

**About this paper**<sup>1</sup> This paper was written to honour Vinay Samuel, the first director of the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0265378811417536>). I worked there for a dozen years after I retired from Leeds. I liked its vision and the students it brought me.

Corneliu Constantineanu was the first person I supervised at OCMS and he became a dear friend. He then was Dean of Graduate Students at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek, Croatia. Subsequently, he worked in Bucharest and then was professor of theology at the Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad, Romania. Sadly he died from covid on 17 March, 2021 – an immeasurable loss. (<https://ceeams.org/2022/02/09/obituary-for-corneliu-constantineanu/>)

Corneliu’s doctoral dissertation was entitled *The social Significance of Reconciliation in Paul’s Theology with Particular Reference to the Romanian Context*. It was published in 2010 (Library of New Testament Studies).

We often discussed the relation between vertical and horizontal readings of reconciliation, both in Paul, in theology generally, and in human, political practice. In this paper, I take our discussion a little further, in grateful memory.

I am glad I was able to write this paper, 16 years ago, for several reasons, but especially for its final section on Romans 9-11. The discovery that the theologian must risk thinking forward into the unknowable future, with God, for God, because of God, was new to me. Is it just a wild idea, an intellectual pleasure, or is it faithful discipleship?

## **‘VERTICAL’ AND ‘HORIZONTAL’ IN PAUL’S THEOLOGY OF RECONCILIATION IN THE LETTER TO THE ROMANS**

In his research Corneliu was concerned to show that Paul goes further than many modern Paul-reading Evangelicals. He agreed with them that for Paul reconciliation was vertically between God and human beings; but Paul’s words and actions show he also expected reconciliation to be practised horizontally between human beings. That it is easy to find both dimensions in Paul provokes questions about how and why so many Christians tend to concentrate upon the vertical in isolation, while the secular world does its best with various inadequate readings of the horizontal alone. Obviously, we should refuse to be one-dimensional. The more difficult task may turn out to be managing the potentially dichotomic language of vertical and

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of the paper published in *Transformation* Vol 24: July and October 2007: issue in honour of Vinay Samuel. Pages 151-160 (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43052706>)

horizontal. We must always keep in mind that the distinction is no more than a tool of analysis in the attempt to understand an integral reality which is not to be parcelled out. God's action in Christ (II Cor 5.21) is an all-round comprehensive sustained movement, in which what may be *seen* by us as distinguishable vertical and horizontal elements *are* in God, simultaneous and in harmony. So when we look for words to reflect God in Christ as truthfully as we can, perhaps following the clue of the Chalcedonian Definition, making distinctions without separation or opposition, we might well speak of the vertical in the horizontal and the horizontal in the vertical; of vertical horizontality or horizontal verticality. And if spinning this two dimensional imagery makes us dizzy, we might (wisely?) look for other language to do justice to the wholeness of God's loving action in, for and with the world, rather than trap ourselves into untruth by reifying oppositional words which are merely analytical or rhetorical tools. In this paper, however, I will risk playing with vertical and horizontal.

It is not difficult to see why interest in reconciliation is widespread nowadays. In a broken world, we cry out for it: idealists and pragmatists, victims and actors all find it makes sense. At the minimum, 'can we all get along?'<sup>2</sup> We want or need some measure of reconciliation within our own disturbed personalities, in our families and societies, and between humanity and the earth whose hospitality we presume upon. Reconciliation at base depends on finding a justifiable working relation between our needing it and our wanting it. We mostly need it much more than we want it. Sometimes, however, people want it even when they do not need it – they are unable to recognise and enjoy the love in which they live. Reconciliation is a fundamental and general human need. I share this desire for reconciliation, a peace which is hospitable to life and love, goodness and joy. If I could not believe in or at least hope for God *the reconciler*, I would not be a theologian or a Christian: a God who is not reconciling the world is not good news. But for me as for many others, hoping for God is not the same as having God. I am one of those who hope, *with* Hebrews 11.1, for what we do not see, and *against* Hebrews 11.1, for what we are not sure of. Where is the Reconciler of the world? When we look around, we do not see everything reconciled – actually or potentially (Heb. 2. 8). There is shortfall, as I shall call it in this paper, which has to be taken into account in all our thinking of God and specifically in our reading of Romans on reconciliation. It is not only that God hides himself, or that God reserves the day of his coming, leaving us to live in the delay. It is also that we are not sure in our hearts that we want to see that day – the closer we get to being open to it the more we are conscious that we are unfit to stand in this place. The shortfall in our words and theories reflects the reticence and hesitation of our spirits in the presence of God.

