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# A Hermeneutics of Blessing as a Meta-Requisite for Reconciliation: John E. Toews' Romans Paradigm as a Case Study

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### Abstract

Within an overall framework of reconciliation as a transformation of mimetic structures of violence to mimetic structures of blessing, teachings of blessing are needed throughout the process. "Teachings" are considered as paradigmatic stories, principles, insights, and practical wisdom that are derived both from religious traditions and the human sciences. "Blessing" refers to that which contributes to sustained human well-being at the individual, collective and relational levels. A hermeneutics of blessing is a deliberate interpretive endeavour directed toward the generation of teachings of blessing. It can be used with any particular source and the insights can be both direct and inverse, identifying what is helpful and not helpful for reconciliation processes. John E. Toews, biblical scholar specializing on the book of Romans in the New Testament, is examined as someone practicing a hermeneutics of blessing. His paradigm of Romans shows how it can be viewed as a letter addressing an identity-based conflict involving Jews and Gentiles. A set of practical teachings of blessing is synthesized from Romans 12 to 15, using the Toews hermeneutical paradigm.

**Keywords:** *hermeneutics, John E. Toews' Romans Paradigm, mimetic structures, New Testament, reconciliation*

### Author Bio(s)

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**Abstract**

*Within an overall framework of reconciliation as a transformation of mimetic structures of violence to mimetic structures of blessing, teachings of blessing are needed throughout the process. "Teachings" are considered as paradigmatic stories, principles, insights, and practical wisdom that are derived both from religious traditions and the human sciences. "Blessing" refers to that which contributes to sustained human well-being at the individual, collective and relational levels. A hermeneutics of blessing is a deliberate interpretive endeavour directed toward the generation of teachings of blessing. It can be used with any particular source and the insights can be both direct and inverse, identifying what is helpful and not helpful for reconciliation processes. John E. Toews, biblical scholar specializing on the book of Romans in the New Testament, is examined as someone practicing a hermeneutics of blessing. His paradigm of Romans shows how it can be viewed as a letter addressing an identity-based conflict involving Jews and Gentiles. A set of practical teachings of blessing is synthesized from Romans 12 to 15, using the Toews hermeneutical paradigm.*

## Introduction

A paradox of reconciliation is that it appears wonderfully simple when it happens but is profoundly complex when its structure is considered as a whole. If one tries to force reconciliation at the wrong time one can do further violence to those already hurt through destructive deep-rooted conflict. However, it is possible to advance reconciliation as a process and as a goal (Bar-Tal & Bennink, 2004), but to do so demands wisdom, sensitivity, and insight. In extraordinary cases, certain people, like Nelson Mandela, develop the wisdom, sensitivity, and insight to advance reconciliation in particular contexts. My hypothesis is that a methodology grounded in a hermeneutics of blessing will generate the requisite understandings, attitudes, and spirit to provide the impetus for reconciliation in particular contexts. I would further argue in corollary fashion that the results of an exercise of a hermeneutics of blessing in one context will produce results that are heuristically and practically useful in other contexts.

The argument for a hermeneutics of blessing builds on a concept of reconciliation I advanced in *From Violence to Blessing* (Redekop, 2002), a framework for reconciliation I applied to Rwanda (Redekop, 2008), and development of the concept of teachings of blessing (Redekop, 2007a). The conceptual progression will be as follows. First I will develop the concept of reconciliation as a transformation of mimetic structures of violence to mimetic structures of blessing. (“Mimetic” is derived from the Greek word *mimesis* from which we get “imitation”; my use is derived from the work of René Girard.) I will then offer a framework for reconciliation, one component of which will be meta-requisites. One of these meta-requisites will be shown to be teachings of blessing,

which I will define. Second, I will develop the concept of a hermeneutics of blessing, showing how it functions within an ethical vision of blessing. Third, I will show how a hermeneutics of blessing is manifest in the exegetical work of John E. Toews in relation to the book of Romans of the Christian New Testament. Significantly, he frames the book of Romans as a conflict resolving text. Fourth, I will show how Toews paradigm can be used to identify teachings of blessing and how these might have application in different contexts.

Allow me to position this research within the field: I am writing as a scholar-practitioner in the field of conflict studies. I am also a practical theologian in the context of deep-rooted conflict and reconciliation. As such, I recognize the scandal, for some, of attempting to draw insights from a religious text within a largely secular field. In the light of this recognition, I offer the following caveat. Methodologically I am not arguing on the basis of the authority of a biblical text; rather I am suggesting that within the field of conflict studies we look for relevant insights where they can be found and that if archaic texts offer archetypal narratives and teachings, we should learn what we can from them. The results should stand on their own within the fields of conflict and peace studies; however, they could have a surplus of meaning for those interested in religious-based conflict in general and those interested in a theology of peace in particular.

