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Reconciliation

(An exposition of 2 Corinthians v. 18-21)

BY THE REV. J. R. W. STOTT, M.A.

NONE of our Thirty-nine Articles expounds the Atonement, and that part of Article 2 which refers to it causes embarrassment to many who are required to give their assent to it. It states that the divine-human Christ "very God and very Man . . . truly suffered, was crucified, dead and buried, to reconcile his Father to us. . . ." All would be agreed that the last phrase is not literally Biblical, and many would go further and deny even that its sense is Biblical. That there is a reconciliation between God and man, and that this reconciliation is effected through the Cross is common ground. But who reconciles? and who is reconciled? and exactly how is the reconciliation achieved? These are controversial questions, upon which this passage throws some light.

We may conveniently begin by observing that "reconciliation" is one of many metaphors used in the Bible to describe and illustrate different aspects of our salvation. It may be helpful to contrast it in particular with "justification" and with "redemption". Redemption is a commercial metaphor and belongs to the market-place. Justification is a legal metaphor, and belongs to the law-courts. Reconciliation is a personal metaphor and belongs to the drawing-room. It is the restoration of fellowship between two enemies. In redemption man is regarded as a slave, in bondage. In justification man is regarded as a prisoner, guilty and condemned. In reconciliation man is regarded as an enemy, estranged and alienated. In redemption God is the Divine Benefactor who by payment of a price releases the slave. In justification God is the Divine Judge who by the death of His Son pronounces the prisoner just. In reconciliation God is the Divine Friend who by the removal of barriers restores the enemy to fellowship. In all three metaphors the grim fruits of sin are exposed. It is from the subjection of sin that we need redemption; it is from the condemnation of sin that we need justification; it is from the alienation of sin that we need reconciliation. Indeed, one may detect here three stages in our salvation. God first sets us free from the thralldom of sin (redemption); then He declares us righteous in Christ (justification); and thus He restores us to fellowship with Himself (reconciliation).

In this metaphor of reconciliation, and in all four passages in which it is elaborated in the New Testament (Rom. v. 10-11; 2 Cor. v. 18-20; Eph. ii. 11-22 and Col. i. 20-21) the particularly baneful influence of sin which is exposed is its disruptive effect. Sin is seen not now as enslaving and condemning us but as estranging us from God and from each other. Sin creates disharmony. Sin erects barriers. Sin breeds conflict. For sin is self-centredness. God on the other hand is a God of peace. It is He who restores fellowship, who brings music into a discordant world, who reconciles. The Biblical doctrine includes the

reconciliation of God to man and man to God, of men to one another, and of the whole universe to God. The subject is too big to be treated exhaustively in one article. We shall concentrate on the reconciliation effected between man and God. This is the "atonement" (Rom. v. 11), which God achieves and man receives, and by which God and sinners are "at one".

St. Paul makes three statements in 2 Cor. v. 18-20 concerning this reconciliation.

(1) THE AUTHOR OF THE RECONCILIATION IS GOD

"All is of God" (18). God is the creator in the "new creation" (17). Every explanation and interpretation of the Atonement must begin here. Reconciliation is not a lucky accident, as if men happen to find themselves restored to the divine favour. Reconciliation is not a human achievement, as if men take the initiative to reconcile God to themselves and themselves to God. Reconciliation is not an arbitrary intervention by Christ, as if He undertook to reconcile men to God when God was not prepared to do so. "All is of God." It is true that in 1 Pet. iii. 18 we are told that "Christ suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God". But it is equally true, and less liable to misunderstanding, to say (Heb. ii. 10) that God had set His heart on "bringing many sons to glory" through Christ, the pioneer of our salvation. Again, Paul could write in Eph. ii. 16 that it was Christ's purpose to "reconcile us both (sc. Jew and Gentile) to God in one body through the cross", but he could also write in Col. i. 19-20 that it was the pleasure of the Divine Fulness not only to dwell in Him but also through Him to reconcile all things to Himself.

All the initiative is God's. In 2 Cor. v. 18-20, there are seven main verbs describing the activity of God, and the subject of each verb is God. God "reconciled us to Himself" (18), "gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (18), "was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself" (19), refused to "impute their trespasses to them" (20), "committed to us the message of reconciliation" (20), "makes His appeal through us" (20) and "made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us" (21).

