<sup>9</sup>
- Van Aarde (2017:6) states that although the audience consisted of non-Judeans and Paul did not know them personally, he had to 'address matters of concern'. The non-Israelites understood the gospel differently and did not bear the fruit of the Spirit amongst them. During that time, false teachers also misled believers. Paul motivated them to embrace change because their lives changed dramatically in and through Christ; therefore, they are dead to the world and through Jesus the creation reached its highest point in reconciliation. With Jesus, believers are the head over everything, and therefore they have to follow the values of the Jesus-group.<sup>10</sup>
- Paul initiated change. Van Aarde (2017:6) states that Paul emphasised: 'the freedom of all through Christ.' Because of this freedom, believers have to embrace a new lifestyle that is in line with that of the Jesus-group. The resurrection of believers is fulfilled in Jesus through baptism and Paul emphasised that believers should seek the things that are above and not the things of the earth.<sup>11</sup>
- Paul stabilised continuity. Van Aarde (2017:7) states, 'two differences were visible in the Hellenistic household' at that time. The first difference was that the 'household codes referred to deities, country, family and friends'. The second difference was that the 'household code only addressed the husband/father/owner', whilst 'women, children and slaves were not regarded as such'. Paul communicated that these views changed with Jesus' views on how the marginalised (i.e. women, children and slaves) should be treated.<sup>12</sup> Everything changed in Christ and Paul tries to stabilise the views of the household by pointing out that 'their lives reflect the image of God through Jesus Christ'. Therefore, all people (including women, children and slaves) share in this image. Discrimination is to be replaced by compassion, forgiveness and love according to the characteristics of the Jesus-tradition.<sup>13</sup>
- Paul's relationship was terminated. Van Aarde (2017:7) explains that Paul became the reason why the Jesus-group

8.Colossians 1:12–14.

9.Colossians 1:18; 1:24; 2:10.

10.Colossians 1–21; 2:12; 4:12.

11.Colossians 1:10; 3:1–2.

12.Philo (De Decalogo 165–167) and Josephus (Contra Apionem) quoted in Van Aarde 2017:7 199–210).

13.Colossians 3:3; 13–14.

moved away from the Messiah's values because of his uncritical predisposition of institutionalisation in his use of the Hellenistic household codes that are not in Paul's writings. Van Aarde (2017:7–8) argues that, one can assert, Paul conformed to the world around him for the sake of peace and to soften the conflict of his time. He adapted Galatians so that the equal treatment of men and women would not contradict the household codes, which required the submission of women. This, says Van Aarde (2017:8), resulted in a post-Pauline reaction of Paul's teaching of inclusivity that ended up as 'love-patriarchalism' where men remained in the dominant roles of the household. This points to a contradiction to that of his previous appeal, namely, that men, women, children and slaves are one in Jesus Christ where no discrimination should occur. This contradiction resulted in Paul's termination from the Jesus-group and his return to the historical Jesus group.<sup>14</sup>

The above theories of change, and specifically the example used by Van Aarde (2017) of Paul in Colossae, clearly give us a better understanding of how theories of change can be used to bring about positive change. However, a theory has to be applied, and to apply a theory of change some elements have to be present. The following section will highlight some elements for a biblical approach towards change.

To understand reconciliation, one needs to understand the various perspectives of the concept of reconciliation; therefore, a brief account of the varying perspectives of the word 'reconciliation' in the Christian context is needed. The same is true about the different perspectives of change. With a bird's-eye view on reconciliation and change, the focus will be placed on the church's role as a change agent to bring about positive change in the transformation of existing and persistent forms of injustice that are problematic in society. Much of the above literature is applicable to our very experience of the concept of change and how the church deals with reconciliation and change.

## Methodology

The article uses the social constructionist approach to gain a general insight and understanding of the terms 'reconciliation' and 'change', and to construct a framework for reconciliation in South Africa. In the history of South Africa, reconciliation and change are often termed and appraised from an insider's perspective (Van Wyk 2017).