Since I am arguing for a particular methodology, let me offer a definition so that we are all on the same page to start out with. “Methodology” comes from the Greek words *meta*, *hodos*, and *logos*. *Meta* introduces the ideas of attendant circumstances, that which is in relationship to something else, and that which comes after or lies behind (Bauer, 1958, s.v. *meta*). *Hodos* means “way,” in fact, on Greek street signs it is used as

the equivalent of “street” or “avenue.” *Logos* speaks of reckoning or a reasoned approach to something. Putting these together we have the concept of methodology as a reasoned reflection about the way in which we proceed, including what lies behind our approach to doing research or discovering truth. Methodology then concerns itself with what it is we are trying to find out, the kinds of questions we ask in our heuristic endeavour, and what we do to get answers to these questions. Each discipline or field has well developed questions that are posed about social phenomena; for example, social psychology, sociology, anthropology and political science, in confronting social conflict, would ask questions about ethno-narratives, group dynamics, cultural values and governance structures respectively. I am suggesting that in the field of identity-based conflict and reconciliation, an interpretive framework that asks questions about how one grounds the impulse toward reconciliation and what principles guide its processes are central to its methodology. In other words, a hermeneutics of blessing will be shown to be methodologically significant for the study of reconciliation. With this in mind we will turn to a definition of and framework for reconciliation.

### **Reconciliation**

Reconciliation I conceptualize as the transformation of mimetic structures of violence to mimetic structures of blessing. Mimetic structures are diachronic patterns in which the actions, orientation and attitudes of those in relational systems are mutually reciprocated (Redekop, 2002; note at this point that I am offering a concise summary of *From Violence to Blessing*). Within a mimetic structure of violence, parties are each

oriented to value the diminution of the other. They wish to hurt the other, attack the dignity of the other, take from the other, or get ahead at the expense of the other.

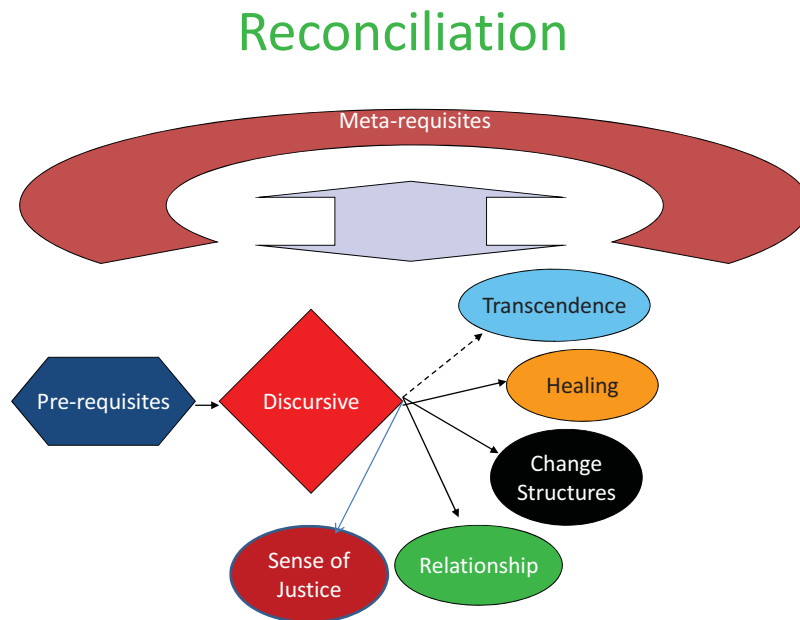
Violence, as René Girard argues (1987), is mimetically returned with interest. Hence mimetic structures of violence tend to grow in intensity until one side or the other is vanquished; or both are sufficiently diminished that they lose energy and impetus to continue; or they become locked in a mutually hurting stalemate (Zartman and Faure, 2005).

Mimetic structures of blessing entail mutual contributions to each other's well being. There is an orientation that manifests itself in attitudes of mutual respect and in actions that are mutually empowering. Mimetic structures of blessing are dynamic, constantly changing and sometimes conflictual. Because of the basic orientation toward blessing, conflicts are used as occasions for creativity.

Mimetic structures are found within relational systems. They are complex; the complexity can be deconstructed through the use of a theoretical framework that includes identity needs, mimetic desire, scapegoating, hegemonic structures, and social psychological concepts such as chosen traumas and chosen glories (Redekop, 2002). A change in mimetic structures implies a reframing of identity narratives in relation to the other and a new imagination of future horizons.

Less abstractly, reconciliation can be conceptualized as a coherent set of relationships among a number of elements, arranged as follows (Redekop, 2008, with modifications).

**Figure 1. Reconciliation**



At the heart of reconciliation are discursive and symbolic processes, indicated by the diamond. These processes include presentations of narratives; eliciting and validating truth-claims; expressions of emotion, remorse, apology, and commitment to make amends; indications of forgiveness; and symbolic actions and rituals to reinforce transformations. In order for these to take place there are pre-requisites such as safety and vision, mandate and resources for reconciliation initiatives. Key result areas are transcendence, personal healing, a change of structures, new relationships, and a sense of justice.

Meta-requisites are those things that are connected to reconciliation, are needed throughout the process, at times lie behind actions taken, and play an empowering role. They include:



## A Hermeneutics of Blessing

1. GRIT—Gradual Reciprocated Initiatives in Tension-reduction: a dance of making safe concessions which, if mimetically followed by the other lead to a gradual thawing of relationships (Osgoode, 1966).
2. Institutions: reconciliation processes usually happen in the context of institutions which may range from circle and dialogue processes to quasi-legal institutions such as truth and reconciliation commissions.
3. Process leadership skills: skilled third parties can expedite the various phases of the total process.
4. Support from the Third Side: Ervin Staub has argued persuasively that bystanders can make a big difference in a conflict (1988) and William Ury has identified nine different roles for members of the third side, that is, a community of people not directly involved with the conflict (1999).
5. Teachings of Blessing: these are stories, values, principles, analyses, and frameworks that establish and feed the impulse, vision, motivation and capacity to proceed with reconciliation.

