

A BRIEF THEOLOGY OF RECONCILIATION

by Philip G. Ziegler

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us (2 Cor. 5:18-19).

Introduction

Among the various concepts and metaphors by means of which the reality of salvation is attested in Scripture, the language of “reconciliation” is notably prominent in traditional Protestant doctrine and continues to be so today. Its close association with ideas of atonement, justification, and forgiveness, as well as its suggestive personal, ethical, and political valences combine to recommend it.¹ The specific terminology of reconciliation is relatively rare in the New Testament, restricted to but a few places in the Pauline letter collection.² Yet its significance for grasping the force, the form, and the fruits of God’s saving action for us in Christ is prodigious.

What follows are but some few theological remarks on Paul’s testimony in Romans 5:10-11 and 2 Corinthians 5:18-21. The aim is simply to consider the nature of the divine *gift* of reconciliation and the Christian *ministry* or reconciliation to which it gives rise. Christian thinking about reconciliation rapidly—and rightly—spirals outward into

¹ Karl Barth set his own extensive account of salvation under the rubric of “The Doctrine of Reconciliation” in his *Church Dogmatics* IV.1–4, the programmatic introduction of which can be read in Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation* (London: Continuum/T&T Clark, 2004). Cf. Jan Milič Lochman, *Reconciliation and Liberation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), John W. de Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* (London: SCM, 2002), Michael Jesse Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, revised edition (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2009), and the essays collected in *The Theology of Reconciliation*, ed. Colin Gunton (London: Bloomsbury/T&T Clark, 2003). For a recent searching exploration of the theme of forgiveness and reconciliation in this relation by a Canadian theologian see Jon Coutts, *A Shared Mercy: Karl Barth on Forgiveness in the Church* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016).

² Rom. 5:10-11, 11:15; 1 Cor. 7:11; 2 Cor. 5:18-20; Eph. 2:16; Col. 1:20, 22. For discussion see Ernst Käsemann, “Some Thoughts on the Theme of ‘The Doctrine of Reconciliation in the New Testament,’” in *The Future of Our Religious Past: Essays in Honour of Rudolf Bultmann*, ed. J.M. Robinson, trans. C.E. Carlston and R.P. Scharlemann (London: SCM Press, 1971), 49-64.

ecclesial, ethical and political questions and affairs; in this it reflects the real dynamic of divine reconciliation itself, the movement and direction of which is certainly centrifugal. Yet perhaps for just this reason there is a particular value in concentrating for a moment upon the very heart of the matter, namely the gospel word that “while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son” (Rom. 5:10).

The Divine Gift of Reconciliation

But the free gift is not like the trespass . . . (Rom. 5:15)

The divine gift of reconciliation seeks and finds us in a situation of enmity and estrangement, which is to say, in a situation of hostility and opposition to God, both open and obscured. This situation bespeaks our captivity to the false lordships of Sin and Death, as well as our active and passive complicity in the disintegration of our own humanity under their sway. Reconciliation breaks in upon the disobedient, the faithless, those whose lives are *incurvatus in se* and so are loveless parables of contempt for God and neighbour. In short, “while yet sinners,” God’s reconciling love finds us (Rom 5:8). The motive and rationale for reconciliation lie solely and absolutely in God’s own sovereign loving will: the need is wholly ours; the reconciling initiative and power is wholly God’s. For reconciliation *is* an act of grace, a divine gift utterly incongruous with anything that might be owed, merited, or befitting, and so just the opposite of us “getting what we deserve.”³

God too is the unique *agent* of reconciliation. We are its recipients, those upon whom God acts. God reconciles; we are reconciled. The form of God’s reconciling act, as Paul stresses time and again, is the self-giving of the Son unto death on the cross: we are reconciled to God *by* the cross (Col. 1:22, Rom. 5:10, 2 Cor. 5:14, 19, 21). How does this event reconcile estranged humans to their God? Paul’s talk of reconciliation keeps close company with talk of Christ’s vicarious representation, of God’s forgiveness or non-imputation of sin, of divine justification, and of purification. Speaking as he is about “the

³ “The concept of revelation . . . emphasizes that God’s saving power is essentially the power of his love”—so Victor Furnish, *II Corinthians* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1984), 336. On the Pauline logic of “gift” and its radical account of the “incongruity of grace” see now exhaustively John M.G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015).

unspeakable” eschatological reality of salvation, Paul’s witness is rightly “metaphorical and indirect” as well as pluriform.⁴ Reconciliation is the work of a divine justice that makes for human peace and the work of a divine peace that delivers human justice. But for all the proper mystery of this reality, Paul’s testimony to it is not obscure: it is clear that God reconciles us by rectifying the old situation of estrangement and hostility by the advent of a new situation “in Christ” which at once supplants it objectively, and liberates us from our subjective entanglements in it. In the world now set to rights with God by God, the inhumanity and absurdity of our enmity is made patent precisely as that which God graciously nullifies for us. This is the work of the cross, a work whose wealth demands a manifold metaphorical witness.