According to Creswell (2009:8), social constructionism proposes that realities are formed through one's experience and one's interactions and relations with others. It uses an interpretive framework, whereby individuals seek to understand their world (reality) and to develop a meaning that is corresponding to unique experiences. Roller and Lavrakas (2015) state:

... the complexities of the human experience and the idea that any one facet of someone's life (and the researcher's role in exploring this life) intertwines with (contributes to) some other facet.

14.Colossians 2:6–7; 3:18; 4:1.

That, as human beings we can't be anything other than intricately involved together in the construction of our worlds. (p. 2)

The development of individual meanings of experience towards certain objects or events is also applicable to the concepts of reconciliation and change. Therefore, in this article, it relates to the meaning and experience of different views on reconciliation and biblical concepts that the church may use to achieve a positive, constructive and sustainable change in the South African society.

I will use the social constructionist methodology to draft a model of the church as an agent of change and reconciliation. The literature reviewed points out that there is much overlapping between the two concepts and between the different elements of the church as an agent of change and the church as an agent for reconciliation. The proposed framework is based on the prescriptive and directive nature of the concept of reconciliation in the Bible, whilst the practical actions required to promote reconciliation are based on change agency.

It is not the aim of this article to do an exegetical study of reconciliation, but a few references will assist us to understand the historical and cultural development thereof.

### Elements for a biblical approach towards change

Against the backdrop, some specific elements of a Christian theology of change can be proposed.

Both concepts of reconciliation and change are core biblical teachings. Biblical principles of change are, firstly, the principle of God's sovereignty and his initiative in change and, secondly, humanity's responsibility as co-creators of change. God himself initiates change through his redemptive actions. Christians therefore have to align themselves as active participants in God's redemptive actions. Right from the beginning of creation, humans turned away from God, and God responded actively, through his self-disclosure in and through Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection to overcome the separation between God and his creation.

As already noted, there are elements that play a crucial role in the achievement of reconciliation and change. My proposed framework for the church as an agent of change and reconciliation shows that there are prescriptive elements and elements that need action to achieve reconciliation.

Prescriptive elements such as confession, repentance, forgiveness, restoration, restitution, mercy, truth, justice, peace and reconciliation pave the way for the church to be an agent of reconciliation. The elements needed for the church to be an agent of change are action-driven and include a vision for change, the acceptance of responsibility, the acceptance of failure, repentance, confession, forgiveness, action towards change justice, peace and mercy, and reconciliation.

We have to acknowledge that no map, guide or plan can put the concepts of reconciliation and change in a nutshell. There are many forms of social injustices, such as economic,

spiritual, racial, political, educational, environmental and gender injustices. In all of these forms, the church has to guide itself through the process of reconciliation and has to act as an agent of change – which is not always an easy task. However, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, Christians are changed and therefore they are the bearers of God's image who can live their lives in a covenantal relationship with God and each other. Secondly, we also have to acknowledge that reconciliation and change differ from culture to culture. If this is not taken into account, it would almost be impossible for the church to arrive at a point of reconciliation, and this will compromise the role of the church as a change agent.

With the following framework in mind, there is one thing that should be stated clearly: if the church does not fulfil its calling to be an agent of change, reconciliation will suffer consequently. The framework points out that there are many overlapping elements in the dual role of the church: being a change agent and in reconciliation. To speak about reconciliation is one thing, but the social meaning of reconciliation has to become a reality in the life of the church so that the church can act against the many social inequities. The role of the church as a change agent is the result of God's reconciliatory action in history. It is the contention of the author that the nature of reconciliation in the Bible is prescriptive and directive, whilst change is the action that the church needs to take to promote reconciliation.

The overlapping of the two concepts can be explained using the following framework: integrated model for the church as agent of change and reconciliation (see Figure 1).