We will now examine the concept of teachings of blessing more closely.

### *Teachings of Blessing*

Previously, I did a critical examination of the concept of teachings of blessing by doing a hermeneutical circle inquiry around the Hebrew words ברכה *berikah*—blessing and תורה *Torah*—teaching (Redekop, 2007a). The four steps to the inquiry included: 1) an examination of the meaning of the word in the context of the Hebrew Bible; 2) a hermeneutics of suspicion in which I enumerated reasons why it was inappropriate to use

such a concept in the field of conflict studies; 3) looking at opportunities that open up with the use of the concept, probing ways in which new possibilities introduced by the use of the word that would be lost without it; 4) returning to the meaning of the word, giving it a new definition for use in the field. I will provide highlights of my conclusion with regard to each concept. “Blessing,” I concluded,

is used to connote a life-oriented, creative impulse oriented toward the mutual well-being of Self and Other. Within a mimetic structure of blessing Self and Other feed one another at many different levels of reality. If blessing becomes mimetic, both parties are at the same time receptive and generous. Symptoms of blessing are joy, confidence, self-esteem, peace, dignity and respect (Redekop, 2007a, p.145).

I identified other concepts associated with blessing that fill out its meaning. The root metaphor of *berikah* is the verb to kneel. The connection is that people kneel to receive a blessing. This indicates an attitude of receptivity reminiscent of the Taoist concept of ying. Receptivity, contrasted with a power orientation, yang, is an openness to receive from others and reciprocally a willingness to give generously. In the context of the Hebrew Bible, blessing is associated with land (Brueggeman, 2002; Martens, 1981) suggesting the need to care for the environment. The ancient Hebrew understanding of blessings extending through the generations resonates with Indigenous teachings that decisions ought to be made for the benefit of the next seven generations (Ross, 1996). The discursive field of blessing includes compassion, patience, mercy and forgiveness (Bole and others, 2004; Lederach, 1997; Volf, 2005).

I was initially led to the concept of “teachings” as significant when I conducted a structural analysis of the Exodus, an archetypal story of liberation—freedom from slavery to positive freedom to enter the promised land (Redekop, 1995). My question was “How can people who were oppressed avoid oppressing others when they get into a position of power?” I noted that between the time of leaving Egypt where they were slaves to entering Canaan was a period of 40 years during which time they received *Torah* understood as normative teachings. Examining the law codes embedded within the *Torah*, understood as the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, I discovered a number of teachings that addressed the matter of avoiding exploitation of slaves. Among them, for example was the admonition to “remember that you were slaves in Egypt” every week on Shabbat (Deuteronomy 5:15) The realization that *Torah* as teachings was important in personal and collective transformation led me to adopt the concept for use in understanding reconciliation.

Here are some conclusions about the concept of teaching from my subsequent work:

The concept of teaching assumes that there is something deliberate about the generation of appropriate value-laden insights and the passing on of these insights to others. If there are “teachings,” there must be teachers. The Torah was linked with the person of Moses who received teachings but who also taught the people. Insofar as the teachings helped to restore both order and mutual well-being in the face of harmful activity, he functioned as a judge to arbitrate; but at the same time with the arbitration he established precedents and demonstrated how to navigate the

complexities of applying principles to ambiguous contexts. Furthermore, he literally taught other judges (please note here that I am lifting ideas from the story line, this does not imply a literal uncritical reading, as I argued elsewhere, even if these stories are retrojected back in time they still convey a particular approach to life.) All this is to say that in the Hebrew Bible it is impossible to isolate the teachings from the teacher. That is to say that the teachings take on the value that is needed to impact how people live in large measure on the basis of them coming from particular teachers. The same point could be made in Islam in relation to Prophet Mohammed being the teacher both as recipient of the Qur'an as well as the one who brought the teachings of the Quran to life in Mecca and Medina... Given the basic mimetic nature of humankind, the idea that effective teachers are those who bring a certain presence to the teaching process but that they also model what the teachings are all about. Among Canada's First Nations and Inuit peoples, elders play the role of teachers. In academia, professors not only teach, they model academic life and the value of a pursuit of truth through their research. This concept starts to connect with the insight regarding mediation that the presence and modelling action of a particular mediator can be determinative of positive outcomes (Redekop, 2007a, p. 139).

Along with Michael Polanyi, we note that academic disciplines have rules of rightness, teachings if you like, that help to distinguish what is vital to the discipline from that which is misleading, false or spurious (1964).

As we develop a self-awareness of the teachings that guide in a given endeavour, we have a basis for self-reflection, validation, questioning and evaluation. That is, the teachings help bring to light what is happening, they assist in re-framing, and they hold a standard by which we compare our own reality with what could potentially be the case. The moment of self-reflection in the light of teachings is a heuristic moment, it is a time of discovery of new insights, direct or inverse, and a time to open up new possibilities that go beyond what is included in the teachings per se but are the result of the creative engagement of teachings with lived reality.