The explanation of this divine initiative is grace, the undeserved, undesired love of God. God loves us not because we are lovely but because He is love. His love is aroused not by its object but by itself. "God commends His love towards us, in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Rom. v. 8). True, God is a God of wrath as well as a God of love. Further, His wrath rests as implacably on sin as His love rests tenderly on the sinner. But the God of wrath and the God of love are the same God. We are not to think that the God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath, and that the God of the New Testament is a God of love; that the God of the Jews is a God of wrath and that the God of Jesus is a God of love; that God the Father is a God of wrath and that God the Son is a God of love. No. The God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament, the God of the Jews and the God of Jesus are the same God of wrath and of love. God the Father and God the Son are two persons in the same Godhead of wrath and of love. The God whose wrath abides on sin acts in love

towards the sinner. The New Testament writers find no contradiction here. They are not squeamish about writing of His love and of His wrath in the same sentence. "We were by nature children of wrath, . . . but God, who is rich in mercy, for His great love wherewith He loved us . . ." (Eph. ii. 3-4). "God commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. Much more then, being now justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him" (Rom. v. 8-9). It is the God who cannot come to terms with our sins who comes to our rescue in Christ. "All is of God." The desire to reconcile, the thought to reconcile, the plan and the means are all of God. "All is of God. The only thing of my very own which I contribute to my redemption is the sin from which I need to be redeemed" (William Temple).

(2) THE AGENT OF THE RECONCILIATION IS CHRIST

"All is of God, who through Christ reconciled us to Himself" (18). "It pleased the fulness of God to dwell in Him and to reconcile through Him" (Col. i. 19-20). But how did the agent of the reconciliation do His work and complete His task? It is here that misunderstandings and disagreements begin.

The need for reconciliation is sin, and its consequent alienation of the sinner from God. This alienation is not merely a moral experience but a judicial sentence. The sinner is not just estranged through his own folly but banished by God's command. The barrier to fellowship is therefore not only, nor even primarily, man's pride and selfwill, but God's wrath. In His love for the sinner God could yet not overlook the sin which was the object of His wrath. In His wrath towards sin He could yet not judge the sinner who was the object of His love. How could His love issue in forgiveness? How could His wrath not issue in judgment? There was only one way. He must remove or "cover" the sin which as the object of His wrath was the barrier to fellowship. This is the "propitiation", where the Hebrew "make atonement" is to put away sin. How did He cover sin? St. Paul declares in this passage two complementary truths:

(a) *God refused to impute our sins to us*

The second phrase in verse 19 explains the first. The first phrase is a general statement that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself". The second phrase makes it clear that the only means by which He could achieve His purpose was by refraining from counting men's trespasses against them. "If Thou, Lord, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?" (Ps. cxxx. 3). "Enter not into judgment with Thy servant: for in Thy sight shall no man living be justified" (Ps. cxliii. 2). For God to mark and impute sins would spell judgment. Reconciliation begins with God's refusal to lay our sins to our charge.

(b) *God laid our sins on Christ*

To use St. Paul's own expression, "He made Him (who knew no sin) to be sin for us" (21). The two expressions are complementary. Our reconciliation arises not only from God's negative refusal, but also from His positive resolve. The sins He forbore to lay to our charge

He laid upon Christ. So completely did Christ identify Himself with the sins of the world He had come to save that He could be described as having been "made sin". The expression is equivalent to that employed by Peter when He writes: "Who His own self bare our sins in His own body on the tree" (1 Pet. ii. 24). The idea of sinbearing is not uncommon in the Old Testament. "If a soul sin and commit any of these things which are forbidden . . . he is guilty and shall bear his iniquity" (Lev. v. 17). That is, he shall take the consequences and suffer the penalty of his sins. In reference to the sin offering it is written: "God hath given it you to bear the iniquity of the congregation, to make atonement for them before the Lord" (Lev. x. 17), and of the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement it is said: "The goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities" (Lev. xvi. 22). But since "the blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sins" (Heb. x. 4), the coming of a Suffering Servant of the Lord is prophesied who should "bear their iniquities" and on whom the Lord would lay "the iniquity of us all" (Is. liii. 11, 6). Whatever the possible immediate reference of this prophecy, it is clearly applied to Jesus by Himself and the apostles. Peter quotes the chapter no less than five times in 1 Pet. ii. 21-25, and one of his reminiscences in this passage is in v. 24: "Who His own self bare our sins . . ." (cf. Heb. ix. 28, "He was once offered to bare the sins of many").