Much paulinism, much reconciliation theory, seems to me to leap over the shortfall at whatever point it arises, as though it is not there for believers. The gift of perfect reconciliation is to be believed, received and celebrated; pointing to the shortfall is simply to deny the gift of God. That is the incessant affirmatory beat of Evangelical faith. But the shortfall cannot be evaded in practical living – even Evangelical living - or in the pauline text (which itself must be read as a piece of Paul's practical living). Unless reconciliation works as instantaneous magic, as if the resurrection had

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<sup>2</sup> D W Shriver *An Ethic for Enemies* (OUP New York 1995) p 3

happened already, the longfall in the first Adam (Romans 5.12-21), which makes reconciliation necessary in the first place, will again and again cast its shadow in this or that shortfall in 'this mixed world'.<sup>3</sup>

### Reconciliation in three moments

Reconciliation is presented in three moments in Romans. They come to view in different sections of the letter (1-8; 9-11; 12-16). Each moment and section has its own characteristic possibilities of shortfall. These shortfalls are carried by the grace of reconciliation, as a thorn in the flesh (II Cor.12.1-10): there is weakness which chastens the tendency to triumphalism, but reconciliation is not thereby invalidated. Grace abounds (Rom.5.17,20) in its sufficiency, even in weakness (II Cor.12.9). I will explore these three moments of reconciliation, looking for the unity of vertical and horizontal in each and seeing how the shortfall divides and holds them apart.

*First, Romans 1-8.* Here the key word for our purpose is: *we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ* (5.1). This peace is the effect of justification, which Paul has explained at length as the effect of the decisive revelation of the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ. Human beings fall short of the glory of God, failing to image God in whose image they were created; they act out their blindness to God and to humanity; the general word for this way of being is sin and its effect is death, the end of human being, which not merely cuts off its future, but eats back into the present, turning the ordinary futility of creaturely existence into bitter despair. Salvation comes as the gift of God, the transforming action of God in his Son, the second Adam, renewing humanity. The reconciliation of errant, rebel humanity to God is achieved by God's action, presence and self-giving *in Christ*, being made sin for us that we might be the righteousness of God in him (II Cor 5. 11-6.13 is a major guide to reading Romans).

Having peace with God, in Romans, is more than coming to feel happy about ourselves, with the help of a little religion. It is arguable that we should never say: *I have peace with God*. Certainly, the Gospel should not be reduced to the therapeutic, as is now commonly done.<sup>4</sup> Paul speaks as a man for whom the fundamental elements of being and the ultimate context of the human enterprise have been revealed (Romans 1.16-18). Human achievement is impressive: but is it as securely founded and truly on course as we like to think? Venice has long known it is in danger of sinking into the sea; today, people wherever they live are becoming aware that the boundaries are uncertain. Wealth, knowledge and skill do much to postpone physical death, but it is not abolished or even completely tamed, as though the lion has been made a pet. There is much that we are not, and cannot be, secure against, in regard to human survival. And we are also not secure morally. Humanity, assessed on its performance, is not simply good. Many live without fear of the judgment of God, but hardly anyone lives in peaceful confidence about the goodwill and the reliable capacity of their neighbours. We may be complacent about our own

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<sup>3</sup> D Bonhoeffer in his poem, 'By gracious powers so wonderfully sheltered...' translated F.Pratt Green and Keith Clements

<sup>4</sup> Ulrich Simon *A Theology of Auschwitz* (Gollancz, London, 1967) pp 147f. for an early, profound and much neglected warning on this point. Also, L.Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1995) chapter 2

performance but we are not gullible about others'. The rhetoric of the invaders of Iraq is now ragged (Isaiah 64.6).

Paul argues that the choice between human salvation or intolerable loss turns upon the relation with God. This relation is not created by human beings, but it can be and has been messed up by them. The messing up is seen and felt by human beings, but is only known in full truth through the revelation of the righteousness of God. Human beings, messed up but not yet finished, are energetic and inventive in trying to clean up the mess, or at least to survive within it. Having lost God they make substitutes (idols, artful visions, technologies, and consumption) as best they can, but that complicates and confuses the problem. Great human achievement fills the horizon, so the vertical becomes unnecessary: a man once found a silver sixpence on the pavement: thereafter he always looked down at his feet, and never saw the stars. The analysis of the human situation in Romans is that we, who are in a hole, should stop digging. And since we cannot and will not stop digging, God stops us. In Paul's theology, there are few if any explicit references to his encounter on the Damascus road, when he was simply stopped. But one of the wonders of Paul's writing, merely as a literary achievement, a playing with words, is that the event, by which God in Christ stopped him from digging any more, leaving him no choice but to begin again, (Phil.3.4-14;II Cor 5.14-17) is transmuted into theological vision and extended argument. Paul knew the folly of boasting (II Cor.11-12); of letting the personal autobiographical narrative upstage witnessing to Christ; of forgetting that 'I must decrease, He must increase' (John 3.30). But he had been stopped by Christ, crucified with Christ and had no life to live except by grace (Gal.2.20). So when he spoke about God in Christ without being betrayed into the foolishness of talking about himself, his way of speaking reflected his being stopped on the Damascus road and the whole world's being stopped. Paul knew from his own experience that God-in-his-grace-in-Christ is the Stopper. We stop digging our hole ever deeper, thanks to God who reaches down into the pit. It is not our digging that saves us, but grace.