With Thomas Mooren, we note that at least the Abrahamic religions have texts of violence that can be used to legitimate violence (2002). This means that the hermeneutic orientation becomes very important. I would like to argue for a hermeneutics of blessing such that the orientation of the serious interpreter of texts uses texts to find nuggets of truth and direction that can enhance the process of reconciliation and the creation of mimetic structures of blessing. We will now examine more closely what might be involved in a hermeneutics of blessing before examining Toews approach to Romans as an example of such an endeavour.

### **Hermeneutics of Blessing**

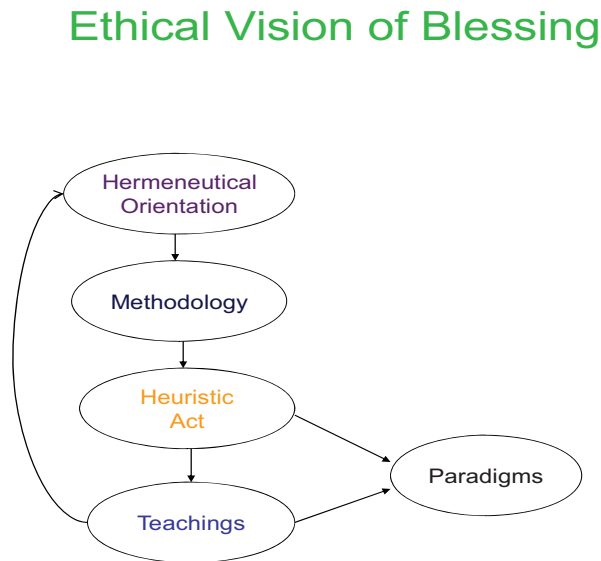
Hermeneutics is the art and science of interpreting; that is, to find meaning in communicative acts which may be oral, conveyed through a particular medium or which may result in texts. There are many technical aspects of interpretation texts resulting in many questions. These include questions related to language, metaphor, genre, form,

context, intended recipient of the communication, emotional components of the communication, intended impact, changes of meaning structures through time, history of interpretation, the connection with the interpreter, the impact on the interpreter, the mental models or paradigms that the interpreter uses to generate meaning, etc. These all have validity but for the present moment the specificity associated with them goes beyond what can be dealt with in this article. What we wish to begin with is the hermeneutical impulse which includes the question, why choose a text to interpret? Which text is chosen? And which questions will be answered through the hermeneutical exercise?

In response to these questions, we have already established an interest in reconciliation and in mimetic structures of blessing. (Reflexively, I can observe that my own interest in these concepts is the result of a hermeneutical exploration that has been described in part above.) Our heuristic quest is for something that is both practical, that is, associated with action, and normative, in that it highlights values. In other words, the interpretive impulse is of an ethical nature. Ethics we take in its teleological sense of having an end, a goal, a desired outcome (Ricoeur, 1992); this, recognizing a secondary deontological sense of having to do with principles or value statements that invoke a duty to abide by them. We are thinking then of an ethical vision akin to Ricoeur's positive sense of utopia as an achievable vision of a practical horizon of the future (1984). In particular, we start with an ethical vision of blessing; that is, we hope we can find a way of taking action such that we can create and nurture mimetic structures of blessing—mutually satisfying relationships. This is a particular challenge when the starting point is the constellation of resentment, hatred, envy, greed and other passions (emotions, backed

by understandings and orientation) that are concomitant with mimetic structures of violence (Redekop, 2002; Girard, 1990; Sites, 1990; Murphy and Hampton, 1988).

**Figure 2. Ethical Vision of Blessing**



As we can see in Figure 2, the ethical vision of blessing gives a particular hermeneutical orientation to the endeavour. This orientation asks the question, “Is there something in this text that contributes to our understanding, imagination and requisite values in order to develop and sustain positive relationships with our Other?” This can be a very conscious goal. With that orientation we develop a *methodology*, understood as a deliberate reflection on the way to proceed in our hermeneutical endeavour. The methodology includes the kinds of questions we bring to the enterprise, including the broad questions around what are the mimetic structures of violence and what indicates

the potential for transformation and the more operational questions of author, intention, context, intended audience, intended impact. As we interact with the text we engage in a *heuristic action* that leads to insights (Melchin and Picard, 2008). This is a reflexive and reciprocal action in which we read the text and the text reads us. That is, we develop new realizations about ourselves as we read the text; these realizations help us mimetically enter into the world of the author, the text and the initial recipients. Out of this heuristic endeavour, we start to get insights into the very real conflict situation we face and wish to address—we start to find some tentative answers to the broad question of how can we affect a transformative process of reconciliation. These become the *teachings* we are looking for. These tentative answers then need to be scrutinized and validated by and with our interactions with others. They also are fed back into the heuristic enterprise for internal validation within the world of the text. As they become clearer, they result in *paradigms* that enable us to see and discover new aspects to reality. The paradigms, or higher level teachings, can then eventually inform specific actions and even action practices in the form of policies and programs. The very concept of a mimetic structure of blessing is one of these paradigmatic developments that is itself in the process of being validated within the field.

Note in the diagram above that there is a circular development in that the discoveries that lead to certain teachings are fed back into the hermeneutical orientation, helping to refine and nuance the questions that are being posed of the text.