This then is also St. Paul's meaning. He knew no sin; He was made sin. He had no sin of His own; He was made sin with our sins. They were imputed not to us but to Him; they were laid not to our charge but to His.

On the cross Jesus not only bore our sins but perfected His righteousness. The cross was the climax of His life of obedience. To look at the cross is to see both our sin and His righteousness. If by faith we are "in Christ", united to Him, a mysterious and marvellous exchange takes place. We lose our sins which He bore on the cross, and we gain His righteousness which He perfected on the cross. He takes our sins from us, and He gives His righteousness to us. All the benefits of what He did and all the merit of what He is become ours "in Him". We are "justified in Christ" (Gal. ii. 17) and "Christ is made unto us righteousness" (1 Cor. i. 30).

This is the means by which God "has reconciled the world to Himself through Christ". He has removed the barriers to fellowship by not imputing our sins to us, by making Christ sin for us and by making us God's righteousness in Christ. Because Christ bore our sin and our curse (Gal. iii. 13) and we have become His righteousness, we are acceptable to God in Him. When God reconciles He does not just persuade the sinner to lay down the arms of his rebellion; He puts away his sin through Christ and clothes him with righteousness in Christ so that He can receive him into favour and into fellowship. In a word, when God reconciles the world to Himself, He reconciles Himself to the world.

(3) THE AMBASSADOR OF THE RECONCILIATION IS MAN

" . . . and gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (18). The reconciliation is from God through Christ to us, to proclaim to others.

“ So then we are ambassadors for Christ ” (20). St. Paul uses the regular word employed in the Greek-speaking world to describe the emperor's legate. He calls himself a legate in the Kingdom of God, an accredited representative of the Emperor Jesus. The reference is primarily to the apostles and to the ministry of the New Covenant whose glorious superiority to the ministry of the Old Paul has elaborated in chapter 3 of this epistle. Nevertheless, these words may be applied to the duty of the whole Church.

God is not content with devising and effecting our reconciliation. He also makes provision for its promulgation. Its heralds are mortal men. He gives us the reconciliation itself ; He gives us the ministry of reconciliation (18) ; and He gives us the message of reconciliation (19). Whereas He made His peace with us through Christ, He makes His appeal to others through us (20). For our sake He made Christ sin ; but for Christ's sake He makes us ambassadors. The business of the Christian minister is not just to lead the worship, to comfort the sad, to shepherd the flock and to teach the faithful, but to implore men and women to be reconciled to God. Our message is a declaration first : “ All is of God. God has acted in Christ. God has reconciled the world to Himself. God has not imputed your trespasses to you. God has made Christ sin ”. Then it becomes an urgent invitation : “ We beseech you, in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God ”.

The transformation is complete. The rebel who has become a friend, becomes his former enemy's ambassador. Once we are “ in Christ ” for salvation, we are “ for Christ ” for service. Although God is the author of our reconciliation, and Christ is its agent, we poor, sinful, stupid, stammering mortals are its privileged ambassadors.

The Incarnation and the Bible

A SYMPOSIUM EDITED BY THE REV. G. W. BROMILEY,
M.A., Ph.D., D.Litt.

INTRODUCTION

IT may be remembered that in the last issue of *The Churchman* it was suggested that there should be further discussion of section iv of the article on the Authority of Scripture in *The New Bible Commentary*. The main drift of this section is to the effect that the problem of the Bible should be “ studied in the light of the similar problem of the incarnation ”, and that “ with the incarnation as our guide, it may well be that the way will open up to a truer and fuller understanding, one which is orthodox, and which safeguards the authority and integrity of the Scriptures, not in content only but also in historical form ”. Contributions have now been invited and submitted by three theological teachers, in which there is a preliminary discussion and development of the comparison. Rather strangely, attention focuses on the objective