

Session One: Bible/Biblical Theology  
 TOWARDS A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF RECONCILIATION:  
 CONNECTING PAUL'S CONCERN FOR RECONCILIATION WITH THE THEOLOGY OF  
 RECONCILIATION  
 IN THE  
 GOSPELS OF JOHN AND MATTHEW  
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There is an increasing awareness that the contemporary Christian perception of Paul's theology is heavily influenced by Luther's reading of Paul. A rethinking needs to occur not only in Pauline, but in NT theology as a whole, also regarding the issue of reconciliation. Reconciliation is not only a matter between God and human individuals, but between human individuals themselves and *at the same time* between them and God. John 20:23 affirms Paul (2 Cor 5:14-21) in that Christ's followers are entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation and forgiveness.

Seeing that this is the only commission that the resurrected Johannine Christ gives to his disciples, we can even speak of the primacy of this ministry in the gospel of John. Matthew 18:21-35 shows that forgiveness in human relationships, while not being a condition to receive God's grace, is a necessary fruit of accepting God's forgiveness in order to attain full reconciliation with God in the day of judgement. Putting the pieces together, we can see that Paul and John both see reconciliation in human relationships at the heart of Christian life, while Matthew even gives it eschatological significance. From a biblical theological perspective, the prevalence of this issue in the NT shows that Matthew's voice cannot simply be dismissed as an isolated "works righteousness" perspective.

### *Introduction*

31 October is a special date for the church. On 31 October 1517, Martin Luther posted his 95 theses in front of the All Saints' Church in Wittenberg, an event which is commonly seen as the inauguration of the Protestant reformation. Justification by grace through faith, *sola gratia, sola fide* have been key words of the Reformation. However, the churches of the Reformation have ever since been accused of neglecting human responsibility on the way of salvation. This criticism can now draw on more supportive arguments developed by the so-called "New Perspective on Paul". Recent research, spearheaded by E.P. Sanders and Krister Stendahl (see Sanders 1977; Stendahl 1977), questions whether Luther's interpretation of Paul's theology was really correct. Luther played the gospel off against the law, as if they were good and evil, but the above mentioned research shows that Paul had a fairly positive overall assessment of the law. This has implications for our understanding of justification and sanctification. As we will see, the terms "justification" and "reconciliation" are closely connected in Pauline theology. Therefore, in light of these findings, we need to reconsider our understanding of reconciliation. The purpose of this paper in particular is to emphasize the connection between divine-human and human-human reconciliation.

After some remarks about Paul's theology of reconciliation in 2 Corinthians, I will move on to discuss what the evangelists John and Matthew have to say about the issue at hand. I will close with a biblical-theological synthesis of my findings.

### *Reconciliation in 2 Cor 5:11–21*

This is not the right place for an in-depth exegesis of this passage. Another conference paper will cover this. Let me just make a few remarks regarding the interpretation of this passage. One of the difficult questions is how to understand the first person plural pronouns (“we”, “us”) that we find in the text. I would interpret them in the way that Paul primarily speaks about himself, but he also tries to include his audience. The ministry of reconciliation described in 2 Cor 5:18 is therefore not only given to Paul (who had issues with the church in Corinth), but also to his audience. According to 2 Cor 5:19, the consequence of being reconciled to Christ is that the word of reconciliation is entrusted to every Christian, i.e. reconciliation is meant to be passed on. The words used for reconciliation in this passage are all derived from the verb καταλλάσσω. This word comes from the diplomatic field and usually describes human-human relationships.<sup>1</sup> With Paul, we can see a change in the use of these terms. In 2 Cor 5:18–20, Paul applies the term also to the relationship between God and humanity. Even compared to hellenistic Judaism, it is a novel use of the term that Paul describes God as taking the initiative in reconciliation. In hellenistic Judaism, it is assumed that a human request for reconciliation still precedes God's move toward reconciliation.<sup>2</sup> For Paul, it is no longer humankind that begs God for reconciliation, but it is God who makes the first step.

It would go too far to say, however, that humans are not involved in the process of reconciliation with God. Reconciliation, by its nature, is a two-sided process. Certainly, humankind is the party in need of reconciliation, and not God, because humankind has sinned against God and not the other way around. It is also granted that God takes the initiative in reconciliation, as outlined above. There is some argument whether the word πᾶς (*all*) in 2 Cor 5:15 as well as in Rom 5:18 describes that all humankind will eventually be reconciled to God. (This position is taken by Adam 2009, 334–336). Following these verses, there can be no doubt that reconciliation with

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<sup>1</sup> The word group δια/καταλλάσσω describes “mediation of a positive change in a negatively charged relationship, as in the case of amnesty” (“die Vermittlung einer positiven Veränderung ... eines negativ belasteten Verhältnisses im Sinne der Amnestie”), Link and Breytenbach (2010, 1773). It belongs to the word field of diplomacy. It is not a religious word; it is not even used to translate the Hebrew kpr (*to atone*) in the LXX, Link and Breytenbach (see 2010, 1777). However, it is occasionally used to describe the relationship between humans and God in hellenistic Jewish literature, see 2 Macc 1:5; 7:33; 8:29, and Link and Breytenbach (2010, 1777).