The explanation of this grace in Christ is the concern of Romans 1-8. The explanation is also celebration and invitation. And what is given us in this section of Romans has seemed coherent enough in the Evangelical tradition to be regarded as a sufficient statement of the Gospel. The other sections may be ignored, or treated as subordinate, more law than gospel, or less exciting and not so uplifting spiritually. So though it may be a misreading of Paul – did he think he was writing a treatise with three disparate, unintegrated sections? - we do well to assess how Romans 1-8, insulated from the rest of Romans, may shape Christian understanding of reconciliation. In powerful dramatic form, it pictures God's reconciliation of the world in Christ. It affirms its necessity and sufficiency: this comes out in the grand climax in Romans 8. 31, 'If God be for us, who can be against us?'

And now we can identify one shortfall that peculiarly besets this articulation of reconciliation. Does it not invite us into a kind of intoxication with verticality? If God be for us, we do not need to worry about anything in the world? Nothing can separate us from the love of God (8.35). We are more than conquerors through him who loved us. So if we have peace with God, we stand in grace, we rejoice in suffering (5.2), for in Christ we have all things. The temptation to live in the vertical, in the relation with God, is thus very powerful because verticality is easily seen as

intrinsic to the Evangel. If you have been raised with Christ, seek those things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things that are on earth (Col.3.1-2).

Of course the princes of this world are blind (I Cor. 2.8) but for those reconciled with God, who see by faith, the pull towards caring only for the verticality of peace with God and trying to live within it, is undeniably powerful. It is a temptation latent in the text; and again and again it seems to Christians that as they grow in faith, they will become more intense in verticality. And the more true to its mission the church is, the more the church will concentrate on the vertical.

So the shortfall we find here is latent in the theological articulation itself. Did Paul intend to teach this insulated verticality? Or is it a side effect of the way he expounds the gospel here – unintended collateral damage, which often occurs in theology as in war? Does a careful reading of his text lead us into adopting intense verticality or would it save us from it? Insofar as the wrenching of verticality from horizontality is an effect of these chapters, is it because we read it in ways that are not led by the text but shaped by pious and cultural and human concerns from elsewhere?

My view is that while Paul's language is so richly, even anarchically, suggestive, opening up so many possibilities, we cannot claim his support for a separated verticalism in reading the Gospel here. For Paul, God acts and reveals God in the horizontal, in the Scriptures, in the world, in Jesus Christ, son of David and Son of God. And from Jesus, there emerges Paul's apostleship to the Gentiles in a world-embracing movement which will in the end bring all back to God (1.1-5; 15.7-33). The word Paul shares is God's; God's word is not a word that comes vertically down from heaven, but is spoken in a history, works itself out through being incarnated horizontally, without losing its verticality.

It is not uncommon for peace with God to be understood as a relation between persons and God, realised through a piety which withdraws from the world in order to find rest in God. Thus, verticality and inwardness go together. As E.H.Bickersteth, the nineteenth century Evangelical, put it:

Peace, perfect peace, in this dark world of sin?  
The blood of Jesus whispers peace within.

And concluded:

It is enough: earth's troubles soon shall cease,  
And Jesus call us to heaven's perfect peace.

Bickersteth was a working missionary leader, but the language of his piety encourages detached verticality, rather than calling us into the horizontality of God in creation, incarnation and history-making spirit.

When Paul speaks of having peace with God he is speaking about the effect of the horizontal engagement of God in the history of humanity with and without God, and about what opens up from the work of Christ. Romans 5.1-5 puts us into the sequence which runs: justified by faith, having peace with God, standing in this

grace, rejoicing in hope of sharing the glory of God (the image in which human being is created?), and rejoicing in sufferings, producing fruits of endurance, character, hope and no disappointment, because of the outpouring by the Spirit of the love of God in our hearts. This is life on earth now, in Christ.

It is perverse but not impossible to turn all this into an inward pious arrangement of our feelings, an excuse to make our private selves the container of peace with God. Jesus is all in all to us. This is the stuff not only of much nineteenth century Evangelicalism but of contemporary worship songs. But, insofar as it bothers with Paul at all, it rests on a superficial, irresponsible, unimaginative reading of his text. This kind of piety, which so often boasts of being biblical, has to shield itself from every part of Romans. Peace with God has to be *lived* with God in *God's way*. God has taken his way in Jesus Christ, the beloved Son, who stands in grace, yet descends to the cross, and can only be understood when we think in realistic unprotected horizontality. So Paul, in Romans 5, does not end his summary of the Christian's state with the promise of heaven's glory but adds the gift of suffering, enduring. Thus he gives time and so horizontality to the vertical relation with God. Character has horizontal visible substance as does hope which is present in the shedding abroad of the love of God. And though Paul did not say it with the succinctness of John, he worked on the same principle, that we cannot talk about the love of God if we do not love our neighbour (I John 4.20,21). The love of God is not only incomprehensible but also incredible if it is confined to verticality.