The foregoing has introduced a paradigmatic framework within which we can place a hermeneutics of blessing. It shows that this hermeneutical impulse and orientation is needed to discern and formulate teachings of blessing that might motivate and guide



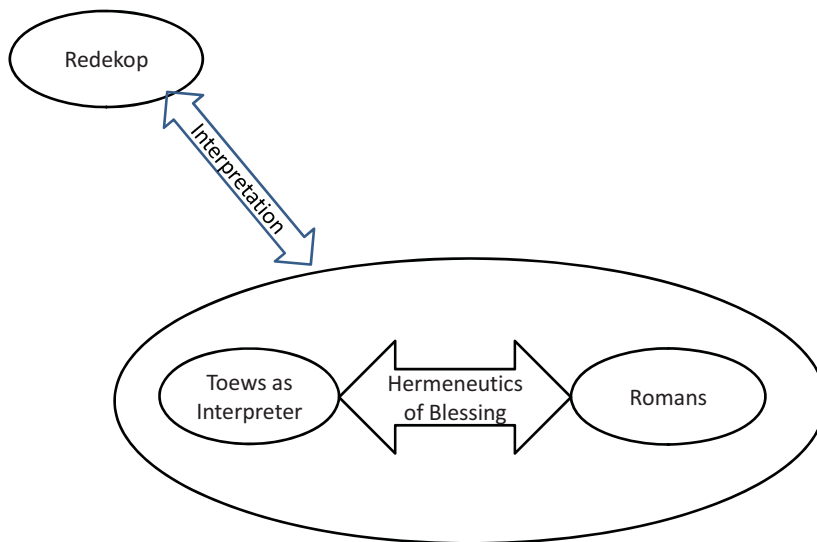
processes of reconciliation in a given context. Teachings of blessing are but one of a number of elements of reconciliation, but one that could be significant throughout the process; indeed they help to define the goal of reconciliation.

We will now turn to the work of John E. Toews, a biblical exegete who devoted his academic career to a study of the Epistle of Paul to the Romans, one of the books in the Christian New Testament.

### **Toews' hermeneutics of blessing applied to Romans**

The heuristic operation is depicted in Figure 3 and involves my interpretation of the work of John E. Toews in developing a new paradigm to interpret the letter of Paul to the Roman house churches around 55 CE. Drawing on a body of scholarship around this new paradigm he included insights from biblical scholars such as J. C. Beker, E. P. Sanders, Krister Stendahl, and N. T. Wright. In this operation, the work of Toews is presented as an exercise of a hermeneutics of blessing. Subsequently I will synthesize particular teachings of blessing from the book of Romans using the Toews paradigm. These teachings of blessing will be shown to have a double valence: first, they functioned as teachings of blessing in the first century to their primary audience; second, they can serve a useful purpose in the interests of reconciliation in the contemporary world.

**Figure 3. Redekop's Interpretation of Toews' Hermeneutics of Blessing**



John E. Toews is a Mennonite biblical scholar. Back in the 1970s when he did his doctoral studies in New Testament, most Mennonite academics were concentrating on the Sermon on the Mount and the Gospels in their endeavour to develop a peace theology. Toews thought it might be interesting to do something different—to look to the Apostle Paul as the grounding for a peace theology and to focus on the book of Romans in particular. As a responsible exegete, he mastered the history of Pauline studies and Romans scholarship. He then undertook his own analysis of the book of Romans (Toews, 1977). What he discovered was quite extraordinary.

For those not familiar with biblical scholarship, particularly in the Protestant tradition, it is important to note that the book of Romans played a pivotal role in the

development of Martin Luther's doctrine of justification by faith. In brief, Luther inherited a sin problem from his Catholic tradition. This manifested itself in a belief that humans were destined for hell on account of their sinfulness but that because of Jesus there was respite from this prognosis of the human condition. To appropriate forgiveness of sins and a place in heaven, one could be justified, in Luther's terms through faith in Jesus—faith alone was deemed sufficient. This became a cornerstone for subsequent Protestant theology for centuries after Luther. Romans was read as a theological treatise meant to develop this particular doctrine. Corollary to this was a negative reading of Judaism, which was construed as “works righteousness” based on legalism. Hence Romans was read in a way that offered a polemic against Judaism. This was the dominant paradigm (Toews, 2004, p.30).

Toews did a historical reconstruction and a structural analysis which introduced a radically different paradigm. It became clear to him that the basic problem addressed in Romans was a conflict between Jews and Gentiles. The earliest church in Rome was a network of house churches that emerged from a significant network of house synagogues. These synagogues included God-fearers—Gentiles who wished to participate in the life of the Jewish community, but did not fully convert (Toews, 2004, pp. 22-23). Christianity had not yet established an identity separate from that of Judaism but the house church gatherings of followers of Jesus included God-fearers and other Gentiles who were attracted to this movement. Romans 16 is the conclusion of the book of Romans in which Paul greets each of the house groups by the name of the person in whose house they meet. There is an extensive list, indicating a large number of house churches.

