

The Work and Message
of
Reconciliation

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The apostle Paul's (and every true disciple's)

Ministry (or work) and Word (or Message) of Reconciliation

Scripture references are to the New King James Version (NKJV)
and the
Complete Jewish Bible (CJB)

Introduction

The apostle Paul uses the terms 'reconcile' and 'reconciliation' in several of his letters to Gentile (mainly non-Jewish) Christians. In Ephesians 2:16 and Colossians 1:20 we find the word 'reconcile', whereas in Romans 5:11 and 2 Corinthians 5:18-19, Paul uses 'reconciliation'. In Romans and in 2 Corinthians, he is referring to reconciliation between **God and mankind** in a broad kind of way. Later, in Ephesians 2:12-15 Paul explains that, through our Lord Jesus, God pointedly **also enabled the Gentiles to be reconciled** to Himself, doing away with a barrier between them and the "Circumcised" (the Jews) ; thus having made peace between them, even having created "a new man" ("new humanity", CJB) out of the two groups of believers. In 2 Cor. 5:18 (NKJV), Paul speaks of the "ministry of reconciliation", while in verse 19 he uses "word of reconciliation". Instead of the term 'ministry', some versions of the Bible (e.g. CJB) use the term 'work'. Likewise, 'word' may also be rendered 'message'(CJB).

Unger's Bible Dictionary (p.914) explains **reconciliation** as follows:

In the New Testament, it [reconciliation] possesses the idea 'to change thoroughly from one position to another' (Eph. 2:16; Col. 1:20-21). Reconciliation, therefore, means that something or someone is completely altered to a required standard (cf. Rom. 5:6-11). By the death of Christ, the world is changed in its relationship to God. Man is reconciled to God, but God is not said to be reconciled to man. By this change lost humanity is rendered savable [see Rom. 5:9 NKJV]. As a result of the changed position of the world through the death of Christ, the divine attitude toward the human family can no longer be the same. God is enabled to deal with lost souls in the light of what Christ has accomplished. Although this seems to be a change in God, it is not a reconciliation; it is rather a 'propitiation'. God places full efficacy in the finished work of Christ and accepts it. Through His acceptance of it He remains righteous and the justifier of any sinner who believes in Jesus as his reconciliation. When an individual heart sees and trusts in the value of Christ's atoning death, he becomes reconciled to God,

hostility is removed, friendship and fellowship eventuate.

'Reconciliation' is a word made up from the prefix 're-' and 'conciliation'. 'Conciliation' is a Latin word meaning the making of peace. 'Re-' in this instance means going, or having gone back, to a previous state, the state of peace or righteousness, that originally existed between God, on the one hand, and on the other hand creation, over which God gave dominion (Genesis 1:28) to our ancestors, Adam and Eve. Re-conciliation therefore indicates that peace has been restored or has returned.

Paul's letters to the believers in the Lord Jesus in Rome, Corinth and Colosse

In the opening verse of Romans 5, Paul exhorts the Roman believers (the Christian community in Rome, the capital city of the Roman Empire): “So, since we have come to be considered righteous by God because of our trust, let us continue to have *shalom* [peace, well-being, wholeness] with God through *Yeshua* [Jesus in Hebrew] the Messiah [Christ].”(CJB) The reason Paul wrote to the Romans saying “we” is that these believers, the Corinthians, and every other community of Gentile Christians he wrote to, represent all of mankind with at least a non-Jewish, or even pagan, background. Ever since Paul's letters, we, along with all other Gentiles, are considered righteous as long as we believe in **what Jesus accomplished, that is**, our righteousness before God the Father, through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross.

Rom. 5:8 (NKJV): “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Verse 9 (CJB): “Therefore, since we have now come to be considered righteous by means of His bloody, sacrificial death, how much more will we be delivered [saved] through Him from the anger of God's judgement!”. Rom. 5:10 (NKJV): “For if **when we were enemies we were reconciled to God** through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.” Verse 11 (CJB) : “And not only will we be delivered in the future, but we are boasting about God right now, because He has acted through our Lord *Yeshua* the Messiah, through whom we have already received that reconciliation.” In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, the apostle again affirms that it was through Jesus that God the Father reconciled all of humanity to Himself. “Therefore, if anyone is united with the Messiah, he is a new creation – the old has passed; look, what has come is fresh and new! And it is all from God, who through **the Messiah has reconciled us to Himself** and has given us the work [or ministry] of that reconciliation, which is that God

in the Messiah was reconciling mankind to Himself, not counting their sins against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.” (2 Cor. 5:17-19 CJB)

Also reassuring is Colossians (1:19-23 NKJV) : “For it pleased the Father that in Him [the Son of His love, v. 13] all the fullness should dwell, and by Him [Jesus] to reconcile all things to Himself, whether things on earth or things in heaven, **having made peace through the blood of His cross.** And you [believers in Colosse], who were once alienated and and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight – if indeed you continue in faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which was preached to every creature under heaven, of which I, Paul, became a minister.”