In these verses, Paul writes a trailer for what he develops more fully in chapters 12-16. He did not neatly write a doctrinal section, which then has to be supplemented by an ethical section. That distinction grew up over centuries as Christian theology developed, and was intensified for Evangelicals by the struggle for the Gospel of grace, battling against the flesh which prefers to be justified by works in some form. Paul is a blessing to us partly because he wrote before that history and so can give us again and again a fresh beginning – although of course, he too was in the middle of another history, and can only point us, never take us, to pure Beginning, which is also our End, in God himself. So we could read Romans fairly if we were to work through it from the beginning, and, on arriving at 5.5, insert chapters 12-15, as Paul's own exploration of what these grand succinct words mean.

So I conclude: there is only a shortfall in the integrating of verticality and horizontality in Romans 1-8 if we read it superficially. We may be lazy or we may have reasons from elsewhere for wanting a vertical religiosity. Then we can work out a reading of Romans to suit our taste. But it will not stand serious testing, either by rereading or by attempting to live the text. This does not mean this shortfall is unimportant: it has been and still is, immensely powerful in practised Christianity.

*The second moment of reconciliation theory* to be found in Romans is, as already indicated, spelt out in Romans 12-16. Here Paul gives various directions to Christians about how they are to live as the church in the world. We need not go through them in detail here. Much of Paul's advice can be seen to be reconciliatory. Paul is attending to points where the life of Christians together and with their non-Christian neighbours is not easily or securely harmonious. Serious conflicts and grievances arise; the Gospel of the peace of God in Christ then is made to seem

remote from practice, powerless in the world. Christians in such situations may give up faith, as being impractical – that is a very common ancient and modern occurrence. Non-Christians may conclude that religion is no use, or does more harm than good. Some Christians somehow may hold on to faith, in an ever more vertical a form. They may hold on to God even though they do not see how God can or does make any difference to the world. They may hold on to God, believing or hoping that God makes for the necessary reconciliatory difference in the world, while confessing that they cannot keep up with God in practice. Or they may have a serious disagreement with God, like Jonah: when God set about making peace in his mercy, the prophet could not bear to see his enemy prosper. He was so unreconciliatory in spirit and mind that he preferred to see destruction rather than rescue, death rather than life, his own pride satisfied rather than little foreign children playing safely in the streets. Paul wants Christian practice to come into line with God's.

Paul does his best to make the world as peaceful as it can be. He not only wants Christians to be peacemakers, but interprets the world as in principle capable of peace in valuable forms. So his account of what we now call the state was positive, even dangerously optimistic.<sup>5</sup> Rom.13.3 appears to be a factual generalisation; as such it cannot stand. We see the reality that Paul bypasses: rulers are often a terror to good conduct and cannot be trusted to judge rightly between good and bad. The Bible elsewhere advises us not to put our trust in princes, telling stories to support the advice, including of course the crucifying of the Lord of glory, as Paul himself said (I Cor.2.8). Evangelicals, whether in an Established or a sectarian church, do not have a consistent record of standing up for social justice and being willing to criticise and resist evil-doers in high places. This docile trustfulness has multiple roots in theology and spirituality as well as in social custom and practice. Precisely because Evangelicals are sometimes too eager for peace, too loving, too respectful of great people, too trusting in God, too patient in waiting for his kingdom to come rather than determined to pray for it by enacting critical anticipatory signs, they fail to do as much as might be done for reconciliation. Agreed, war as such will not make all things whole; but it is wrong to conclude that 'the sword' in some form can never serve to restrain evil and to make some good things possible<sup>6</sup>. Some Christians are right when they argue that until God brings his peace in his way, in the coming of his kingdom, anything we do will fall short. But that does not excuse us from doing what we can in our time (Mark 14.8).

In the world, there is no quick road to reconciliation: criticism and conflict are inescapable, not only as the problem but as components in solutions. In the world as it is, and in the church, the peace of God is not realised in its fullness. Reconciliation is limited; sometimes it is on its way; sometimes it is stalled. When we are working in the horizontal, which is the obvious dimension of this section of Romans, we may often have more reminders of the shortfall than of God's reconciliation. Paul acknowledges this in one key injunction: 'if possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all' (12.18). Christians are to have a reconciling spirit and intention, insofar as that 'depends' on them. But in human relations we are always dependent on others as well as ourselves. And sometimes, others, intentionally or not, limit the possibilities of reconciliation.