Significant debates were taking place concerning the degree to which Gentiles had to become Jews first before being part of these early churches, circumcision being a significant point. Within this network of churches were many conflicts over ethics, lifestyle, diet, sacred days, and basic theological understandings. People had woven different customs into their identities; to forge a new community with people tied to radically different lifestyles was a major challenge. Paul, recognizing both the strategic importance of a church in Rome as well as its vulnerability to falling apart because of internal conflicts, wrote his longest letter to the Romans. It more than any other has been considered the best developed theological statement coming from Paul.

The new paradigm advocated by Toews posits that Romans was meant to provide a framework for Jews and Gentiles to be part of a new inclusive community. This can be seen in the structure and the themes. The argument of Paul, as developed by Toews, runs something like this. God is presented as having the twin characteristics of being angry about things that are not right in the world and being passionate about making them right. The anger is directed at both Gentiles and Jews; neither group can claim perfection and neither can pull moral rank. The sense of things going wrong is linked to a force field of sin that pulls people into destructive ways of being. God's transformative action (righteousness of God) is directed at both groups to their respective benefit; hence, in this enlarged frame of reference, they are in a similar state in relation to God. This argument is made in Romans 1 to 8 and sets up the central argument according to Toews.

The problematique leading to the conflict includes a context in which the Jews have an awareness of a covenant with God, that is, a relationship of solidarity in which they are to be agents of goodness within the world. As part of this covenant, they are to

live according to the *Torah*. As they define a *Torah*-oriented lifestyle, it sets them apart from the surrounding community. Their lifestyle becomes a boundary marker that sets out their identity. A key problem for Paul, who would like to see an inclusive community, becomes the issue of how to frame the teachings (*Torah*) and the self-understanding of the Jewish followers of Jesus such that Gentiles will be welcome without becoming Jews first. On the other hand, how can he convince the Gentiles to truly honour the Jewish heritage within which the Jesus movement is emerging? Having established that both are susceptible to the force-field of sin as well as the transformative work of God, Paul uses a metaphor to advance his argument.

In Romans 9 to 11, Paul uses the metaphor of a tree to create a new level of consciousness concerning the respective identities of the Jews and Gentiles in the Jesus movement. The tree represents Judaism. It is a strong and healthy tree. It is not cut down or destroyed. Rather, it is honoured. However, a new branch is grafted in—the Gentile branch. It is the reality of the life and work of Jesus that makes this possible. By using this metaphor, Paul argues to the Gentiles that they need to respect the life-giving tradition of the Jews. The Jews for their part have to welcome the Gentile branch as an integral part of the now expanded tree. Both are part of the same organism. But how can they make this work? Each group has its own baggage—baggage that creates conflict between the two groups.

Romans 12 to 15 is identified by Toews as the set of teachings that show both the Gentiles and Jews of the movement how practically they can flourish together. We will return to this text in the following section.

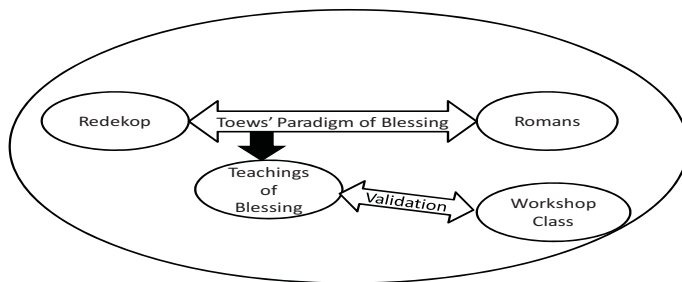
Framing the work of Toews as exemplifying a hermeneutics of blessing, we can make the following observations. First, this new paradigm enables us to see the degree to which there was a social identity-based conflict in first century Rome and the creativity of the Apostle Paul in addressing it. Second, this work shows how a previous reading of Paul provided a paradigm among Christians that depreciated the religious standing of Jewish people; conversely Toews' reading provides an impetus among Christians to honour the Jewish tradition in a new way. Third, by developing this particular paradigm, Toews raises the question, How exactly did Paul creatively address the conflict and what can we learn from his efforts? A question we will now attend to in the fourth section.

### **Teachings of blessing in Romans**

We are now ready to identify teachings of blessing in Romans. As is shown in Figure 4, this happens through a reflection on the book of Romans based on the Toews paradigm but with a particular question in mind: what are the teachings of blessing within this ancient text? More practically, how did Paul manage to set forth a framework and agenda that kept a fledging movement intact?

The teachings of blessing identified in this section are of a threefold nature. First, we will look at Paul's reconciling methodology. Second, we will look at the teachings on *Torah* as an instructive dimension of Paul's approach. Third, we will identify the specific principles that Paul developed in Roman 12 to 15. Finally, in relation to these principles, I will describe some action research undertaken to validate these as teachings of blessing.

**Figure 4. Generating and Validating Teachings of Blessing**



*Paul as a Third Party Neutral—His Reconciling Methodology*

In analyzing Romans as a conflict transformation document, one can discover a number of methodological elements that point to Paul’s passion to bring the two sides together. First, he identified with both groups, saying in the first chapter that he is a debtor to both. Second, Paul shows commonality between them as has been pointed out. Third, the language of “all” is used 68 times throughout the book in an attempt to be inclusive (Redekop, 1980). Fourth, the central metaphorical argument of the tree becomes a creative way of developing a new consciousness. Fifth, as will emerge in the section below, Paul is attentive to the vulnerabilities of the weakest members of the movement.

