

Session One: Bible/Biblical Theology
 RESPONSE TO WOLFGANG KÖHLER AND SVETLANA KHOBNYA
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The theme text for this conference should be highly influential in shaping and undergirding the mission of the people of God. It sets out our responsibility in announcing the good news to all in deed and word. The passage is at once simple and profound. So it is fitting that our conference has started with two excellent papers in biblical studies that provide both the undergirding of our discussions and the basis of the mission of the people of God.

The papers themselves are complementary, reflecting somewhat different approaches to the text. Köhler approaches the text primarily through word study of ‘reconciliation’ and ‘ambassador’, which then allows him to draw in the gospel traditions through looking at cognate words, especially forgiveness. Khobnya roots her paper in the context of Pauline theology, drawing upon Paul’s intertextual reading of his scriptures in the light of the big story of the Father’s redeeming activity through the reconciliation offered in Christ.

Köhler starts his paper with a reminder that this text needs to be re-read without the spectacles of the classic Lutheran reading of Paul. Dissatisfaction with this reading came to the forefront in the new perspective on Paul. Khobnya’s own work may be located within the post new-perspective period. Recent work in Paul, with its attention to relational salvation, through participation in Christ by the Spirit, has the potential of being especially important in renewing a Wesleyan perspective on salvation.

This recent work has an interesting pedigree. In a book published in 1930, entitled *Die Mystik des Apostels Paulus*, and translated into English as *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, Albert Schweitzer argued that ‘participation in Christ’ was the central theme in Paul’s understanding of salvation. This was set against the then overwhelming Lutheran reading of Paul’s salvation language in terms of justification by faith. Schweitzer, however, challenged this reading of Paul. In Schweitzer’s view, this somewhat sterile and scholastic understanding of salvation essentially in contractual forensic terms missed the heart of Paul. For Schweitzer, the phrase ‘in Christ’, ‘in the Messiah’ is central.

For reason that I do not have time to assess this morning, Schweitzer’s work did not have the impact it should have had until recent times. But a renewed emphasis on participation in Christ permeates the monumental post new-perspective work of N T Wright¹ and especially Douglas Campbell.² In simple terms, phrases like ‘in Christ’, ‘in the Messiah’, ‘the people of God’, ‘in him’, ‘in the son’ are central for Paul and must shape our thinking about salvation. Both Khobnya and Köhler see the importance of this relational understanding of salvation. For Paul, the consequence of human disobedience is that all relationships are damaged beyond human repair. This affects each relationship: human-human, human-divine, and human-creation. Instead of the God-designed love relationships, our relationships apart from Christ are dysfunctional. Humans are unable to restore the marred relationship with God. But the good news of the gospel is that, through participation in the faithful obedience of Christ,

¹ See N T Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God. Christian Origins and the Question of God* (London: SPCK, 2013).

² Douglas Campbell, *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

we may be brought back into a right relationship with the creator. Hence, Paul can say, *so if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God.* Both Köhler and Khobnya note the universal tone of Paul's thought here. For Köhler, following scholars like Hubbard,³ the precise wording of the text focuses on humanity in its relationship to God and other humans. Khobnya, however, implies that the restoration of marred relationships needs to include the whole created order. Khobnya summarises Paul's argues here with these words: '[reconciliation] affects each and every one: everyone in Christ is a new creation, everything old has passed away, everything has become anew, and the whole world is reconciled to God in Christ.' If the human condition is one of marred relationships for all, Paul asks the question, How much more will the free gift in Christ heal and restore all relationships (see Rom 5:15-21)?

Köhler and Khobnya remind us that reconciliation is entirely the divine initiative. As Khobnya puts it, 'God is not only the subject of reconciliation but the source'. Köhler's word-study supports this view. Paul has used the word 'reconciliation' in a way that is unusual in second temple literature because reconciliation is usually offered by the weaker to the stronger. In religious terms, it is often achieved through propitiation by sacrifice or some other means. At the same time, as Köhler pointedly notes, an exclusive emphasis upon human inability to rescue itself also leads 'to the classical Reformed-Lutheran fallacy that on the road to salvation, the *via salutis*, God does everything and humankind does nothing.' Both Köhler and Khobnya offer important correctives to this contractual reductionism.

Köhler develops this theme of reconciliation with a look at Matthew and John. He acknowledges that the word does not occur, perhaps highlighting the methodological limitations of word study, but notes that the theme is present, primarily through the language of forgiveness. Köhler argues that Jesus links our forgiveness with our willingness to forgive others. In reference to a passage often ignored, Köhler asks whether John 20:23, is pointing to the ministry of the church?

This is a challenge to us, at many levels. How do we relate as persons to each other in our community of faith? Would it be possible for outsiders to say, 'see how much they love each other' when within our congregations there is unforgiven animosity between individuals, families, clans? Do we need to address this practically in our everyday lives together as well as liturgically, in our worship. Do we need to recover some sense of corporate repentance and absolution from our sins? Should we use the ancient tradition of 'Passing the Peace of Christ', and when doing so, mean it sincerely? Should our holy communion become a place of Holy Communion – a forgiven and sanctifying sacrament that renews the people of God in their relationships with each other?

Both Köhler and Khobnya discuss the notion of ambassador. Less time needs to be spent on this term, except to say that Paul again re-defines it away from political or national understandings. Paul has a different starting point – ambassadors are people who are in Christ, in the Messiah. For Khobnya, they represent the king and are being transformed in the likeness of Christ so that they, in Khobnya's words, 'become an expression of God's righteousness before the world.' If that is so, then their lives are part of the message itself. And this includes the full range of God's righteous kingship. Since Yahweh executes justice for the orphan and the widow; loves the strangers; is righteous, steadfast in love and love and

³ Moyer V Hubbard, *New Creation in Paul's Letters and Thought* (SNTSMS 119; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

faithfulness, in Khobnya's words 'Ambassadors should reflect the same values as the king and his kingdom in carrying out the mandate of delegated dominion, i. e., the rule of reconciliation, the rule governed by justice, mercy and true concern for others.'

This is only a small sample of the good thinking within these papers. They show that the reconciliation offered to all through Christ is comprehensive, healing broken relationships and offering the righteous reign of God to his beloved creation.

Thank you, Wolfgang and Svetlana.