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<sup>5</sup> Haddon Willmer, 'Towards a theology of the state' in *Essays in Evangelical Social Ethics*, ed, David F.Wright, (1978) pp 85-104

<sup>6</sup> Cf Barmen Declaration, paragraph 5

In this passage, Paul echoes the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5.43-48): Bless those who persecute you. Do not seek vengeance but leave it to God, trust God. The command and the example of Jesus indicate the way, calling and promise of God. Paul does not soften the call in any way, which is why the text is bound to disturb us, whenever, in trying to live peaceably, we come up against a limit to our possibility. . . We are to love our enemy, but the persistent determined enemy systematically refuses love; we cannot always do what we are commanded, even if we want to. And too soon, if the enemy makes it impossible for our love to be effective, we may hate him with righteous hatred, for he has not merely opposed us, but has despised and rejected the most precious thing we could offer him: love. Enmity is intensified whenever people feel not merely threatened in their material security, but dissed, their honour slighted. For some, honour is proper self-love so that they look to be treated with respect; some go beyond this concern with their own dignity, as a validation of self-regard. They seek a free way to be there for and with the other, to love the neighbour and the enemy. They want to give rather than receive. And so they do not seek status for themselves, but the chance to be available for service, to offer fruitful gifts in genuine love. If that giving is spurned, an insatiable passion for revenge or justice can be provoked. That is why wickedly proud and selfish people are not the only ones who can become implacable fighters; when the good intentions of generous constructive people are thwarted, they become very angry.

So good and not so good people are limited in their capacities to live peaceably. The resources for reconciliation have limits, and the processes of reconciliation can provoke new conflicts. Power cannot simply command peace, because power stimulates resistance. Reconciliation is now often said to be the effect of truth, but what commissions, hearings and researches bring to light is not the full truth, it is always someone's truth, reflecting realities of power. That means they reshape the situation in which we are to live peaceably, rather than bringing peace decisively. Reconciliation is held to depend on justice, but justice is never without the shadow of the possibility of accusation and the demand for punishment. The shortfall in horizontal reconciliation is thus evident in the best processes.

And the problem of peace in ordinary human relations is far more difficult than this makes it sound. Is reconciliation a feasible project, or is it an illusion for human existence, whose determining dynamic is infected by misunderstanding, ill-will, fear, ambition, ignorance, and arrogance? 'In the Middle East, it sometimes feels as if no event in history has a finite end, a crossing point, a moment when we can say: 'Stop – enough – this is where we will break free'.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, not only in the Middle East. The shortfall in reconciliation is so massive and deeply rooted in historical human being that we may decide reconciliation is not worth thinking about. The language of reconciliation is not usable. When we consider the weight of sin, the way Paul phrases the injunction to live at peace *as far as possible* may be another example of his optimistic reading of our situation. In Romans 12 -15, he writes and thinks determinedly within the decisive mercies of God, who is God with and for us, (as set out in Romans 1-11) and so Paul does not allow the world of the first Adam to define

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Fish, *The Great War for Civilization* (Harper Perennial, London, 2006) pxxii



human possibilities or processes. The optimism is theologically grounded. *Theological* obedience requires us to think peace as possible. The corollary is that all that seems to put peace out of reach is not to be allowed to prove the impossibility of peace, but is assessed as shortfall, which implies an encumbered possibility. So the call to live peaceably is not invalidated by our limited capacity for peace. The capacity is there, even though it is limited.

We are called to live peaceably with all, as far as possible. In the out-going spirit of God the Spirit, the first instalment of our redemption, in search of true humanity, we should every day work to stretch the possible farther than we have hitherto thought possible. Open to the vertical, we are eager for the elasticity of the possible. Openings for peace and reconciliation may be given, where the processes of reconciliation, as we know them, give us no reason to expect such openings. To live with this grateful alertness to greater possibilities of reconciliation than we can imagine or plan energizes a constant obedience to the call of Jesus to watch and pray. It is the way in which we live with and in God in the world. Living attentively in the horizontality of God with us in Christ, we are attended by the vertical, and find that life makes no sense if one dimension is divorced from the other. But we shall stumble on the path if, dreaming of reconciliation, we fail honestly to confront the shortfall inherent in our limited fractured and fragile human capacity for peaceable living.<sup>8</sup>

*Finally, we consider Romans, chapters 9-11.*<sup>9</sup> To treat it as the third moment is to follow conventional Evangelical reading, rather than to keep with Paul who put it second. Evangelical homiletics has the lazy way of making Paul accessible by saying his letters start with doctrine and follow it with ethics. So Romans is treated as two relevant sections, 1-8 and 12-16. Romans 9-11 was often raided to give support to doctrines of election and predestination, but the old Calvinist base has declined, at least as a proportion of Evangelicalism. A minority take it very seriously as an eschatological text. It leads some towards Christian Zionism, in which interest in Jewish faith and people and the future of the state of Israel may significantly marginalise Jesus Christ as the centre of trinitarian faith in God.<sup>10</sup> Many think it wiser to ignore a passage which puzzles and stimulates dangerously weird speculation. But a serious enquiry into the relation of verticality and horizontality in Paul's view of reconciliation cannot leave it aside. It opens up an essential component of any theology of reconciliation, which we will not so plainly see in the other parts of Romans.