It needs to be pointed out that although reconciliation and change are often described in phases, this proposed framework does not follow a strict sequence because the elements of reconciliation and change do not necessarily follow a set order.

### A vision for change

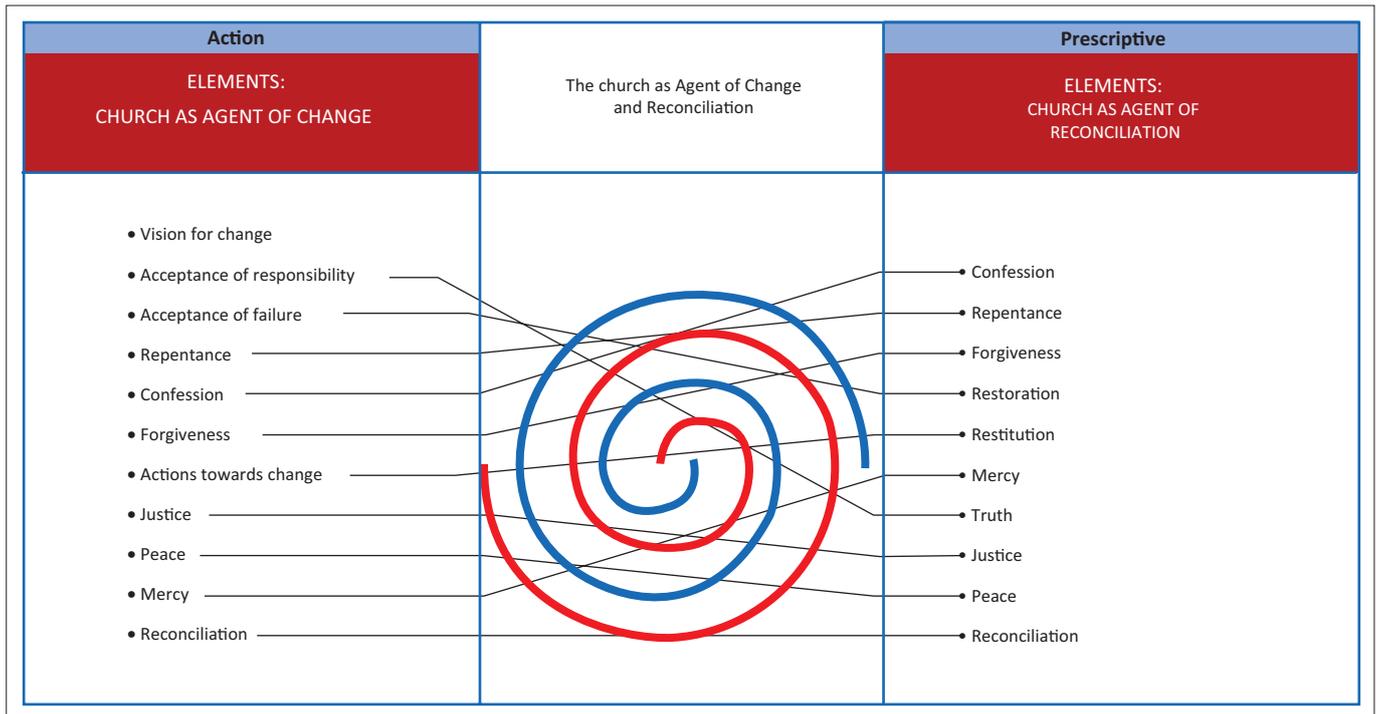
A vision for change often occurs amidst severe problems in a society or in the life of an individual. In order for change to take place, there has to be a vision for change. Thus, a vision of change can only be realised if the church is committed to those who suffered injustice. The church should therefore focus on current inequalities and social repression, and through collective action injustice can be confronted and changed. In order to change injustice, the church has to offer a different system than the one it seeks to replace. The vision to change can occur from the outside when a potential threat occurs and needs attention, and/or it can occur where past failures are recognised. A few examples for a vision of change are, amongst others, the Exodus,<sup>15</sup> the rebuilding of Jerusalem,<sup>16</sup> Jesus, the Samaritan woman<sup>17</sup> and Zacchaeus.<sup>18</sup>