Reconciliation between God and Mankind

How exactly did God undertake to restore peace between Himself and all of sinful mankind? As early as Genesis, God began to reveal a tremendous plan – a plan that would, from Gen. 3 onward, take thousands of years to be fulfilled. In 3:15 God declares that there is to be animosity between good and evil, and that the 'seed', or 'descendant' of Eve, meaning Jesus, God's only-begotten Son, will 'bruise', meaning ultimately eliminate, the 'seed' or continuity of Satan and all his evil ways and works. With Noah in chapter 9, and later Abraham in Gen. 17:6-7, God revealed more and more of His determination to re-establish His loving relationship with, ultimately, all of humanity. See also Gen. 12:3, 22:18, 26:4 ; and Galatians 3:8. He did this by means of **covenants** with these ancestors at least two thousand years before the Lord Jesus was born, without sin, into the human race. In the Bible, a covenant, indicating a contract or testament, is always initiated by God (not by people), its purposes are declared by God and its conditions are set by God.

Many hundreds of years after Noah and Abraham, having delivered the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt through Moses, God initiated another covenant, the Mosaic covenant, also known as the Old Covenant. This covenant and all the history, prophets and other writings which followed it are known to Christians as the Old Testament (O.T.). In the O.T., prophets like Isaiah (59:20-21) foretold the coming of Jesus, the Messiah (or Christ, both meaning 'anointed one'), hundreds of years ahead of time. See also Romans 11:26-27 and Galatians 4:4

in the New Testament (N.T.). The covenants in the O.T. were all undertaken by God (not by people) in connection with His chosen people, the Israelites, later known as the Jews. As we noted above in Gen. 22:18, 26:4 and Gal. 3:8, it would be through the Jews that ultimately **the whole world would be blessed and reconciled** with their Creator and Father in heaven.

What did a Messiah, an 'anointed one' have to do with God's plan to restore peace with all of mankind? The Messiah was to be anointed like king David in the O.T. (1 Samuel 16:12-13; 2 Sam. 5:2-4), but not just as another 'king David' (Is. 11:1, Jeremiah 23:5-6); He would also emphasise the **continuity between God's promises in the O.T. and their fulfilment** in the new covenant in the N.T. See Acts 13:22-23. The last covenant according to God the Father's plan came into being (Matthew 26:28, Luke 22:19-20) when God the Son came to earth as Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish Messiah. The gospel stories in the N.T. leave no doubt about God's love for the Jews to begin with, but also for the Gentiles (Matt. 12:17-18; Luke 2:28-32; Rom. 1:16) Through Jesus the Christ and the new covenant in His blood, **God's mercy and grace reached out to all the world** (John 3 : 16-18) as never before.

The Gentiles (a term of Latin origin simply meaning 'nation' or 'pagan') for the most part Greek-speaking pagans, **were clearly included by God** in His plan of making peace, by drawing them into the truths of the gospel (derived from Old English *godspel*, meaning 'good news'). The gospel stories make it clear that Jesus was initially sent to proclaim the good news to "the house of Israel" (Matt. 15:24), i.e. His own 'covenant people', and that He also instructed His twelve disciples to do so (Matt. 10:6). However in for example Matt. 15:21-2 (referring to the same event as does Mark 7:24-30), and John 10:16, we find that essentially, **God's mercy and grace and the new covenant were not limited to the Jews**. In John, the Lord refers to "other sheep" who "will hear My voice." The Samaritans, neighbours to the Jews, too, were shown mercy by Jesus (Luke 17:15-19) and were taught the truth about God and worship as He did to the woman at the well in John 4:21-26...29-39. The demon-possessed men in Matt. 8 (or the man in Mark 5) were also more than likely not Jewish, yet the Lord graciously and quickly delivered them.

Ephesians 2 : Reconciliation between Jew and Gentile

God the Holy Spirit directed the apostles Peter, Paul and others to write their letters to various communities of believers, after He explicitly directed **the**

apostle Paul to minister to the Gentiles: Acts 9:15; 13:44-48. Since the days of the book of Acts, the unfolding of God's plan is in a phase known as the 'church age.' While Paul became the champion of God's work and message of reconciliation with the Gentiles, we find that Peter, in Acts 10:17 to 11:18, in his wonderful encounter with the Roman centurion Cornelius, was also involved in this great and exciting work of God.