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<sup>8</sup> The optimism of faith and hope in God (cf Romans 15.13) is ever in conflict with the futility to which creation is subjected (8.28ff), against which God is working (8.25ff)

<sup>9</sup> As Corneliu Constantianu summarises: The question of the relationship between Jews and Gentiles, between the ethnic Israel and the great new redefinition of God's people in the light of the story of Christ, represented one of Paul's fundamental concerns throughout his life and ministry and is evident in his dynamic theologizing in his letters. The same very question has become in recent decades a major theological concern for the contemporary Christian churches.

<sup>10</sup> I have learnt much on this subject from another student, Wilrens Hornstra, who has completed his doctoral research on 'Christian Zionism among Evangelicals in the Federal Republic of Germany'. <https://gc.uofn.edu/files/journals/1/Resources/WillemHornstraPhDdissertation.pdf> (2007)

We might summarise the two moments we have so far considered in a caricature: in response to the vertical grace of peace with God, the church responds in an ethically guided horizontality. And what the church can accomplish is limited, even within its own borders; in the world at large its influence is even smaller. *The world outside the reach of Church, or any form of Christian action, needs reconciliation at every level and on a massive scale. Where does Paul say anything concrete about this world in Romans? Where does he call Christians to look outward, and to care more about the world than about the church? Not in the later ethical chapters, which are addressed to church, but certainly in 9-11.* Here Paul addresses a major rift between historical peoples and cultures, a rift he not merely observed but lived within: the difference between Jew and Gentile. Here he attends theologically to historical magnitudes, not just to the relations between persons.

The difference between Jew and Gentile is often not a quiet co-existence, enabled partly by indifference to the other or by each being securely at home in their own territory. Jew and Gentile were mixed up by diaspora and empire. There was indeed some peaceful living and cultural interchange – Paul himself was a Roman citizen as well as a Pharisee of the Pharisees. But there were also tensions and occasions of conflict; the pride of Jews and their faithfulness to the One God clashed with the dominance of the Empire and its syncretistic and cultic solutions to plurality. Each viewed the other warily, reading the other through the lens of histories of conflict.

The coming of Jesus did not in itself reconcile Jew and Gentile. For the earliest churches, telling and interpreting the story of Jesus, the question of the relation of Jew and Gentile was unavoidable: a purely Jewish, Jerusalem community of Jesus could not forever confine the Jesus movement. Early Christianity developed within the long troubles of Jewish-Gentile relations as the wood dried (Luke 23.31) towards the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. – itself a massive history of non-reconciliation. Responding to this context gave near-indelible shape to both Christian and Jewish identities. So the divergent relation between the Jews, as an historical people in the horizontality of the Roman Empire, and as the Covenant People in the verticality of God's election, and those who were gathered from the nations and grafted into Christ, was, in Paul's lifetime as well as after, a challenge to any faith in God's reconciliation of all things. In this fraught history, the possibilities for peace were precarious. Observing this relation truthfully might easily drive talk of reconciliation back into the hidden verticality of the believer's peace with God outside the world, even though the believer may do what he can to live peaceably with all. It is a clue to Paul's view of reconciliation that he did not retreat into such pious verticality and his horizontal vision consisted in more than an ethical demand for a 'peace church'. He insisted the church must make for peace, but also, he worked with the real church, which is limited in its possibility. He dared to venture into what is impossible with men, but possible with God. In Romans 9-11, we are shown a third moment, mixing vertical and horizontal in an act of theological imagination which is more prayer than either proclamation affirming God's realised reconciliation or ethical teaching telling Christians to be reconcilers.

Here Paul does not speak of God's *finished* work, as common readings of Rom.1-8 suggest is on offer. He speaks rather of work yet to be done. What is yet to be done is not seen, however, as a task for human beings, responding ethically to the mercies

of God, and carrying on God's work 'as far as in them lies'. Rather, in this section, what is yet to be done is spelt out as what God is doing and will complete, in a history Paul and his fellow-Christians share as participant-observers rather than as activists. In order to be able to talk about this, even to picture it as a grand rounding up of all history into joyful doxological amazement (Rom 11.33-36), Paul has to speak about what is not seen. It is probably too simple, but I have in view here a contrast between 1-8, which reports, explains and interprets what is to be seen, the righteousness (even more than the wrath) of God revealed, in Scripture, reason, experience and Jesus Christ and 9-11, where Paul speculates about what is not yet revealed. Paul the theologian always walked by faith not by sight: even to confess Jesus as Lord is an act of faith enabled by the Spirit. But here faith takes wings, but not in purely vertical take-off<sup>11</sup> but in a mode of horizontal verticality.