God reconciles us *with God’s own self*. It is the relationship between God and the human creature which is the primary object of this act of divine grace. As Calvin explains, the resolution of the “quarrel between God and us” is ever the “main purpose of the Gospel.”⁵ Yet not only “we” but also “the world,” and indeed “all things,” are caught up in God’s reconciling action: reconciliation is a gift at once personal and global in scope and significance (2 Cor. 5:19; Col. 1:20). One of the wider aims of divine reconciliation is undoubtedly to end the mutual enmity among peoples, of which the division between Gentile and Jew is exemplary (Eph. 2:14-19). Yet, the rectification of all things has its origin and paradigm in the restoration of a right relation between God and human beings, that is, in a divine work of sheer goodness and mercy so disproportionate with the hostility and opposition that confronts it, so as to be its antithesis. God’s reconciling love does not work itself out within or according to existing “schemes”; rather, it breaks up and open all such existing schemes, contradicting, overthrowing, and displacing them (Gal. 3:28, 6:14; Eph. 2:14-16). This act of grace is so unconstrained and total, so unprecedented and powerful, that Paul is driven to speak of it as another act of divine creation (2 Cor. 5: 17).

Our reconciliation with God—like the “great turn of the ages” in the death and resurrection of Christ which accomplishes it—is “*the fact*”

⁴ See Charles B. Cousar, *A Theology of the Cross: The Death of Jesus in the Pauline Letters* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 84-5.

⁵ John Calvin, *The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians, and the Epistles of Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, ed. D.W. Torrance and T.F. Torrance, trans. T.A. Smail (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1964), 77.

from which all else follows.⁶ Expressed negatively, the gift of reconciliation brings our alienation from God to an end and releases us from its distorting effects; said positively, it establishes a new amity and humanizing peace with God. This peace is as secure as the grace that affords it is sovereign. And in it there is genuine rest and joyful assurance. Yet this peace is not idle. For reconciliation arises when God graciously repudiates the world that sin and enmity have made, displacing it and all its schemes with another world, i.e., the world of the Kingdom, that new creation in Christ. To be reconciled to God is to be set and to dwell in this new world, to orient ourselves to it, and to live in accord with the grain of its reality. Peace with God is *life* and so characterizes the manner of our active vocation. This new human life actively at peace with God is simply the “ministry of reconciliation.”

The Human Vocation of Reconciliation

For Christ's love lays claim to us . . . (2 Cor. 5:14)

The gift of reconciliation in Christ gives rise to the church's ministry of reconciliation because, as the Barmen Theological Declaration has it, through Christ “befalls us a joyful deliverance from the godless fetters of this world for a free, grateful service to his creatures.”⁷ And so grace makes us its free and joyful advocates and ambassadors: to be reconciled to God in Christ is to be conscripted to the cause of that very same reconciling power. Bonhoeffer observes in a similar vein that the relation of the Christian congregation to the world “is completely determined by God's relation to the world” and thus has as its “task and essence . . . to proclaim precisely to this world its reconciliation with God, and to disclose to it the reality of the love of God.”⁸ The gift of reconciliation founds, funds, and directs the ministry of reconciliation; it is its essential presupposition. And it does so without being merely occasional or

⁶ J. Louis Martyn, “Epistemology at the Turn of the Ages,” in *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 93.

⁷ https://www.ekd.de/english/barmen_theological_declaration.html. Glossing Paul's claim cited in the epigraph here, Furnish suggests that the force of the remark in 2 Cor. 5:14 is the same as Paul's claim elsewhere that the Christian life is one lived “under the dominion of grace” (Rom. 6:14)—Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 325.

⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. C.J. Green, trans. I. Tödt et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 66.

instrumental to it: even as it calls out and claims our active service, the gift of salvation is always also and fundamentally its own proper end.

The ministry envisaged encompasses both the effective proclamation of the gospel of reconciliation and the courageous practice of Christian lives whose very shape and substance attest the reality of that gospel.