In Ephesians 2:12 (CJB), Paul pointed out to the Gentile believers in Ephesus, a prominent city in Asia Minor within the Roman Empire, that at one time “You were estranged from the national life of Isra'el. You were foreigners to the covenants embodying God's promise. You were in this world without hope and without God.” Verse 13: “But now in Christ **you who once were far off have been brought near** by the blood of Christ.” Being 'brought near' by Jesus' sacrifice indicates that our Father's plan gives tremendous hope to all of non-Jewish mankind! Sooner or later every pagan nation is to be drawn into the love of God the Father through the blood and teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is what is at the heart of the 'work and message of reconciliation' through the preaching of the gospel to every nation on earth.

By being the Jewish Messiah to the **whole** world, Jesus did away with what the N.T. calls the 'enmity' or spiritual separation between Jews and Gentiles. Ephesians 2:14 (NKJV) points out that “**For He [Jesus] Himself is our peace**, who has made both [Jews and Gentiles] one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation,...”. Verse 15 (CJB) states that God created “a single new humanity” from the two peoples, namely Israel and the “strangers” (v. 19), in order “that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity.” Verse 18 confirms that the enmity between the Jews and Gentiles was done away with in that “... through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.” The letter to the Romans uses two olive trees as symbols to show that believers with a Gentile background are like a wild olive tree grafted into an older olive tree representing the Jews. As a result, the reconciled, combined groups of believers now share the spiritual “rich root” (Rom. 11:17 CJB) of the original 'tree'.

As children of God, we are peace-makers like Jesus

During His ministry on earth, the Lord Jesus Himself referred to reconciliation in terms of peace-making: “How blessed are those who make peace! – for they will be called sons of God.” (Matt. 5:9 CJB). Our Redeemer's 'last will and testament'

was, "Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you." (John 14:27a NKJV) **He taught about peace, as well as supernaturally made peace** between God the Father and mankind through His sacrifice on the cross. In that God is a peace-maker through Jesus, so are His children as we take part in His 'family business', peace-making being the "birthright and birth-assignment of God's sons and daughters." (NKJV). Paul wrote to fellow believers, "If possible, and to the extent that it depends on you, live in peace with all people." (Rom. 12:18 CJB)

Being a peace-maker is of course strongly supported by the Bible's declaration that God is love, and since by His Holy Spirit He produced the whole of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16a), therefore the very existence of Scripture represents a **loving move by God toward reconciliation** with, and ultimate restoration of, mankind. Without God's Word we would not know about reconciliation, because we would probably not even know about God Himself ! All we know or seek to know concerning God is found, first and foremost, in His Word. As we saw earlier, God particularly revealed Himself to mankind by means of covenants, besides other ways, even before Moses began writing the first five books of the O.T. The continuity of God's Fatherly, loving involvement in the whole of the biblical record, all 66 books of it, is sometimes called 'the history of salvation.'

How are we as God's children to actively conduct ourselves as His peace-makers? The answer is to see ourselves as, first of all, disciples (followers, learners) of the Lord Jesus Christ who, in His own words, did "...what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner." (John 5:19b NKJV) Also in John, He said things like "I am the vine and you are the branches. Those who stay united with Me and I with them, are the ones who bear much fruit; because apart from Me you can't do a thing." (John 15:5 CJB) So quite simply, the most straightforward way to be a peace-maker, a carrier of *shalom*, is to **study the life of our Master and how He interacted with people** according to the will of His Father. The Lord Jesus' life was characterised by mercy and forgiveness. His example and teaching about forgiveness are found in all four gospels, and the apostle Paul refers to it several times in 2 Corinthians. There would have been no reconciliation between mankind and God if He had not intended to forgive in terms of our His great plan described in, for example, Eph. 1:3-10 with emphasis on v.7 (NKJV / CJB).

Along with the apostle Paul who called himself a minister (a 'servant' in the CJB) of the gospel in Col. 1:23, we likewise proclaim the gospel and the love and mercy and peace of God by being a disciple of Jesus. As He made clear, God

encourages us to be peace-makers, yet we can do nothing without Jesus, who is one with our Father (John 10:30 NKJV). Matthew the former tax-collector was anything but a peace-maker or a follower of Jesus until He said to him “Follow me!” (Matt. 9:9 CJB). Let us allow our Father, by His Holy Spirit, to lead us step by step into becoming a peace-maker like our unique and precious Prince of peace (Isaiah 9:6); Acts 5:31 (NKJV).

Note: Related to 'reconciliation' is the term 'atonement'. The New King James version uses it only in the Old Testament. The much older King James version, published in 1611, uses reconciliation in 2 Cor. 5:18-19 and Hebrews 2:17, and atonement only in Rom. 5:11.

Sources of reference:

New King James Bible, *Spirit-filled Life* / South African edition, 2008

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