If Paul is right in Romans 1-8, God not only wills reconciliation but works on earth to realise it. If we say: it is all done in Christ already, then the study of reconciliation has to explain how God has reconciled the world in Christ. Reconciliation is then treated as a fact that can simply be proclaimed and assumed.<sup>12</sup> There are plenty of examples of the way that has been done in various kinds of evangelical and catholic theologies. It becomes overwhelmingly verticalist, and essentially in the past. We are invited to believe it and set our hopes on it, on Christ's finished work, even while we are in a present which at all levels may be non-reconciliatory. So Christians then believe in defiance of the world about them, whereas other people say that, given the reality of the world, the christian talk of reconciliation is empty, indeed an idealistic mockery, a verticalism which does not communicate with the world nor incarnate in it.

Now one response to theological verticalism is to add to it ethical horizontalism. The christian community is committed in obedience to working to realise on earth the reconciliation, or the reconciliatory spirit, achieved and revealed in God's action in Christ. That is necessary, morally, and good as far as it goes. But does it go far enough, especially if we seek a theology which overcomes the split of vertical and horizontal? It still leaves open the possibility, which we see in much traditional evangelical and catholic thinking, where the work of God in Christ is understood as vertical, and the life of the church as horizontal, but the distinction is still very strong, so the two can be split apart and end up fighting each other. Some Christians emphasise peace with God, and are sure of that, even though they are warmongers in practice – other Christians think we should try to live peaceably, but judge anything like the doctrine of the atonement to be unnecessary medieval obfuscation. So work still needs to be done if we are really to live and think the vertical in its horizontality and the horizontal in its verticality, in the wholeness of the gospel, where God and humanity are inseparably together in one history.

I think this forces the theologian into the situation where she must do what Paul attempts in Romans 9-11: to speak about the structural largescale non-reconciliations in the world, in the history of God with the world, and between the peoples of God, in such a way as to begin to *envision* the history that a reconciling God might be making here and now. That involves daring to speak about more than one can see or be at al

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<sup>11</sup> As in Isaac Watts' hymn, Give me the wings of faith to rise/within the veil, and see/the saints above...

<sup>12</sup> Cf G W Bromiley (ed) *Karl Barth Letters 1961-1968* (Edinburgh 1981) pp 88-91

sure of. It is to hope, to dream – to risk dreaming God in, for and with the world. Paul was a theologian, unlike many in the Christian tradition, who saw himself as living in the world, at the point and in the movement where *God* was making history, taking up little situations, like the work of the apostle to the Gentiles, into the grand overall, cosmic and eschatological reconciliation of all things. Paul was not merely implementing the gospel in a number of small ethical examples. Paul stood at the crossroads of history – crossroads where God is making his own way.

If this kind of theology can be done it quite dissolves the distinction, and with it, the possibility of the separation, of vertical and horizontal. Paul's historical action and hope – the horizontal he was engaged in – are nothing apart from the relation with God, the vertical; but God is One who not only made history in the past, but is making it here and now. The theologian who will do her job, speaking of God, must therefore express herself not only by explaining what has been done, and by outlining an ethic for the community, but by daring to envision reconciliation coming to the world in its future and being realised in changing the massive structural non-reconciliations which give the world its shape. That the relation of Jew and Gentile was such an issue for Paul was given to him by his theology, by what he thought God was about. He was not concerned with this problem as a merely secular political manager who wanted to avoid intolerance or genocide – though he elsewhere provides grounds for arguing for such avoidance – but his concern arises from his commitment to the theological task of speaking faithfully and fully about God. Paul has already argued that the God of Abraham has to be faithful to himself, to the promise he makes; so God's coming in Christ is deep-rooted in God's being God. God cannot abandon his work halfway along. Because of this divine faithfulness, God may be trusted to deal somehow with the new shape of Jewish-Gentile difference which has arisen after the coming of Christ, and the appearance of a new people confessing Jesus as Lord. The theologian who ventures into this territory is simply doing his job, trying to think and speak in tune with God.

