

Reconciliation

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A number of different words have been employed by the Spirit of God to convey to us the far-reaching effects of the work of Christ. Reconciliation is one of them, and it possesses great definiteness of meaning. It carries us further into the positive blessings of the Gospel than do justification or redemption. The very idea it expresses belongs to the New Testament.

At first sight this hardly appears to be the case. A good concordance (such as "Young's") shows us that the word occurs nine times in the Old Testament; but on closer inspection we discover that in seven of these it is used to translate the ordinary word for "atonement." In one case it is used for a word that has to do with offering or receiving a sin offering. The remaining occurrence of the word comes nearer to the New Testament meaning (in 1 Samuel 29: 4), but there God is not in question.

In the New Testament there are three passages that deal with reconciliation — Romans 5, 2 Corinthians 5, Colossians 1 — and there is also a reference to it in Ephesians 2.

Justification is needed by us because of the guilt of sin and the condemnation thereby incurred. Redemption is needed because of the bondage which sin has produced. Reconciliation to God we must have because one of the gravest effects of sin has been the way it has alienated us from God, producing utter estrangement of heart on our side. The word "alienated" occurs in Colossians 1: 21, where it stands in full contrast to the fact that we now have been reconciled. We shall better understand the fulness of the reconciliation if we begin by grasping the full tragedy of the alienation.

One other passage refers to the state of alienation into which man has fallen — Ephesians 4: 18. We get right to the bottom of things when we discover that we have been "alienated from the life of God." Connected with this alienation are such things as vanity, darkness, ignorance, blindness, lasciviousness, uncleanness. This is not surprising for the life of God is the exact opposite of all these things. Sin, having alienated us from God, has cut us off from all the things that go to make up life according to Him.

Alienated from God, we have naturally no desire for Him, nor for the light and life that His presence brings. This came out most clearly directly sin had entered and the alienation had come to pass. Genesis 3 bears witness to it; the action of Adam and his wife plainly declared it. Directly the voice of the Lord God was heard in the garden they hid themselves. God did not instantly destroy them.

He dealt with them in mercy; still they had erected a barrier between themselves and Him which **nothing on their side could surmount, and** which He ratified by placing a barrier on His side in the shape of cherubim and a flaming sword.

Sin thus spoiled the Divine pleasure in man. To say this puts the matter too mildly. We have only to turn on to Genesis 6 to find that, mankind having been given sufficient time in which to develop their sinful propensities, an utterly unbearable state of affairs was produced, so that, "it repented the Lord that He had made man on the earth, and it grieved Him at His heart." At the end of Genesis 2 everything, man included, was pronounced to be "very good." Once man had been very good in the Divine eye, now he was a perfect grief to contemplate. The alienation was complete.

And it was complete on man's side also. God had become as distasteful to man as man had become to God. The latter part of Romans 1 unfolds the dreadful story of man's alienation from God. The sunken state of mankind is attributable to this, "they did not like to retain God in their knowledge" (verse 28). Romans 3 corroborates this by telling us that, "there is none that seeketh after God." When we get to Romans 5 it is plainly stated that when the reconciliation reached us we were "enemies."

Here we must carefully draw a distinction. On our side the alienation was not only in life but in heart also. On God's side the alienation in life was felt far more acutely than ever we could feel it, but there was no alienation in heart. In other words while we as sinners hated God, He never hated us. Had He hated us He could have just damned us, and left it at that. Instead of which He has Himself made available for us the reconciliation; a reconciliation brought to pass at so great a cost as "the death of His Son."

The Lord Jesus came into the world in the spirit of reconciliation. "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them" (2 Cor. 5: 19). This characterized His life and ministry. Not judgment but forgiveness was His work; and even where guilt was most pronounced and manifest, He did not impute it: see for instance John 8: 11, and Luke 23: 34. All that God could do was done by Him, yet every overture was rejected by men and He was crucified. But it was just then that God's reconciling mercy registered its most signal triumph.