15. Numbers 13:3.

16. Nehemiah 2:18.

17. John 4:1–42.

18. Luke 19:1–10.



Source: Author's own work

**FIGURE 1:** The church as Agent of Change and Reconciliation.

## The acceptance of responsibility and truth

According to Boraine (2000:288–291), there are four kinds of truth: objective or factual truth that refers to revealed matters resulting from public findings or incidents; personal or narrative truth of stories and oral traditions as revealed by victims; social or dialogical truth in which the experience of individuals plays a major role and through interaction, discussion and debate; and healing and restorative truth where truth contributes to the reparation of past injustices as well as the prevention of the repetition of future injustice. Telling the truth means to make a distinction between matters as they are and how they should be. Once the truth is recognised, we need to repent to God, who will then accept our repentance and forgive us. Telling the truth means that we can draw on our God-given faith resources that will enable us to act for change. Transparency, clarity and revelation are concepts identified with truth.

## Acceptance of failure and restoration

Once problems are recognised and responsibilities for failure are accepted, and the society or the individuals are truly convinced of their contribution to a problem or failure, a process of turning around can begin. For example, David accepted the responsibility for his failures, and after the prophet Nathan visited him, he repented his sin. According to Galatians 6:1, God restores us through Jesus Christ, but he encourages us to bear one another's burdens. We have to encourage each other also during our mistakes, and when someone stumbles we are encouraged to seek restoration with them, as well as for that restoration to happen as soon as possible.

## Repentance

After acceptance of failure and setting restoration in motion, one needs to turn away from past behaviour. Repentance means to turn away from that which is evil and to turn to that which is good. In Ezekiel 14:6, we see how God calls to Israel to repent and to turn away from idols, offences and evil. In the New Testament, Jesus commands us to repent (Mt 4:17) and in Acts 3:19 Peter says that we must repent and be converted so that our sins can be forgiven. Luke (17:3) teaches that when someone trespasses against us, that person must be rebuked, and if the rebuked repents, we must forgive him or her.

## Confession

In 1 John 9, we read when we confess our sins, God who is just and faithful will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. In Matthew 6:14–15, we find the command to forgive others and not to be judgemental, and in James 5:16 we are commanded to confess our sins to one another in prayer so that the one at fault may be healed.

Forgiveness is a way of life. The church's task in the facilitation of forgiveness is not an easy task. Aspects such as racism, xenophobia, ethnocentrism, violence and economic injustice often hamper forgiveness. Forgiveness is a process moving from past injustices to seeking the good for everybody today. As an important element of reconciliation, forgiveness can only occur through the steadfast, free and forgiving love of God. Thus, the church's calling as an agent of change is one of peacemaking and being ambassadors towards reconciliation.

## Forgiveness

Mark 11:25–26 commands us:

And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses.

Because of God's grace through the work, life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the process of forgiveness can begin. We have to offer forgiveness to those who acted unjustly against us, not only for the sake of receiving forgiveness but also that those who suffered injustice may be free. Forgiveness does not mean that there will be no consequences, neither does it mean that injustice will be forgotten; it is an ongoing process to ensure a reconciled future. Scripture teaches us that once we repent our sins, it is God who forgives. For example, in Matthew 6:15 and 2 Chronicles 7:14, we find that forgiveness has a prescriptive element:

But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Mt 6:15)

If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land. (2 Chr 7:14)

The significance for the church as an agent of change lies in the action of forgiveness in order to confess all forms of harmful social injustices and discrimination as David did in Psalm 51.

