

Session One: Bible/Biblical Theology
 RECONCILIATION: NOW IS THE ACCEPTABLE TIME (2 COR 5:14-6:2)
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Introduction:

The idea of reconciliation is explained in the Bible mostly by Paul, particularly in 2 Cor 5:18-21. Paul describes it theologically/Christologically as God's act in Christ and missiologically as the ministry of reconciliation of those who are in Christ. It has both personal/communal ("reconciled us", v. 18) and universal ("the world", v. 19) dimensions.¹ Reconciliation denotes a change in the relationship between God and human beings ("reconciled us to himself", v. 18) and a change in human beings ('new creation', v. 17, "the righteousness of God", v.21).² Although much has been said on reconciliation, Paul's use of royal/diplomatic language ("Christ the Lord", v. 11, "we are ambassadors of Christ", and "on Christ's behalf", v. 20) and the eschatological language of fulfilment ("now is the acceptable time" of Isa 49:8 in 2 Cor 6:1-2) have not been seriously taken into consideration to shed light on the idea. This will be a particular target of this essay.

Paul seems to indicate that the world placed now under the rule of the new appointed King is a new state of affairs attuned to the King in authority: where reconciliation must prevail and where those who live under this King are new appointed agents to extend his rule and his reconciling order. This essay will examine how this state and agency of reconciliation can be understood in the Corinthian narrative and what implications of that are for us today.

First, it will explore what the act of God as King and Christ as Lord means in relation to reconciliation of the world. Second, it will look at the ministry of reconciliation as expansion of God's rule in Christ. Third, it will examine the reality of reconciliation for the present "now acceptable" time.

Reconciliation as God's act in Christ

Paul anchors the idea of reconciliation³ in God's act and the historical events of Christ's passion and resurrection. The necessity of reconciliation presupposes the enmity between God and the world because of human trespasses. Death and resurrection of Christ

¹ Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians* (WBC 40; Waco: Word Book, 1986), 146.

² T. W. Manson, *On Paul and John* (SBT 38; London: SCM, 1963), 52.

³ Broadly speaking, reconciliation is a mediation of two parties that come together in peace and give up their enmity, anger and hatred. See I Howard Marshall, "The Meaning of 'Reconciliation'" in *Unity and Diversity in New Testament Theology* (ed. Robert A Guelich; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 119. In the religious sense, reconciliation denotes restoring of humanity (and the world) to friendly relationship with God and others, Joseph A Fitzmyer, *To Advance the Gospel: New Testament Studies* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 164. Since "reconciliation" as a term is a rare NT word, appearing infrequently in Paul, it confused some scholars in the past describing the idea of reconciliation as incidental and insignificant for Pauline theology, Ernst Käsemann, "Some Thoughts on the Theme 'The Doctrine of Reconciliation in the New Testament'" in *The Future of our Religious Past: Essay in Honour of Rudolf Bultmann* (ed. J. M. Robinson, New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 49-64. However, the recognition that reconciliation is a matter of God in Christ that deserves examination is admitted early by scholarship including Käsemann. See summary of that in Victor Paul Furnish, "The Ministry of Reconciliation" in *Currents in Theology and Mission* 4 (1977): 204-18. Furnish develops the idea of reconciliation as a binding thought in Paul's theology as a whole. More recent discussion on reconciliation in Pauline theology see Fitzmyer, 162-185.

brings the enmity to an end. Paul announces the acceptable time and the day of salvation arriving as God acts in Christ (2 Cor 6:1-2).⁴ No human action, including repentance of sin (“not counting their trespasses against them” in 5:19), initiates and brings about the reconciliation. According to Paul, this is the solemn act of God in Christ. God is not only the subject of reconciliation but the source; and Christ is the agent.⁵ Moreover, God’s act impacts not only his covenant people but the whole world, presumably all peoples of all nations and the rest of creation (as Paul carefully unfolds in his letters, Romans 5, 8; cf. Ephesians 2; Colossians 1). The description of this act in Pauline teaching is presented in a context of royal/imperial themes.⁶

Although Paul does not use the word “king,” “emperor” or “kingdom” in 5:18-21 directly the idea of God as the ruler/king of the universe, Christ’s kingly rule and diplomatic language for believers on Christ’s behalf point to the regal theme. In the immediate context God as the ruler of the universe “is graciously making a diplomatic overture to an estranged cosmos to be reconciled to him.”⁷ He provides a necessary sacrifice for relevant offences and expands his offer through his appointed ambassadors. Earlier Paul refers to Christ as “Lord” ascribing him glory which even in a technical sense points to the respect and nobility of the person. In Pauline context Jesus as Lord is a confession of Jesus’ deity and exalted messianic king and saviour at whose name every knee should bend (1 Cor 8:6, 12; 12:3; Phil 2:9-11). Paul refers to Christ’s judgment seat and “ourselves” as slaves for Christ’s sake (5:6-10, 4:4-6) again uplifting Christ to the higher position of a ruler and describing us as his servants. Anyone in Christ, says Paul, is a new creation (5:17) assuming in God’s new created order/kingdom.