<sup>2</sup> As an example, see 2 Macc 8:29: “When they had done this, they made common supplication and implored the merciful Lord to be wholly reconciled with his servants.” (NRSV) Link and Breytenbach (For further explanation, see 2010, 1778).

God can potentially be experienced by everyone. However, it does not follow from this that humans are merely passive recipients of reconciliation. It is necessary to point out the striking verb form καταλλάγητε in 2 Cor 5:20. This is an aorist passive imperative, “be reconciled!”. So, the primary active person in reconciliation is certainly God, as pointed out above. However, while being in the passive, the verb is still an imperative, therefore asking the audience to somehow become involved in reconciliation. Moreover, Rom 5:17 says that “if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more *those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness* will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ” (NRSV, emphasis added). So, the gift of righteousness, and thus the gift of reconciliation, needs to be *received* (λαμβάνοντες) by humankind. Note that this is an active form of λαμβάνω. Considering this, the πᾶς in 2 Cor 5:15 and Rom 5:18 could be interpreted in a way that Christ’s atonement is effectual for all humankind, but reconciliation is only potentially effectual for all humankind. The atonement needs to be received through faith to experience reconciliation with God. Unlike the universalist understanding, this view is consistent with the metaphor of reconciliation which is derived from the diplomatic field and describes a two-sided affair.

In conclusion, while some issues of interpretation have been left open, the study shows clearly that God takes the initiative in the reconciliation process with humankind. Humans, however, are called to respond, and this response might involve seeking reconciliation with fellow human beings. A study of the gospels of John and Matthew will strengthen this assumption.

### *Reconciliation in the Gospel of John*

While the word field reconciliation and forgiveness only appears twice in the gospel of John, the two occurrences of the verb ἀφίημι (*to forgive*) in Joh 20:23 are very significant, not only for our understanding of this passage, but for the book as a whole.

The context is the pericope Joh 20:19–29 which describes the first encounter of the risen Christ with the disciples after the resurrection. Joh 20:30–31 might have been the original book ending, which is followed by a possibly secondary epilogue in Joh 21. If this is the case, this would further emphasize the key role of this passage for the book as a whole. Without the passage, there would be no evidence of Jesus’ resurrection besides the dubious testimony of Mary Magdalene described in Joh 20:11–18.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, this passage is vital for achieving the author’s goal described in Joh 20:30–31.

During the encounter, Jesus passes on the Holy Spirit to his disciples, making sure the movement can continue without his physical presence.<sup>4</sup> The Holy Spirit is given in the context of the sending of the disciples, who are to imitate Christ in their ministry.<sup>5</sup> To carry out the ministry,

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<sup>3</sup> In the time of the writing of the gospel, the testimony of a woman was not considered reliable because women were uneducated. This does not mean that her testimony is actually dubious.

<sup>4</sup> See Joh 20:22.

<sup>5</sup> See Joh 20:21.

the disciples receive not only the Holy Spirit, but also the authority to forgive or retain sins.<sup>6</sup> It is puzzling that the disciples are given the freedom to retain sins. However, it needs to be seen that the mission of Christ is a mission of peace. This is indicated by the fact that the greeting Εἰρήνη ὑμῖν (*peace be with you*) is repeated three times in the pericope.<sup>7</sup> Jesus is coming in peace, and he is calling his disciples to follow his example. The authorization of his disciples to forgive and retain sins is really an invitation to participate in Christ's ministry of reconciliation. Seeing that the church was founded by the disciples and carries on the tradition received by them, she also inherits the commission given to them. Therefore, reconciliation is an essential and defining ministry of the church.

### *Reconciliation in the Gospel of Matthew*

The gospel of Matthew has a lot to say about reconciliation. In Mt 5:23–24, Jesus is quoted saying: “So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.” (NRSV) Reconciliation with fellow human beings is seen as a prerequisite to participating in worship. Just like in 2 Cor 5:20, a passive imperative (διαλλάγηθι, *be reconciled!*) is used to engage someone in reconciliation. This once again shows the two-sided process of reconciliation: The point made here is one is to seek reconciliation, but if the other person is not willing to reconcile, then this is beyond the scope of what is addressed here. However, if one is not following up on the other's initiative, or if one is not willing to take initiative, the consequence is then that one should not participate in worship. This indicates that lack of reconciliation with fellow human beings makes one unprepared to encounter God.

