After the slammed door

Small harms, unequal power, and the way God reconciled us

Gilha Lee

A father, worn down by weeks of slammed doors, knocks and says, "Let's make peace." A pastor, after a tense congregational meeting, invites a frustrated member to her office "so that we can be reconciled." A manager schedules a "repair conversation" with the employee he embarrassed in front of the whole team. On the surface, each is a gesture toward healing. Each can also be something else: a summons.

When the more powerful party initiates reconciliation, the invitation arrives freighted with the asymmetry of the relationship. The daughter cannot decline her father's peace without becoming, once again, the problem. The congregant knows who will be standing in the pulpit next Sunday. The employee knows who writes his review. In such moments, the language of reconciliation—warm, healing, even Christian language—can quietly do the work of restoring not the relationship but the hierarchy. The harm is declared resolved, and the imbalance that produced it emerges not only intact but freshly legitimized, because now it wears the garments of peace.

There is an opposite failure, and it is common among people of good heart. The less powerful party absorbs the harm unilaterally—*it's all right, don't worry about it*—asking nothing, exchanging nothing. I have watched this happen repeatedly, nowhere more than in churches, and I have done it myself. It does not produce peace. It produces resentment, and it quietly strengthens the unequal dynamic: one party perpetually benefited, the other perpetually depleted.

Both failures are failures of reciprocity. In the first, the powerful counterfeit mutuality; in the second, the powerless surrender it. And both flourish most not in catastrophic violence but in the small, everyday harms that accumulate in homes, congregations, and workplaces—precisely the places where power differentials are unavoidable and largely invisible. So the question: Between parents and children, pastors and congregants, bosses and employees, even the extroverted and the introverted, how can the repair of harm be genuinely reciprocal without becoming one more tool for maintaining privilege?

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My answer comes from the steepest power difference of all: the most asymmetrical reconciliation ever narrated, the reconciliation of God and humanity. Paul, I will argue, presents reconciliation not as a unilateral act of grace received by passive beneficiaries but as a reciprocal exchange, one in which the immeasurably weaker party has something to give that the stronger cannot supply for itself. How reciprocity was possible across that difference—not because God is God, but through the very logic of exchange—can teach us how to make it possible across ours.

Reconciliation is exchange

The Greek verb Paul uses for reconcile, *katallassō*, holds a surprise for readers who encounter it first as doctrine. Open a lexicon, and its primary meaning is not "reconcile" but "exchange." It was marketplace language, used for changing money and trading goods, before it named the mending of relationships (*redemption*, another word we have thoroughly theologized, comes from the same commercial world; we still redeem coupons). When ancient cities ended hostilities, the same vocabulary applied, and the process it named was recognizably an exchange: a gift given, a tribute paid, an offending practice ceased. Something changed hands, or there was no reconciliation.

Nor is reconciliation alone in this. The study of grace has arrived at a strikingly similar conclusion: John Barclay has shown that *gift* in antiquity was never the no-strings-attached, one-way transfer we moderns imagine; gifts in Paul's world came wrapped in the social expectation of return.[1] My own study of reconciliation reached the exchange dimension by a different route: through the vocabulary, institutions, and ideals of exchange and reconciliation in Paul's world. The two findings reinforce each other: grace and reconciliation, each carrying reciprocal exchange in its very grammar. So when Paul chooses *katallassō* for what God has done in Christ, his first hearers would not have heard "unilateral." Reciprocity was built into the word. The question is what Paul does with it.

God's unequal exchange

I did not come to this question as an exegete first. I came to it as a Korean. I grew up hoping to see the reunification of my divided peninsula, and I have

1 John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015).

watched that hope grow more distant—not only because the older generation carries the traumatic wounds of war, but because younger South Koreans, weighing the enormous economic gap with the North, increasingly do not want reunification at all. Watching this, I kept asking: How can reconciliation happen between parties so unequal in power, status, and wealth? Then I noticed that the reconciliation Paul places at the heart of his gospel is exactly that kind. And according to him, it worked.

The traditional account says it worked because God is God: reconciliation as a unilateral, one-time divine act accomplished in Christ's death, with humanity contributing nothing, or at most passively receiving. I want to suggest a different reading. In 2 Cor 5:18, Paul writes that God, who "reconciled us to himself through Christ," also entrusted to us the *diakonia*—the service, the ministry—of reconciliation. The gift comes with a task, and the task is the return gift. Notice its shape: The gift descends vertically, but the reciprocation moves horizontally. We respond to God by practicing reconciliation with the people around us—family, friends, strangers, enemies—and that horizontal *diakonia* counts as our return to God. Divine-human reconciliation begins in the unrepeatable event of the cross and resurrection, but it continues as an ongoing process in which humanity plays a crucial role.

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An objection arises immediately, and it is an ancient one. Greek and Roman economic thought held that a just exchange required equal value, or at least proportion; to trade unequal things was not merely bad business but moral injustice. And this exchange is scandalously unequal: God gives Christ; humanity gives mere participation in the *diakonia*. How can that be a just exchange? Three features of Paul's world suggest how.

First, emergencies change values. Aristotle observed that exchange takes place only where there is need.[2] Philo went further: In a famine, he wrote, anyone would gladly exchange "all the treasures in the world for a little food."[3] And here is the theological turn: The rupture of God's relationship with humanity was, from the side of divine love, an emergency. A God indifferent to us could have shrugged or started over with another humanity. But the God who loves refuses to lose the beloved, and in an emergency,

2 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 5.5, 1133b.

3 Philo, *On Providence*, 2.10–11.

the beloved's recovery is worth anything, even Christ. Divine love is what makes the unequal exchange intelligible.