What significance might this royal language have? Even to the casual eye, it points to the reality of the world accountable to the higher authority of God if he is the King. From this perspective, the world is God’s arena over which he has ultimate authority and where he reigns in Christ. God works in Christ and put him above all people, principalities and powers (as clearly stated in Col and Eph). If Christ is the messianic king, he brings forth a new rule for God’s people who are, in Paul’s context, the renewed people of Israel, Jews and Gentiles in Christ. The royal language describing God and Christ can be illuminated further if we consider the essential duties of ancient kings in relation to reconciliation or bringing peace and mediation.

One of the primary duties of the kings was to deliver or defend their subjects and to establish them in (relative) freedom, peace and safety.⁸ OT at large describes the responsibilities of the king as establishing justice and righteousness (2 Sam 8:15; 1 Kgs 10:9; Ez 45:9), and to “deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed,” and to “do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow” (Jer 22:3). These motifs are found in the proclamations of the Mesopotamian gods and kings.⁹ Obviously, not all

⁴ All references without indication of the book will be to 2 Cor.

⁵ Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistles to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 303n10.

⁶ Campbell is keen on emphasising this resemblance although his primary concern is the book of Romans. Douglas A. Campbell, *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 912.

⁷ Campbell, 912.

⁸ Campbell, 691.

⁹ Mesopotamian king Urukagina promises his god Ningirsu not to hand over the widow and orphan to the powerful. Egyptian kings Haremheb, Hammurabi, Ammisaduqa, Lipit-Ishtar are described as establishing justice and good for people. See fuller discussion in Moshe Weinfeld, *Social*

earthly kings fulfill their responsibilities to these standards.¹⁰ But the God of Israel does. He executes justice for the orphan and the widow; loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing” (Deut 10:14-19); righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before him (Ps 89:14). God listens to his people and acts at the acceptable time (Isa 49:8).

Paul claims that God’s loving act in Christ has made the time acceptable (6:1-2). God has established his kingdom anew in Christ. He has established the new order of peace where there is no fear or enmity between him and his people. The basis of establishing this new kingly order is quite novel though: the death and resurrection of Christ, who acts on behalf of all people in the most self-sacrificial way. The duty of the King to establish peace and safety is fulfilled to the highest extent by Christ’s death and resurrection. The results of this act are enormous. It 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.

The complementary duty of the king is to sustain the established state of peace.¹¹ Once order is established it is the duty of the monarch to preserve it. Both of these functions are at the heart of the God of Israel. God the King exercises his righteousness and benevolent power toward all but particularly to the powerless, weak and oppressed (Deut 10; Ps 145, 72). For Paul the power of God is most visible in the crucified Christ (1 Cor 1:20-31). God exercises his righteousness through Christ and guidance of the Spirit (3:12-18; 4:13, 5:5).

The sustainability of the divine kingship is also effected by appointed agents or representatives who act on the behalf of the king and with his authority. Paul clearly has in mind the idea of sustaining God’s established order in Christ when he explains the concept of reconciliation further stating that the ministry of reconciliation is entrusted to us (2 Cor 5:19). The language that Paul uses is still consistent with royal/diplomatic circles - ambassadors of Christ- and deserves special attention.

Ambassadors of reconciliation

God’s act of reconciliation in Christ has significant implications for the identity of Christ’s followers. They are appointed ambassadors of reconciliation. The word that Paul uses for being ambassadors is a rare NT Greek verb *πρεσβεύω* which means “to act as emissary and in a transferred sense, to represent.”¹² Paul uses the term most likely in its technical sense to describe ambassadors or envoys who represent someone else, usually a king or a ruler, in an official capacity. Normally, the ambassadors representing lesser political powers are sent to greater political powers to plead their cases.¹³ In Paul’s context, God’s

Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 49ff.; J. S. Cooper, *Sumerian and Akkadian Royal Inscriptions I: Presargonic Inscriptions* (The American Oriental Society Translation Series 1; New Haven, 1986), 73ff.

¹⁰ See the contrast that Jeremiah 22:13-18 describes between Josiah as the ideal king and Jehoiakim who enslaves the people. In fact, the wickedness of the human kings distorted their true function as deliverers and defenders of the weak.