We can see that the gospel of Matthew repeatedly calls for forgiveness in human relationships, and also connects it with the fact that God's initiative to forgive humankind antecedes human initiatives to forgive each other. A well-known example is found in the Lord's Prayer: “And forgive us our debts (ὀφειλήματα), as we also (ὥς καὶ ἡμεῖς) have forgiven our debtors (ὀφειλέταις)” (Mt 6:12, NRSV). Further emphasis is put on this issue shortly after that: “For if you forgive others their trespasses (παραπτώματα), your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (παραπτώματα)” (Mt 6:14-15, NRSV).

The word ὀφείλημα refers to financial debt in Greek, but in rabbinic literature it is also used as translation for Aramaic *khobah* (חובא), which means “sin, obligation”. (See Wolter 1991, 500; Sokoloff 1990, 189) The combination of ἀφίημι (*to forgive*) with a form of ὀφείλημα or παράπτωμα describes “being set free from a debt or a legal state.”<sup>8</sup> So, the prayer in Mt 6:12 has both a material and a spiritual dimension. Mt 6:12 takes it for granted that forgiveness to debtors is a part of Christian life, so much so that it becomes the analogy for thinking that God would

<sup>6</sup> See Joh 20:23

<sup>7</sup> See Joh 20:19, 21, 26.

<sup>8</sup> “Erlaß aus einem Schuld- bzw. Rechtsverhältnis”, Breytenbach (2010, 1738).

forgive humankind. Mt 6:14–15 looks at it from the other side by saying that God makes forgiveness among human fellow beings a *condition* for offering his forgiveness. It is clearly stated that without this forgiveness, the forgiveness from God cannot be received.

The parable of the unforgiving servant in Mt 18:21–35 gives an even clearer picture of Matthew’s theology of forgiveness and reconciliation, and confirms the findings from Mt 6:12–15. Unlike Mt 6:12, the parable shows that God’s forgiveness precedes human initiatives to forgive: The forgiveness of the king to the servant comes at the beginning of the story. The servant was a debtor (ὀφειλέτης, v. 24) to the king with the enormous sum of 10,000 talents. This is equivalent to the tax income of a major province over the course of several years (see Klaiber 2015, 2:51). After having been forgiven the debt, the servant chose not to forgive the comparatively small debt of 100 denarii that a fellow servant still owed him.<sup>9</sup> This would be equivalent to 100 daily wages of a day labourer (see Klaiber 2015, 2:52). The end of the story is that, after having heard of the incident, the king once again demanded from the servant to pay back the debt and put him in prison until the debt was paid.<sup>10</sup> Considering the amount of the debt, this would most likely mean imprisonment for life.

At the end of the parable, Jesus draws a comparison between the king in the parable and God: “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart” (Mt 18:35, NRSV). So, the unsettling end of the story confirms what has been said in Mt 6:15: God’s initiative in reconciliation precedes human initiative; however, if humans fail to pass on the forgiveness received by God, they will ultimately fail to receive God’s forgiveness. The drastic picture from Mt 18:34 shows that this even has eschatological consequences: As Christians, we will not experience reconciliation with God in the day of judgement without striving for reconciliation with our fellow human beings.

### *Conclusion*

Paul, John and Matthew all agree on the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation in Christian life. Of the three, Matthew puts the strongest emphasis on the issue. Matthew’s presentation of the issue is particularly drastic because of the eschatological consequences he paints for being unforgiving. Paul has no interest in doing so. He wants to emphasize that it is God who takes the first step in reconciliation.

Now, there is the danger to play Paul off against Matthew. However, both have in common that they agree on the divine initiative in divine-human reconciliation. Also, according to the interpretation developed here, both agree that humans play a part in the reconciliation process. John speaks less frequently about forgiveness and reconciliation, but based on the resurrected Jesus’ “first words”, he shows that these issues make up an essential part of the church’s ministry. By doing so, John confirms Matthew and also Paul, as we have interpreted him here,

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<sup>9</sup> See Mt 18:28–30.

<sup>10</sup> See Mt 18:34.

concerning the importance of reconciliation. Therefore, we cannot dismiss Matthew's perspective as an isolated one in the NT. However, this has happened many times when a certain understanding of Pauline theology has been taken as the key for biblical theology.

The overall message for us as Christians is that firstly and most importantly, we can be grateful for the reconciliation and forgiveness we have received through Christ. However, this experience also needs to set us free to forgive others and seek reconciliation with them.<sup>11</sup> Matthew shows that reconciliation has a spiritual as well as a material dimension. Knowing that reconciliation is an essential ministry of the church should motivate us to become ambassadors of reconciliation and give particular attention to this issue, within the church as well as within society as a whole.

### *Literature*

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<sup>11</sup> At this point, it is good to look back into the OT. The imprecatory psalms show us that the road of forgiveness and reconciliation is obviously not a quick and easy one.