Then it was that God "made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him." Now it is evident that if we are made in Christ — in the Christ who died and rose again — the very righteousness of God, there can be no longer before Him that which is obnoxious and distasteful to Him. It cannot be any longer a grief to His heart to look down upon us, but the exact reverse. Christ was identified with us and our sin under the judgment of God. We are identified with Him and His acceptance as risen from the dead.

In Colossians 1: 21, 22, the same truth is stated, but in other words. We have been reconciled "in the body of His flesh through death," for He became a Man, thereby possessing Himself of the body of His flesh, in order that He might die. As the result of reconciliation we can now be presented "holy and unblameable and unproveable in His sight."

"In the body of His flesh" may seem a rather peculiar expression, but a similar form of words occurs elsewhere; Romans 7: 4; Ephesians 2: 15; Hebrews 10: 10 and 20. If we understand the matter aright, the thought is that the Lord Jesus in His grace identified Himself with our place and condition in assuming Manhood apart from sin, so that He might lay down His life, presenting His sacred body as a sacrifice for sin; and then take up life again in resurrection, in which life believers may now be identified with Him. His death was thus the judgment and judicial ending of the old order; His resurrection the real beginning of the new.

This mighty change then has been brought about for us "in the body of His flesh through death;" and consequently our whole standing before God is manifestly altered. Once we were exactly in the position of fallen Adam, and nothing could be worse than that, nothing more repugnant to God. Now, being in Christ, we have the position that is Christ's as risen from the dead, and nothing could be better, nothing more delightful, more pleasing to God than that. This is what we may call God's side of reconciliation; the work which He has Himself effected in the death of Christ. It is perfect and absolute; accomplished for us, accomplished for ever. It is work of a new creation order, as 2 Corinthians 5: 17 shows.

But there is our side of the matter which had equally to be met. It was we who were "alienated and enemies **in mind** by wicked works," and consequently there had to be a complete and fundamental change of mind and attitude as regards God with every one of us. There was no need that His heart should be turned towards us, but there was every need that our hearts should be turned towards Him. Hence the Gospel was committed to the Apostles as "the word of reconciliation." They carried on that ministry as "ambassadors for Christ," praying men "in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5: 19, 20). When we believed the Gospel, the ministry of reconciliation became effective with us, and it could be said, "we have now received the reconciliation" (Rom. 5: 11, margin). As the fruit of having received the reconciliation we "joy in God," whereas formerly we feared and even hated Him.

We may sum up, then, this most blessed truth by saying that everything about us which was obnoxious to God and deserving of judgment has been judged in the death of Christ; and as the fruit of reconciliation we stand in a perfect acceptance before Him. His work it is, for "He hath made us accepted in the Beloved" (Eph. 1: 6). Christ's acceptance is the measure of our acceptance: and the measure of His acceptance may be discerned in the title given to Him — "the BELOVED." And further, since we do not believe the Gospel apart from the work of the Spirit in us, by which new birth is effected, we receive the reconciliation in believing. Our thoughts Godward are altogether altered; the enmity that once filled our hearts is removed, and we joy in Him. A new day has dawned in which He can look down upon us with complacency, and we look up in answering love to Him.

We can now see more clearly perhaps how reconciliation does carry us more fully into the positive blessings of the Gospel. As forgiven, we know that our sins have been dismissed. As justified, that we have been cleared from all charge. As redeemed, that our days of slavery are over. But as reconciled, we have full entrance into the wealth of the favour and love of God. It is the introduction into blessing of the highest order.

An old hymn states the matter thus:

"My God is reconciled,
His pardoning voice I hear."

that is hardly in keeping with what we have been seeing, is it?

It is not. It was we who needed to be reconciled. It was God who did the reconciling through the Lord Jesus Christ. But though this is so, we must not overlook the fact that God had to be propitiated in regard to sin. The publican of our Lord's parable knew this, for he said, "God be merciful [propitiated] to me a sinner" (Luke 18: 13). God had to be propitiated inasmuch as sin was an outrageous challenge to His righteousness and holiness. He never hated us however. His heart was not estranged from man, for had it been He would never have sent His Son to be the propitiation, which was needed to meet the claims of His righteousness and holiness.