¹¹ Campbell, 691.

¹² G. Bornkamm, “présbys, presbýteros, sympresbýteros, presbytérion” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (ed. Gerhardt Kittel and Gerhardt Friedrich; tr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 931. The second time the verb is used in Eph 6:20 where Paul refers to himself as an ambassador of the gospel in chain.

¹³ The plural noun *πρέσβεις* (envoys) in many Jewish writings denotes envoys of the kings who deliver the message of the king with a certain negotiation plea to a party with more power (Num

reconciling of the world to himself works in a reverse order whereby the king dies for his subjects granting them peace. The diplomacy of the ambassadors of this king also works in a reverse order. The powerful ruler of the world sends ambassadors seeking reconciliation with the lost world. They are to carry out the mandate of his established powerful ministry and the authority entrusted to them as his ambassadors of peace in the world.

“On behalf of Christ” (ὕπὲρ Χριστοῦ) is repeated in 5:20 twice, further supporting the identity of Christ’s followers as his envoys and delegates. It is as if God through Christ, the newly appointed king, reinforces and enhances human agents for the ministry of the king. They are pronounced competent agents on the basis of God’s prior work in Christ and through Christ in them. Paul clearly states in 5:15 that those in Christ may live not for themselves but for him who died and was raised for them. Paul constitutes the purpose of life for himself and, in fact, for every believer, as service to God and his ministry. Simply, the ambassadors of Christ do not carry out ministry for their own advantage. Their ministry is always a response to the ministry of God and to what God does in Christ. From this perspective, C. Wright writes “we are advocates for God before we are advocates for others.”¹⁴ God in Christ is our primary subject and source for the ministry. Human competency is founded on divine initiative. Although human agents are renewed and completely competent, they are by no means independent. This is not to deny our active participation but it does rule out the notion of autonomy.

God’s act of reconciliation in Christ has transformational implications for Christ’s followers. Paul explains these transformative changes using “the new creation” and “the righteousness of God” language. Some scholars rightly emphasize a personal dimension of the new creation language, translating the Greek statement ὥστε εἴ τις ἐν Χριστῷ, καινὴ κτίσις as “anyone who is in Christ is a new creation.”¹⁵ This new identity of a person comes because of being or participating in Christ and being guided by his Spirit. However, if we take the new creation referring to the new created order established in Christ, it “places the phrase in a broader, eschatological context,” i.e. there is a new creation.¹⁶ Thus, to maintain that God reconciled the world to himself is not only the message of the new kingdom that shapes Christians in a personal way and not only the new lifestyle of those who live in his kingdom; it is the new kingdom itself with new values put in place under Christ’s rule and the new way of living with each other as part of the eschatological order that has been brought by him. If we admit the existence of the world under God’s new rule then “the world has the monumental possibility of coming to participate in God’s life - in a new mode of existence, a mode of existence that cannot be provided by any of its constituent parts.”¹⁷ Being ambassadors in God’s kingdom should be considered in its political context in a sense that God’s rule must prevail in the affairs of the world; and those people who are in Christ communally owe allegiance to none other than Christ and live out their lives as they are in and under Christ.

21:21; 22:5; Deut 2:26; 1 Mac 9:70; 10:51; 11:9; 13:14; Isa 57:9). More in George H. Guthrie, *2 Corinthians* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 311.

¹⁴ C. Wright, *Mission*, 45.

¹⁵ Ben Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 395. This translation is found in NIV, ESV, NASB, NET, and in NLT.

¹⁶ Guthrie, 308. This translation is found in NRSV, HCSB, and in TNIV.

¹⁷ Athanasios N. Papathanasiou, “Reconciliation: The Major Conflict in Postmodernity An Orthodox Contribution to a Missiological Dialogue,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 58:1-4 (2013): 33.

In relation to Christ believers become the righteousness of God (5:21). God's righteousness must be more than just positional interchange or imputed righteousness. What God has done in Christ transforms believers; that is why "the reconciled can serve as a presentation of God's righteousness to the world."¹⁸ Morna Hooker helpfully adds to that, "If Christ is the source of 'righteousness and sanctification' (1 Cor 1:30), then those who, in him, become what he is, should also embody righteousness and sanctification. Perhaps it explains why Paul goes on, in 6:14-7:1, to urge Christians to live holy lives."¹⁹ Through relationship with Christ believers take on God's righteousness, transformed as new-created people in the world and become an expression of God's righteousness before the world.²⁰

Practically, living for Christ and in his kingdom precludes Christians from regarding others in human terms (5:16).²¹ Once Paul regarded Christ in a human way but having been confronted with Christ, he no longer sees Christ in this way. He began to see others through Christ. Paul suggests that the old ways of regarding people in human terms or forming an opinion about them or judging them have passed. People "should be understood in the light of the risen Christ and his gospel" and in the light of the love of Christ which constrains believers.²² New standards of evaluation or judgement come from living for Christ and for others under the rule of love. 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, a rule governed by justice, mercy and true concern for others.