*Teachings about Teachings*

A very tricky point for Paul was how to regard *Torah*. For Jewish people, *Torah* is at the center of their faith and has different valences (Neusner, 1993; Martens, 1981). First, it designates the first five books of the Hebrew Bible known traditionally as the books of Moses. Second, it refers to the instructions given to Moses during the 40 years in the wilderness. Third, it designates eternal principles; there is a Jewish tradition that

Torah existed before the creation of the world. Fourth, the concept of oral Torah designates the living tradition that has been passed down through a community that has lived continuously since the written Torah was established. Fifth, Torah is associated with wisdom, as providing the source of insights needed to live well. Within Judaism, there has been constant questioning and debate about how to interpret the Torah and what it means to live by its teachings.

Given this high regard for Torah on the one hand, and the manner in which it was interpreted to create boundaries, on the other, Paul was left in quite a predicament. If he only affirmed everything in the *Torah* as it was understood and practiced, he could not reconcile the inclusion of Gentiles into a community still dominated by Jews and rooted in the Jewish tradition. If he dismissed it, he would be undercutting the ground of his own being. There are three ways in which he works his way through this paradox.

First, Paul makes a distinction in his use of the Greek word *nomos*, which is the word used to translate the Hebrew *Torah*. It is the word for law; this in itself is misleading because it misses the connotation of teaching embedded within *Torah*. When Paul is critical of how the Torah is used, he refers to it simply as *nomos*, without a definite article. When Paul is speaking of the Torah as a gift from the Divine, he uses a definite article, *ho*, referring to *the nomos*. Periodically he asks rhetorically, “Does this mean that *the nomos* is abrogated?” He then answers with the most emphatic negative possible in Greek.

Second, Paul argues that something that is essentially good can be subverted by the force-field of sin and death. This subversion he sees happening when the Torah is used to substantiate violence through a legalism that removes principle and practice from



the spirit of Torah, which is good and pure. In other words, he exposes a hermeneutics of violence and argues for a hermeneutics of blessing when it comes to Torah. His same arguments could be used against those who in later Christian contexts used his very words to develop a new kind of legalism that was used to justify such things as Anti-Semitism.

Third, as we will see below, Paul synthesized from the Torah a number of teachings meant to engender positive orientations, values, and attitudes among the people to whom his letter was addressed. Paul's methodology could be useful in deconstructing the subversive way in which religion is used to legitimate acts of violence (terrorism) by people who frame their motivation in legalistic terms, which demonize an Other (Juergensmeyer, 2001).

*Practical Teachings of Blessing—Principles which Paul Developed*

The overall point Paul is working towards is expressed in Romans 14:19. In the Jerusalem Bible it is expressed: "So let us adopt any custom that leads to peace and our mutual improvement." In the NRSV it is translated, "Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding." In Greek the two phrases in this verse are *Eirenes diokomen* which means eagerly pursue peace and *ta tes oikodomes tes eis allelous* meaning literally pursue the things that build up one another. The first key word, *oikodomes*, introduces a root metaphor connoting initial house construction or renovation; in either case it makes things better. *Allelous* is the reflexive pronoun referring to one another; it implies mutuality. Let us look now at a series of teachings within the text—teachings to build up one another. In other words, we are identifying

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teachings that promote mimetic structures of blessing from Romans 12-15:6. I will synthesize the themes as they emerge consecutively.

1. Recognize that your actions are to be directed toward a higher good. (12:1)
2. Do not let your minds be mimetically moulded according to current trends in thinking but transform your way of thinking through creative renewal. (12:2)
3. Do not be hyper-concerned about your own importance but think reasonably about your distinct role and gifts in relation to the community as a whole.  
(12:3,4-8)
4. Establish structures of mutual reciprocity around care and recognition. (12:10)
5. Participate in meeting the needs of others. (12:13)
6. Delight in welcoming those different from you into your homes. (12:13)
7. Say upbuilding things about those who are working against you (persecuting, scapegoating, picking on you.) (12:14)
8. Show empathy to one another through a range of emotions from celebration to mourning. (12:15)
9. Mimesis of evil is out; do not return harm or bitterness when it has been directed to you. (12:17; 13:8-10)
10. Thoughtfully look out for the well-being of all people. (12:17b)
11. As much as is possible, respecting the fact that relationships are two-sided, live peacefully with all people. (12:18)
12. Do not take revenge; find a safe place to put your anger; feed your enemies.  
(12:19)

13. Don't let mimetic structures of violence overtake you but defeat these structures with good. (12:21)
14. Honour your civic responsibilities. (13:1-7)
15. Fulfill the Torah by practicing love. (13:8-10)
16. Do not judge the thoughts, action and lifestyles of others. (14:1-19)
17. Those who are strong ought to assist those with certain weaknesses to bear their burdens. (15:1-2)

Two particular points of contention addressed by the principles were eating food offered to idols and honouring specific feast days. For Paul, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with food offered to idols. Food is food. Idols have no power. Materially there is no reason why this could not be done. However, for those coming from a Pagan environment this is a big deal. Hence Paul argues that out of respect for those who might be offended it is best not to indulge when in their presence. Similarly he argues for mutual respect when it comes to feast days.