Second, the weaker party's offering is unique. Roman patronage shows this well: It bound together parties of wildly unequal capacity. An emperor could shower a provincial city with benefactions no city could ever match. Yet the city could give the emperor something he could not procure for himself: it could raise a monument to him in its square (erected by others, a monument conferred honor; erected by oneself, it conferred nothing). Likewise the wealthy landowner in Rome and the poor tenant farmer on his distant estate: Only the farmer's hands could work that particular land. The client's return could not match the patron's gift in value; it matched it in uniqueness. So it is between God and humanity. The *diakonia* of reconciliation happens human-to-human; it must be enacted by fellow humans, in bodies and neighborhoods, or not at all. God cannot do it for us. There is a startling irony here: God needs humans. That need is not weakness, still less a surrender of omnipotence; it is the space God has chosen to make for our reciprocity.

Third, reconciliation re-founds the relationship. The Greek ideal of *homonoia* (concord) meant more than the settling of a conflict. It meant a fundamental change in the relationship: two parties now sharing one will, one direction, one purpose, each recognizing the other as, in some sense, part of itself. When rival cities achieved concord, they sometimes minted coins bearing both cities' deities side by side—equal footing, stamped in bronze. This is what Paul means by making us "ambassadors for Christ" (2 Cor 5:20): The reconciled take on the very purpose of God. God does the same: not merely ceasing to be angry but placing humanity on a footing where our agency matters—not equal status, but equal regard. And with that, the objection dissolves. Between parties who share one purpose, who count each other as part of themselves, gifts are no longer audited for equivalence. The exchange that began as scandalously unequal ends by retiring the arithmetic altogether.

Repairing small harms across unavoidable differences in power

What does any of this have to do with a slammed door, a tense congregational meeting, or an employee humiliated in front of the team? Four things, I think.

Name the power difference first

Small harms are precisely where power hides best. A parent's sarcasm or a pastor's dismissive email rarely looks like an exercise of power, which is why the power in them goes unexamined. Churches that prize flat structures are not exempt; where power is denied, it does not disappear—it goes

underground, and underground power is the kind most easily mistaken for peace. Repair that begins from the privileged script—*I know what happened, I know what is needed, I have already prepared the terms*—will fail, however sincere. From my observations, I have come to understand that reconciliation is never achieved from a position of assumed superiority. The first move that made divine reconciliation possible was God's refusal to stand on status. Ours is to say, out loud if necessary: I have more power here than you do, and I know it.

Practice equal regard, not equal status

Where power is hoarded or abused, it should be contested; that is simple justice. But not every difference in power is an injustice. A parent must remain a parent; a pastor does not stop being the pastor when the hard conversation begins. What can change is regard: treating the other as a whole human being whose account of the harm carries full weight—as God treated humanity not as possession or project but as partner, entrusting to us, of all creatures, the *diakonia* of reconciliation.

Hold the paradox of true reciprocity

There are two ways to break reciprocity. One is to calculate your own benefit first, to enter "repair" already computing what the outcome should do for you. When I am in conflict with my teenager, this is my confession: I begin from my own agenda—*how do I change their behavior?*–and call it reconciliation. It does not work; teenagers can smell an agenda, and what I offer as peace, they receive as management. The other way is to want nothing at all, the good-hearted self-erasure that says my needs do not matter here. That is not generosity; over time, it breeds resentment and further entrenches the unequal dynamic. The paradox is that true reciprocity asks for both at once: Think first of what the other will receive, yet do not pretend you need nothing. Both agendas belong on the table, and it is only from there that letting go of my own demands becomes free rather than forced. Concord, after all, means the other has become in some sense part of me—their gain now counting, in part, as mine—the neighbor loved as the self, with both neighbor and self still present.

Receive the gift on the giver's terms

Ancient exchange teaches that value is contextual, and the weaker party's offering, of little worth by market measures, may be the one thing the stronger cannot get anywhere else. Every teacher knows this. The brilliant student's tenth flawless paper brings satisfaction, but the failing student's sudden breakthrough brings joy of another order entirely. The same act from someone of greater capacity would not be the same gift; it costs them

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far less. The father of the prodigal was not measuring his returning son's speech against some standard of adequate apology; the return was itself the gift. In the repair of small harms, the child's clumsy half-apology, the introvert's few words offered in a room built for the talkative, the congregant's risky honesty with their pastor—these may be the whole treasure. When we are the party with more power, our temptation is to refuse such gifts, to insist that the repair take the shape we prescribe. That refusal is domination by other means. Accepting the other party as they are—receiving what they can actually give rather than demanding what they cannot—is not a lowering of the bar. It is what God does with us.

One caution belongs alongside these practices: Power is contextual, and it shifts. In Korea, I held privileges I could not see; in the United States, I am a professor in one room and, in the next, an immigrant whose life could be unsettled by policies beyond my control. Awareness of power differences is therefore not a box we check once but a discipline we carry from room to room, asking each time: Where am I standing now, and who can afford this repair less than I can?

The classroom of small harms

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If that is true, then reciprocity is not what endangers repair between unequal parties; counterfeit reciprocity is. And the small harms of ordinary life ask for repair in their own right. They are also where true reciprocity is learned, for such skill rarely comes in the moments that demand it most. The slammed door, the tense congregational meeting, the humiliation in front of the team: These are small enough to learn from—and, left unrepaired, they do not stay small. The practice is less a formula than a posture.

Ask where you stand, and name whatever power you hold. Regard the other as God regarded us. Put both agendas on the table, prepared to release much of your own. And when you are the stronger party—as each of us sometimes is—receive, as the father received his returning son, the gift that only the weaker can give.

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