Reconciliation must be applied to concrete communities, as the one in Corinth when Paul proclaims to them, "Be reconciled" (5:20); "Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you" (12:11). The call "Be reconciled to God" reflects the language of evangelism. But in Corinthian context it can rather be explained as Paul's enforcing concern for the Corinthian community to restore good relations with him and with one another (cf. 6:11-13).²³ Theologically, reconciliation is a fulfilled act by God in Christ. But reconciliation is being completed or continuing as people respond to this act in a personal way and as they carry it out as ambassadors of reconciliation within their communities and in the world. "Be reconciled" is Paul's "appeal to receive what God has already given, to appropriate what God has already done. It is an appeal to Paul's readers to embody and manifest within their individual and corporate life the reality of their reconciliation to God."²⁴

Reconciliation: now is the acceptable time

Paul claims the fulfilment of the Isaianic promises (Isa 49:8) and arrival of the acceptable time and the day of salvation (6:1-2) when he explains God's act of reconciliation in Christ in its broader context. One cannot miss the resonance between reconciliation,

¹⁸ Guthrie, 314-15.

¹⁹ Morna Hooker, "On Becoming the Righteousness of God: Another Look at 2 Cor 5:21" *Novum Testamentum* 50 (2008): 373.

²⁰ Guthrie, 315.

²¹ Guthrie, 307.

²² Guthrie, 308.

²³ Martin, *Reconciliation*, 94.

²⁴ Furnish, 212. Another good example of that comes from Eph 4:1-2. In the beginning of the letter Paul indicates that the hostility between Jews and Gentiles is overcome by the cross of Christ who has reconciled both parties in one body (Eph 2:11-22). Nevertheless, Paul begs that Christians lead a life worthy of the calling bearing one another in love and maintaining unity in the bond of peace.

salvation and the grace of God. Grammatically, 6:1 is connected to the previous section by δὲ (therefore, so) and καὶ (also). The similar semantic construction in 5:20 and 6:1 (both appeals use the same verbal “urge”) make this connection even stronger. But in 6:1-2 Paul writes about reconciliation as God’s act of grace reaching out to those who are not yet reconciled. Paul and other leaders in the church are described as co-workers with God (using participle συνεργοῦντες, “working together”) reemphasizing again that their ministry rests in the authority of God; they are not on their own. This ministry includes carrying on the grace of God into the world.

Isaiah talks about the redeeming God who promises to restore his people. Paul uses these words in the context of the fulfilled prophesy pointing out that God’s restored kingdom is not only future end-time blessing but a present reality capable of being experienced now; it has arrived (1 Cor 4:20; cf. Rom 14:17); and they co-work on its extension.

In our world of wars, oppression, hatred and enmity, how can we say that our life is dominated by Christ, that his rule prevails and that his cross reconciles the world? How do we evaluate our competence as God’s agents of reconciliation? What does the reality of reconciliation look like? Sometimes it is difficult enough to carry on the ministry of reconciliation in Christian circles (like Paul, we feel sometimes rejected and not being heard). It might be even more difficult to share love and friendship with people who are outside of our Christian circle.

In the midst of these questions we learned from Paul (as this paper pointed out) that reconciliation is fulfilled reality. It is God’s loving and powerful act in Christ reaching out to and embracing all nations; and the whole world deserves to hear this message.

God’s act in Christ opens up a way for us to live in the reality of his new rule: not for ourselves but for him who died and was raised for us. This act shapes the identity and ministry for all whom God reconciled to himself.

We are called with God’s message of reconciliation into the world as his ambassadors. We are called to extend the established order in Christ in the affairs of the world representing his righteousness and living out as his transformed new created people; treating one another and all people through Christ who died for each and every one.

The word of reconciliation reaches the world only when it is alive, only when it is present, only when it gives shape and substance to the life in the community.²⁵ Paul provides plenty of examples of that in the rest of 2 Cor and elsewhere when he calls to or praises Corinthians for open hearts, hospitality, generosity, and genuine love. In this regard, reconciliation has not only theological but also social dimension. I believe that Paul would agree with me that the community at peace with God and each other that reflects God’s love in their midst and for others is capable to be heard further in the world; is capable to make a difference in the world that desperately needs reconciliation.

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²⁵ Furnish, 218.

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