### *Validating the Teachings*

The challenge for me was to see whether a hermeneutics of blessing could be used with a group of Jews, Christians, Muslims and those not committed to any theistic faith to discern and validate teachings of blessing derived from the New Testament to their mutual heuristic and personal benefit. This involved first creating a dialogical space, then presenting a framework, and then presenting a list of teachings derived from Romans 12-15 and asking them to engage in dialogue on these teachings. This list was presented to a group of about twenty people in a workshop at the Colloquium on Violence and Religion

at Purdue University in June 2002. After talking about the list in pairs participants voted for the top three teachings. A similar process was used with three different classes of graduate students studying conflict resolution. Within the four groups were Jews, Muslims, Christians and non-theists. In each case people participated willingly in the exercise after receiving the introductory information presented in the case study. These cases show that people from divergent backgrounds were prepared to engage on a set of teachings drawn from the Christian Testament. The results of their votes are presented in the table below.

**Table 1. Top 5 Teachings from Each Group**

| <b>Top 5 Teachings from Each Group</b>   | <b>Group 1 Rank (votes)</b> | <b>Group 2 Rank (votes)</b> | <b>Group 3 Rank (votes)</b> | <b>Group 4 Rank (votes)</b> |
|--|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| a. Fulfill the Torah by practicing love. (13:8-10)   | 1 (8)                       |                             |                             | 2(3)                        |
| b. Do not let your minds be mimetically moulded according to current trends in thinking, but transform your way of thinking through creative renewal. (12:2)       | 2 (6)                       | 1 (9)                       |                             | 2(3)                        |
| c. Mimesis of evil is out; do not return harm or bitterness when it has been directed to you. (12:17; 13:8-10)   | 3 (5)                       |                             |                             |                             |
| d. Do not take revenge, find a safe place to put your anger; feed your enemies.(12:19)   | 4 (4)                       | 3 (8)                       |                             | 2(3)                        |
| e. Say upbuilding things about those who are working against you (persecuting, scapegoating, picking on you.) (12:14)  | 4 (4)                       | 4 (7)                       |                             | 1(7)                        |
| f. Do not judge the thoughts, action and lifestyles of others. (14:1-19)   |                             | 1 (9)                       | 1(7)                        |                             |
| g. Do not be hyper-concerned about your own importance but think reasonably about your distinct role and gifts in relation to the community as a whole. (12:3,4-8) |                             | 4 (7)                       |                             | 2(3)                        |
| h. Those who are strong ought to assist those with certain weaknesses to bear  |                             |                             | 2(6)                        |                             |

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|   |  |  |      |      |
|---|--|--|------|------|
| their burdens.  |  |  |      |      |
| i. Show empathy to one another through a range of emotion from celebration to mourning.                           |  |  | 3(4) |      |
| j. As much as is possible, respecting the fact that relationships are two-sided, live peacefully with all people. |  |  | 3(4) |      |
| k. Recognize that your actions are to be directed toward a higher good.   |  |  | 4(3) |      |
| l. Participate in meeting the needs of others.  |  |  | 4(3) |      |
| m. Don't let mimetic structures of violence overtake you but defeat these structures with good.                   |  |  |      | 2(3) |

The top seven teachings, when considering all of the results, are all directed toward establishing and maintaining mimetic structures of blessing. Of these, a,b, and g concentrated on the Self; f concentrated on the Other; c,d, and e concentrated on responses to conflictual dynamics. Of those concentrating on the Self, “b” could be seen as a corrective to aliuscentricism, an over-emphasis on the Other, and “g” as a corrective to egocentricism, an over emphasis of the Self. Of the three that the three groups have in common, “b” is inclined to develop a strong healthy sense of Self and “d” and “e” provide one negative and one positive response to the kind of behaviour that would normally prompt mimetic violence. Significantly, the first group voted for the affirmation of love as central to Torah. Taken as a whole, these eight teachings, if acted upon would help to build, maintain and strengthen mimetic structures of blessing.

At the end of the first process, one member of the first group mentioned that the session had been nourishing to his heart, to his whole being. At the end of the second process, one of the participants asked about the place of people outside of Religion. Her question prompted an affirmation of those without a belief in God who care about the

earth (cf. Harrington, 1985) and the potential for finding teachings of blessing within texts and stories generated by non-theists.

### **Relevance to Reconciliation**

I have made the argument that those interested in furthering reconciliation would do well to exercise a hermeneutics of blessing to generate teachings of blessing. This approach could be used with any text relevant to a given context. Where religion is involved in a conflict, this principle should be brought to bear on the study of religious texts. Doing so would help to elicit the potentially positive contribution of religion (Appleby, 2000; Bole, and others 2004; Johnstone & Sampson, 1994; Sampson & Lederach, Silva, 2001). What is significant is that an eirenic text written in one context can be shown to produce positive results at many levels when interpreted with a hermeneutics of blessing. In this case, the book of Romans, which was shown to address an identity conflict in the first century, can be interpreted to undergird Jewish-Christian dialogue in the twenty-first century and argue against Christian anti-Semitism. It can generate principles that appeal to people of many different backgrounds, showing the potential for what works in one context to work in others as well. To further corroborate this point, it would be interesting to see how these particular teachings could be constructively drawn upon in a conflict situation. Also worthy of further study would be to show how conflict resolvers follow a methodology similar to that of the Apostle Paul.

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