

Reconciliation, Redux

“. . . to reconcile to Himself all things . . . by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross” (Colossians 1:20).

The terms used in theology aren't just big words. They convey essential and precious truths, truths that should transform us. And this term, reconciliation, is most important to every believer in Jesus. Reconciliation is central to our salvation, it's what makes salvation possible. We've studied reconciliation before. But we need to discuss it again, and that in depth.

But first, a couple of fundamental truths need to be reviewed. (i) God is “personal.” He's not a person. We are persons. But analogically, God has characteristics of personhood. And He created us in His image so that we are able to relate to Him, that is, be in personal relationship with Him. Not that He needs such a relationship, but we need it. Indeed, not only do we need it, it's the supreme blessing of being created: being in intimate fellowship with the infinitely glorious, transcendent Creator God. It's what we should desire more than anything. The 7th day, the Sabbath-day rest, was for such *koinonia*. The purpose or goal of salvation is the loving bestowal on us of a divine nature (while we remain creaturely) so that we can forever enjoy fellowship with the triune God.

(ii) Sin alienates. Sin isn't merely doing wrong things. Sin is deep and invisible, like the subsoil rhizomes of bamboo, or the subsoil mycelia of mushrooms; we don't see them but they're there and insidious. Sin corrupts us absolutely and thoroughly. Our desires, our motives, our values, our thoughts, our will—the totality of our being—is morally and spiritually corrupt. We do what we should not do and we don't do what we should do. Worse, listening to the evil one, Satan, we've become his possession, his servant, to do evil. And so we're alienated from a holy and good God. Not only alienated, but under condemnation because God is just.

And (iii), Do we understand that God cannot simply forgive sinners? We think (wrongly) that forgiveness is an emotion, so we suppose that God can do that. But forgiveness of sins would be a repudiation of justice. Justice demands that wrongs be punished. Justice requires that our moral debt be paid, and that in full. Even so, forgiveness of sins doesn't satisfy the need for righteousness, nor does it counter Satan's iron grip on humanity, nor does it defeat the curse of death.

The two basic, mutually opposing truths, (i) and (ii) above, necessitate reconciliation. We, sinners all, need to be reconciled to God so that creation blessing can occur. It's something only God can effect. Only God can deal with sin and with Satan, with moral debt, with guilt, and with the absence of requisite righteousness. And He did that, in love and mercy, and in goodness. It's the story of the Bible. It's the Gospel (see Colossians 1:19-23).

Now let's think about reconciliation. The need for it began in Genesis 3, when Adam's disobedience/rebellion occurred. In Romans 5:12, Paul states that the need for reconciliation began with Adam's sin and the consequent banishment of humanity from God's presence. Furthermore, reconciliation can only be effected if the curse of death is overcome. Death entered in Genesis 3. And reconciliation can only be effected if the Genesis 3 serpent who drags God's people into alienation is defeated. Genesis 3 is certainly the point at which the need for reconciliation began.*

The need for reconciliation however was heightened at two critical points in biblical history: (i) with the rebellion of humanity at the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11), when God abandoned the Gentile nations of earth. And (ii), the need for reconciliation for Israel likewise was amplified when that nation was cast into Exile, when God abandoned the Temple (Ezekiel 8-11). All Scripture is the story of God's initiative in bringing His beloved humans back to Himself for blessing and life.

* If alienation began in Genesis 3, what about Abel and Seth? And Enoch, and Noah and Job and Abraham? And Moses, Aaron, Joshua, David, Elijah and Elisha, Daniel, and the other prophets? These people—and many others—are said to have been righteous and walked with God. Abraham was actually a friend of God! And the Nation of Israel is said to be God's son, His bride, His people, His servant, the apple of His eye, and more; but not His enemy! I would argue that the reconciliation effected by the Son retroactively applied to these individuals and to that Nation.

Christianity is in essence a relationship. It's an intimate, personal relationship with the living God thru the Son. The Gospel invites us into this relationship. So reconciliation is the supreme and absolute necessity for those alienated from a holy God. It means that a debt that we could never have paid and which has dreadful consequences has been paid on our behalf so that there's now peace. And not just peace, but a beautiful, blessed, joy-filled, love relationship. We should understand reconciliation as very personal, affecting each one of us because each one of us has a sin nature and sins, and/or is indifferent to God if not flagrantly disobedient. If we treasure our relationship with God, then humbly being reconciled is the most precious thing there is. If we're proud, un-committed, or if the reconciliation is only something abstract and theological, our desperate individual need for reconciliation is totally lost.

The reconciliation that God effected is absolutely staggering. God applies or imputes or somehow grants to us His very own infinitely perfect righteousness. We become as righteous as God himself is! To have God's righteousness is to share His nature. We *must* be as righteous as God is to be in His holy presence.*

Do we grasp, even if only in some small way, how radical this is? The Pharisees believed they had to obey the Law to be righteous and so to be in God's presence. All religions believe we must DO something to be good enough for God. But we become reconciled to God NOT by anything we do, or anything we give to God, or . . . anything at all. But God does it all for us. It's all by grace, which means we don't deserve anything from Him but wrath. We need to meditate upon this again and again until it takes hold.

In 2 Corinthians verse 21, Paul states the essence of the Gospel, the belief that's necessary for *salvation*. But interestingly Paul says here that what we most importantly benefit from Christ's atoning sacrifice is not forgiveness of sins (as he repeatedly says elsewhere), but righteousness. Self-righteousness is deadly. It voids the Gospel. In the Church, there must be no mixing of self-righteousness with the righteousness that's ours from God as a gift.