Do we understand then that reconciliation has more to do with our state before God than with the guilt of our sins?

It certainly has. It is worthy of note how the fact of our enmity comes into view when reconciliation is in question. The passage in 2 Corinthians 5 is an exception to this, but even here enmity, though not mentioned, is inferred, for it says, "old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." Old things are passed away wherever new creation comes to pass, though they are very much in evidence in the world at present. As new creation beings we are reconciled to God. Nevertheless we must not overlook the fact that "the blood of His cross" is the basis of the reconciliation, for it was there that sin met its judgment, and everything in us that was offensive and obnoxious to God was condemned. Our guilt is not overlooked, but even here it is more a question of the judgment of our sinful state than the expiation of our innumerable sins.

Why then, in Hebrews 2: 17, do we read of Christ as "a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people"?

Simply because the translators of the Authorized Version inserted here the wrong word. It is "to make **propitiation** for the sins of the people," as the Revised and other versions show. Under the law Aaron the high priest made atonement by sprinkling the blood of the sacrifice on the mercy-seat. The Lord Jesus has fulfilled the type, but on an infinitely grander scale. It is an interesting fact that in the Old Testament the word for "mercy-seat" is one closely allied to the word for **atonement**; whereas the word in the New Testament is as closely allied to **propitiation**. This shews that the propitiation of the New Testament embodies the idea of atonement, yet going beyond it. Reconciliation is to be distinguished from both, though not to be disconnected from either.

We have been dwelling on the fact that believers are reconciled now. What about the reconciliation of all things, spoken of in Colossians 1: 20?

That far-reaching reconciliation is coming in its season. You will notice that the verse limits the blessing to "things in earth, or things in heaven." The "things under the earth," of Philippians 2: 10, who are to bow at the name of Jesus, are not mentioned here. The blight of sin has affected certain parts of the heavens, through the fall of angelic beings. Wherever sin has been, there reconciliation is needed. A time is coming in which all that is evil will be swept into the place of judgment, there to lie under God's fiery indignation; and then all things purged and reconciled both on earth and in heaven will be delightful to God, and themselves delight in God.

The blood of His cross, that has already brought us into reconciliation, has power and value to accomplish even this.

There seems to be a sense in which the world is already reconciled, according to Romans 11: 15, What does that passage mean?

The whole passage has to be read and carefully considered if we would arrive at the Apostle's thought. He is discussing God's ways with Israel as a nation, showing how they have been set aside for the present in order that He may pursue His purpose of extending mercy to Gentiles. Throughout the dispensation of law, God concentrated His favour and His dealings exclusively upon Israel: they were in the light of His countenance, and the nations were left in their darkness — the darkness which they had chosen for themselves, according to Romans 1: 21. But with the advent of Christ and His rejection by Israel a great change in God's ways came to pass. Israel is fallen from their place of national favour,

and this has led to what is called "the riches of the world," in verse 12, and to "the reconciling of the world," in verse 15.

The "world" here has evidently the force of the Gentile world as distinguished from Israel. The reconciling has been brought to pass by the change in God's dealings which has led Him to set Israel aside from their special place of national favour, and to bring the Gentile world before Him for blessing. Formerly the position was that the Gentiles had deliberately turned their faces from God, and He had turned His from them. Now He has turned toward them; and as Paul elsewhere said, "The salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and . . . they will hear it" (Acts 28: 28). This dispensational reconciliation has taken place and Paul was the chosen servant, sent to offer salvation to the Gentile world.

Does the reconciliation which we receive today involve more than this?

Most evidently it does. When we receive it we "joy in God," as we are told in Romans 5: 11. This is a thing which the world cannot do, in spite of the fact that the mercy of God is active towards it in connection with the Gospel. When God gave His only-begotten Son He had the world in view' and love to the world was behind the gift. This dispensational reconciliation brings to all the ministry of reconciliation, of which 2 Corinthians 5 speaks; and that is not dispensational but intensely vital. Believers are really brought to God in righteousness and love, with every stain and discord removed, and every fear banished for ever.