## Actions towards change and restitution

Confession paves the way for redress or restitution, which means that something that was either lost or stolen will be returned to its owner. The church should focus on teaching restitution, facilitating discussions about restitution, and assisting people to gain their dignity through restitution. Antjie Krog (2002) once stated that:

Without adequate reparation [*restitution*] and rehabilitation measures, there can be no healing and reconciliation, either on an individual or community level. (p. 130)

Matthew 5:23–24 teaches us that before one presents one's offering at the altar, and one remembers that someone has something against you, you should leave it at the altar and reconcile with the other; only then one can present one's offering to God.

## Justice

Scripture states that 'Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue' (Dt 16:20) and 'Strive first for the reign of God and God's justice' (Mt 6:33). The concepts of the terms 'justice' and 'righteousness' are used interchangeably in biblical texts. Righteousness implies a personal dimension and justice implies a social dimension, and both may be regarded as having a moralistic or relational dimension. Justice needs to be restored where social injustices such as inequality, broken

relationships and human suffering have occurred. This means that the church must seek to change harmful social injustices. The church could be the voice of those who were treated unjustly within society, speaking out against social evils such as unemployment, poverty, education, women's abuse, and those on the margins of society.

## Peace

When people are at peace, they will experience dignity, harmony, unity well-being, security, value, respect and a feeling of appreciation. Mark 9:50 directs us to have salt in ourselves and to have peace with each other, and Ephesians 4:3 says that we must endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

In Luke 10:5–6 and Luke 5:9, we find the active concept for peace. Peace has to be part and parcel of our very context as humans. Peace is not something we experience in the absence of war, nor is it a balancing power between enemies; rather it is part of the reconciliation process. It needs to be achieved and the church has to be creative in the struggle against all social injustices through educating society to take action against social evils such as indignity, economic equality and violence. Jesus, as the Prince of peace, reconciled all human beings with the Father.

## Mercy

In Matthew 9:13, Jesus commands of us mercy when he says that we must go and learn what mercy means, that he will show mercy and not sacrifice because he came to earth for the sinner to repent. Matthew 5:7 teaches us that the merciful are blessed and they shall receive mercy. Mercy is an act of kindness that one person bestows on another; it is rooted in God and is therefore God's divine initiative and act, and an acquired Christian virtue. Mercy is an action and includes elements such as forgiveness, support, acceptance, healing and compassion. As an action, mercy is a reaction and motivation to someone else's suffering (Sobrino 2016:64). The activity of mercy is grounded in love, which, according to Galatians 5:6, makes us acceptable before God.

The principle of mercy should be lived by the church. Mercy is an important element of reconciliation and it can govern and guide the church to nurture the world. Christian mercy is a strong power that can steer the world through the many forms of injustices towards reconciliation.

## Reconciliation

Reconciliation must not only be proclaimed by the church and its members, but it must also be accepted through faith. The best way to proclaim reconciliation is through relationships between God and human beings, a relationship between a human being and the self, and a relationship between different human beings. We took note that God reconciles and that this act of reconciliation of God makes it possible for reconciliation to occur at other levels as well.

## Conclusion

This article sketched reconciliation and the role of the church as a change agent to bring about positive change in society. God, according to Colossians 1:20, is the initiator and author of reconciliation because through his initiative he restored the broken world by reconciling himself to all things through Christ.

A reconciled life demands a reconciliation with God, the self, others and the environment so that change in broken relationships between God, others, the environment and oneself may be restored. Disturbed relationships have social and cosmic implications (Gn 1:24–28; Ex 32:32; Mt 5:23–24) and according to Colossians 1:20 and Romans 3:25, we learn that sound and reconciled relationships are the will of God. Broken relationships are the result of sin and disobedience, but in Jesus we are reconciled. Thus, amidst social injustices such as economic, spiritual and racial discrimination; poverty; violence; despair; and political, health, educational, environmental and gender injustices, the church has to guide itself through the process of reconciliation and has to act as an agent of change. All the elements of reconciliation and change must be taken into account when the church as an agent of change goes into action to challenge social issues. This is not an easy task.

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