Paul gave himself to this aspect of the theological task in Romans 9-11. His account of the immeasurable mercy of God was not completed by the end of chapter 8. It needed the venture of Romans 9-11 to become plain and present and pressing. Chapter 8 rises to a doxological climax, but it is only with 11.33-36 that its transcendent fullness is indicated. Paul has to show the mercies of God are ongoing, and up to the present, and as horizontal as they are vertical. In order to do that, he had to speak of the concrete unfinished history he was sharing in. And because it was unfinished, he had to take the risk of speculating about possible reconciliatory futures. He could not then describe them with precision and evidence based knowledge. Another kind of shortfall is possible: the picture of the future can be falsified by events.

So a different problem in any theology of reconciliation comes into view. Paul shows us what is involved in developing a satisfactory theology of reconciliation. The theologian has to dare to imagine and offer not only an ethic directing people to behave in a certain way, but an account of what God is doing now, and will do, in relation to what we know and feel to be very difficult problems in reconciliation on earth. Historians dispute whether in Paul's time, it was still possible that Jews and Gentiles could be brought together in one family of God in Jesus the Christ. Certainly by the end of the first century, it was plain that most Jews were unwilling to

accept Jesus in this way and the church was less and less able to offer a reading of what it is to be in the one family of God with Jesus Christ which was tolerable, let alone, attractive to Jews. The two religious traditions were distinct; they could sometimes live in tolerance, even with some friendship and respect, but the course had been set for two millenia, culminating in the long-gestated genocide, which is the lens through which we now look back on the whole history.

So the theological problem for us now: Paul ventured a theological vision and dared to say what God was doing with this relationship, in terms which have not come true, but have been shown by subsequent history to be wishful thinking. If today there is a measure of friendliness and peace between Jew and Gentile, Jew and Christian, it is not because the programme Paul dared to outline has been realised, but because toleration, leaving each other alone, keeping the peace in a minimalist way, together with some dialogue and respectful learning, has come to seem wiser than war.

If then we are interested in a theology of reconciliation, Romans 9-11 may seem to be a failure to be abandoned. We cannot adopt or even adapt his speculative vision. But we should appreciate his method as a theologian of reconciliation and dare to follow his example.

His method is, as I have said, to risk a kind of speculation about what God is doing now because God is God as he is in Jesus. Paul can speak of God because he loves with the love of that God shed abroad in his heart and mind. Paul loves to the extent of being ready to be accursed for his people. Paul's love is rather like a parent's, perhaps: he not only wants to give practical guidance about how to live, in the ordinary circumstances, as well as possible; but he wants to dream on behalf of his people (or his peoples, because in a sense he counted Gentiles as his, being a debtor to Jew and Greek). He dreams in dimensions opened up by the mercy of God, not the capabilities of men, and so his dreams reach out towards the depth of God's wisdom and knowledge (11.33-36 is a crucial part of the text, and the clue for theological method). But when we dream we play seriously with more than we can verify or control. When we dream some would say we lose humanity; we are out of control; but ecstasy is a necessary if dangerous aspect of humanity. If we do not dream, speculate, venture, what are we as human beings? Where is the image of God? Dreams are not beyond criticism – some dreams must be discarded as wicked or foolish; but some dreams are manifestly heightened visions of the good which warrants our taking the risk of following the dream. Of course, the goodness of the dream does not guarantee its realisation but the uncertainty of realisation is not a good reason for giving up dreaming or praying. We must not bury our talent in the ground where it will be kept safe, but the dreams latent in talent will be stifled before birth.

Theology must risk vision. Risky vision is an essential characteristic of reconciliation. For reconciliation is only a serious and worthwhile thought in places where there is conflict and hostility and alienation, and where there is little sign of easy resolution. Reconciliation involves imaginary speculative analysis and action, which risks going beyond what the present circumstances suggest is feasible. At the point where reconciliation is needed, reconciliation appears unworkable. The reconciler, advocating reconciliation, whether theologically or not, has to resist the powers that make it seem more practical not to reconcile. So vision that risks failure,

that braves defeat at the hands of hard practicality, is indispensable. And it is in this section of Romans that Paul shows himself to be venturing theologically in this way.

Now our task as readers of Paul is not to try to save his speculation from its falsification by history, which cannot be denied. We are not to read this section of Paul as creationists read Genesis: upholding the text as it stands in the face of well-worked scientific understanding or historical experience. That is, we must not try to save Paul from having made predictive visions which have not come true. When we try to save Paul in that way, we also lock ourselves into an untruthful reading of the text in history. Then we will fail to save Paul and will make ourselves untruthful.

Instead of treating Paul as a supplier of an apocalyptic scenario, we have to learn from him how to be theologians of reconciliation, of God's reconciliation, *in our own time and place*. We do not seek to revive his vision literally, but we are inspired to exercise the same sort of courage and imagination for relevant vision-making in our own situation. We do not read Paul to escape into a pious verticality, but we live with the living God in the gift of vertical-horizontality God gives us today – which includes the risk of participating in history, where things often do not turn out as we expect or hope even when we venture in faith.