First, it is the vocation of Christians to be *ambassadors* of the “word of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:19), which is to say, to be witnesses to the gospel word that is the “power for salvation” (Rom. 1:16). The announcement of such a word is not merely talk *about* reconciliation; it is *the very offer of* reconciliation by way of the gospel. In their efforts to recover and reform the preaching office, Protestant theologians of the sixteenth century stressed that it was the particular duty of ordered ministers “to apply to us the fruit of Christ’s death” through their preaching.⁹ Without derogation of that office, it can and must certainly be said that this apostolic responsibility properly belongs to the entire Christian community.¹⁰ Christian witness in all its varied forms and *fora* will be ambitious for one thing, namely, to make the gift of friendship with God in Christ known to all those to whom it has been given.

Second, it is the vocation of Christians to be *practitioners* of reconciliation. We may and must now live as friends of God; it is time—and there is time—for that. A full account of this life of friendship with God would be best developed in terms of the original vocabulary of the Christian life in the New Testament: faith, hope, love, freedom, obedience, humility, gratitude, joy, self-giving. Its contours might also be traced in relief from those features of the life of enmity with God opposed and annulled by the gift of reconciliation: a truly human existence now lived free from mistrust, suspicion, despair and hate, free from captivities of all kinds, free from thanklessness, self-obsessed pride, and self-belittling resentment, and free from our lording over others and suffering the illegitimate lordship of others.

Actually to live a life of friendship with God is the hope and prayer of individual Christians; it is also the hope and prayer of Christian communities. And it is the hope and prayer of Christians for the world—

⁹ Calvin, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, 79.

¹⁰ See Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 336. On the constitutive nature of proclamation to Paul’s own apostolic work, and by extension to the apostolic constitution of the church as such, see Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, *The Theology of the Second Letter to the Corinthians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 63.

faith rightly longs for all our familial, social, economic, and political relations to be drawn out of their continued futile, absurd, and unknowing enmity with God, and so also to become spheres where the practice of reconciliation—the performance of genuine human freedom before God and with one another—is found, welcomed, and celebrated. Crucially, in the context of Christian faith, such hope and prayer are not proxies for present action but rather themselves genuine acts—acts of invocation—which necessarily enjoin and enkindle all manner of other human action. Christians assume responsibility for those things for which they hope and pray, and so “act in accordance with their prayer.”¹¹ The mainsprings of all Christian social and political witness, service, and struggle lie here.

Two final observations in this regard—first, a full account of the proclamation and practice of our friendship with God would need to be set firmly in a pneumatological register. For both effective Christian witness and authentic Christian liberty are fruits of the Spirit and must be welcomed and acknowledged as such. Second, concern for the proclamation of the gospel of reconciliation and concern for the practice of reconciliation cannot in any way be played off against each other. For the word of reconciliation is the power at work in all such practice, even as the practice of reconciliation is eloquent testimony to the gospel message itself. It is with both words and deeds that Christians exercise their ministry of reconciliation to “call the world to the very different accounting which is only possible in Jesus Christ.”¹²

Conclusion

Be ye reconciled to God! (2 Cor. 5:20)

In pursuit of their ministry of reconciliation in the world, Christians must continually recall its centre and source in the astonishing work of God’s grace in Christ. For faith’s final interest does not rest in reconciliation as such, but in the Reconciler, of whose love and righteousness and mercy all enactments of creaturely reconciliation are but so many parables.¹³ In our thinking and speaking about reconciliation it is right and necessary that the theological register encompass and illumine both the personal

¹¹ Karl Barth, *The Christian Life*, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981), 205.

¹² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, 77.

¹³ Cf. Colin Gunton, “Towards a Theology of Reconciliation,” in *The Theology of Reconciliation*, 174.

and the political. For the doctrine of reconciliation is a signal instance of what Johann Baptist Metz has called “dogma as a dangerous memory”—dangerous precisely as its eschatological content “threatens the present and calls it into question because it remembers a future that is still outstanding.”¹⁴ That future is one in which the ministry of reconciliation is finally made redundant by the triumph of a creaturely peace that arises from, bespeaks, and rejoices in the lordship of Christ, the sovereign reign of the gracious God of the gospel. In hope during time that remains, the ministry of reconciliation is “our daily bread,” as Taizé’s Brother Roger once remarked.¹⁵ So it is that the grateful witness and service of the *ecclesia militans* continues since, as Calvin observes, “the work of the Gospel ambassadors is perpetual for the Gospel must be proclaimed ceaselessly in the Church to the end of the world and it cannot be preached without a promise of the forgiveness of sins.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, trans. D. Smith (London: Burns & Oates, 1980), 200.

¹⁵ At the opening of the Taizé Church of Reconciliation in 1962; see http://www.taize.fr/en_article14240.html.

¹⁶ Calvin, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, 80.