We don't and can't fully take in the significance of reconciliation unless and until we first are gripped by the enormity of sin. Part of the problem with modern American Christianity is the near-universal absence of a conviction of sin. So there's no sense of alienation, no repentance, no gratitude, no love for Jesus, no life-change, and no understanding therefore of how central and deep reconciliation is to our salvation.

We should understand that reconciliation is only possible if there's first propitiation, and that requires crucifixion. Nobody today really understands Roman crucifixion. Yet, it's essential to our understanding of reconciliation. What historians have uncovered about it reveals how ghastly and cruel it was. Rome used it only for the most abhorrent of criminals, which informs us how deeply the leaders of Judea despised Jesus. The person to be crucified was first "scourged," and most didn't survive having their skin and muscles ripped off by fiendishly-made whips. The crucifixion itself was intended to produce maximum, relentless agony, not for hours but for days until death occurred. Victims were shamefully naked, bloody and in unimaginable pain. It was a public torture done deliberately to show how fierce Rome was as a conquering power.

So, why did Jesus have to be crucified? If death was necessary to satisfy atonement for sin, taking upon Himself the curse of death we deserve, why couldn't it be a quick, easy death? Why—of all possible forms of death—did it have to be such a horrible, violent, degrading death? Because propitiation and reconciliation demanded it. Because only crucifixion would satisfy God's perfect justice. And because God's transcendent love required it. This is so radical, let's think further about it.

* Scripture also commands us to live righteously (e.g., Romans 6:13). It's our responsibility to imitate God, so we must know what righteousness is and do it. Our motive is (or should be) love—God's love filling and empowering us. But that's not the righteousness that allows us to dwell in God's presence, which comes from God as a gift. Reconciliation requires righteousness as perfect as God's, and it can *only* come from God Himself (Romans 3:22a). In a sense, this need for righteousness is what drives all of Scripture.

The depth and offensiveness of human depravity, rebellion and sin escapes us. It's abstract for most of us. But it's all very real to God. Forgiveness is only possible if justice is served, and justice demands that near infinite wrongs require equivalent suffering. So the glorious, eternal Son, God Himself, had to suffer grievously. (We need to read between the lines of Philippians 2:6-8 to be gripped by what God did.) Did the Father really need to have the beloved Son suffer such agony to be satisfied? Can we understand that justice required it? The Son experienced not just "the penalty of sin" (another abstract term for us) but the horrible suffering that we deserve. And so propitiation was effected, thus making reconciliation possible.

I now ask, Why did God create such a world as this, with willful creatures who would offend His holiness with hate and rebellion and that would necessitate the torture and horrible suffering of the beloved Son? Because of love, that is, God's unique, transcendent Love. God's Love anticipates the future, when redeemed, sanctified and glorified creatures will enjoy blessing, joy and peace in communion with Himself forever. And that kind of love requires suffering to fulfill it. Let's understand something basic: There is no expression of love without some form of sacrifice, of suffering. The greater the love, the greater the self-sacrifice. It's the suffering that makes the love real. Reconciliation is not merely God's mental or emotional state; it's not merely His disposition toward us; it is, rather, the expression of an infinite kind of Love inherent to God (but that He shares with us thru the Spirit), love that is manifest by suffering. Thus, the cross.

And Satan had to be defeated. We can't comprehend the intense animosity Satan has for God. Satan's fury, poured out on the Son in the scourging and crucifixion of Jesus, was how Satan's wickedness was shown for what it was in reality: hatred of God. And by willingly suffering to show love and then coming back to life and being exalted, Jesus overcame Satan and justified the eternal end of Satan.* The curse of death had to be defeated too. Our participation in Jesus' death and resurrection overcome death for us. Our identification with Christ, our union with Him, means that we died with Him on the cross, so our sin nature is dead, our "old man" is dead. This was essential, because no one with a sin nature can be in God's holy presence and live. Reconciliation was costly. It deserves deep understanding and a response from us that's appropriate.

Reconciliation is not just another important theological word, one of many that don't matter to how we live in today's world. Reconciliation needs to be understood as intensely personal and life-changing. Our status has changed, from condemnation to life and blessing in fellowship with the living God, possible only because Christ changes us. Our response to reconciliation needs to be one of deep gratitude coupled to committed obedience to God, an obedience that despises sin and pursues sanctification, yielding to the Spirit for empowerment.**

If Christianity is (as it seems nowadays) a "pop" religion, a "my sins are forgiven and I'll not be in hell when I die and so I can live as I please" kind of religion, then reconciliation is irrelevant. The unbiblical, ungodly attitude that exists in our modern American churches, viz., that we're OK with God because we believe in Jesus (whatever "believe" means to us), so we have assurance of being in heaven regardless how we live, is ghastly wrong. But reconciliation, the core of the Gospel, gives the lie to all such religious nonsense. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5, "Be reconciled." It's an imperative, a command. It means that we are responsible for being in a saving relationship with God. It involves trusting in Jesus and all that He accomplished for us; it involves our being humble and receiving what God in grace has taken the initiative to do; and it involves loving God and all that biblical love entails. We need to be gripped by what God has done, reconciling us to Himself.

* In the Bible's meta-narrative of cosmic conflict, alienation is not merely rupture of a personal relationship. It's worse. It's God's enemy, the Serpent, thru deception seizing the entire human race. The "reconciliation" therefore is also more than restoring fellowship; thru Christ's victory over the Serpent at Calvary, God re-possessed His beloved people, His image.

** Reconciliation is not only a matter between us and God. A local body of believers is a corporate unity. A local church is not merely individuals meeting together for a religious purpose. It is a unity; all believers are joined together as one, in love for Christ and for each other. All members therefore must be in right relationship with God and in right relationship with each other. This means reconciliation must be constantly in play at a horizontal level. There is to be transcendent love not only for God but for each other as well. Otherwise, the local body gathers in vain.