

RECONCILIATION

When two people have a falling out, good will has to be expressed by both parties for them to become friends again. If most of the fault has been on the one side, the one who has wronged the other may do something kind in an effort to win back the other's favour. That is how we often understand the word "appease." Very often people's sinful human natures lead them to blame the other party entirely, and very often each waits for the other to make the first move. However, God alone has acted to restore sinful people to His favour. That is the special biblical sense of the scriptural word "reconciliation."

Reconciliation between two parties of human beings does not usually happen by itself, but comes as the result of deliberate initiative. That is implicit in Paul's instructions that, if a wife separates from her husband, she should either remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband (1 Cor 7:11). It is also involved in Jesus' instruction, "First go away and be reconciled with your brother; and then come and offer your gift" (Mt 5:24).

We are conditioned by the popular use of the word "reconciliation" to think of it in racist terms, as between white and black. Some people are cynical about the word because they know that merely saying "sorry" may lay the country open to lawsuits to get money awarded for things that were done long ago. As Aboriginal people had close ties to their land, which they expected to provide their needs, now that much of their land has been taken over by white settlement, "reconciliation", as popularly used, suggests that the government, which is run by the white people, should continue to provide for aborigines' needs. So cynical people easily think that the bottom line when there are demands for reconciliation is not really covered by acceptance and friendly relations, but by ongoing handouts. Society conditions us to think primarily of reconciliation between individual persons and between groups of human beings. We are conditioned by popular use to think of peace as absence of war between nations. In scriptural usage the parties are God, the offended party, on the one side, and all offending human beings on the other. In the New Testament "to reconcile" in the active voice is used only of God. God is not reconciled. He reconciles. Nor does God reconcile Himself to us or reconcile Himself to the world. The passive voice, "to be reconciled" is used only of human beings. God's reconciliation is global in scope. We are reconciled to God (Rm 5:10), and, when we preach the Gospel, we implore people to receive God's peace, so that they are reconciled to God "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Cor 5:19-20). He extends His peace to all people.

It is good to think first of individual personal relationships between God and the sinner. The opposite of reconciliation is rejection, and the essence of it is acceptance (Rm 11:15). Other ways of expressing the truth of reconciliation are justification and forgiveness. God justifies the ungodly person (Rm 4:5). God declares sinners righteous in His sight apart from what they have done or deserve. He credits them with the obedience of Jesus Christ, His Son. He does not count their sins against them, but chooses to bear the cost of His justice in the suffering of His own Son (Rom 5:9-10; 2 Cor 5:18-21).

Reconciliation with God means a fundamental change. In 2 Cor 5 reconciliation means a renewal of the relationship between God and man, and consequently a renewal of human beings themselves. In that context Paul has written that the believer has become a new creature, that old things have passed away and that all things have become new. In Romans 5 there is also a penetrating change. We are no longer enemies, helpless, ungodly, and sinners, (5:6, 8), but God has shed abroad His love toward us in our hearts through the Holy Spirit (v.5). There is a change, not merely in our disposition or in our legal relationship to God, but in the total state of our lives. We should also not think of any sudden change of mind on the part of God, because He revealed His gracious will immediately after the fall of Adam and Eve. Indeed, our reconciliation has been part of His plan from eternity, in Christ.

Attempts at reconciliation between one human individual and another are often spoilt by the churlish natures of both. We do not understand what Scripture teaches us about reconciliation unless we keep in mind the effects of original sin and God's wrath on human sin. By nature all people are spiritually blind, spiritually dead, and, actively, enemies of God. They are without fear, love, and trust in God. They resent His commandments as restrictive. If they take God's Law seriously, they realise that in strict justice God must reject and condemn them, and they know that there is nothing that they can do to placate His wrath and win His favour. For reconciliation, sinners look to God's nature, not primarily as a God who is just and holy, but as a God who is merciful, gracious, and compassionate, for the sake of the atoning sacrifice of His Son. Notice how the undeserved love of God is the basic motive in the following passage: "However, God shows His own love for us by this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more, therefore, now that we have been justified by His blood, we shall be saved through Him from God's wrath. For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, now that we have been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation" (Rm 5:8-11).

In the original Greek of the New Testament the word for "reconciliation" includes the basic word that means "other." In secular Greek usage the basic meaning is "to make otherwise", to "make different", to "alter", "to give in exchange," or "to take in exchange." Because human beings are not active in establishing reconciliation with God, they are said to receive reconciliation (Rm 5:11). When we say that we are justified through faith, it is also good to remember that faith is not a meritorious virtue, but it is simply receiving God's undeserved gift. The concrete

expressions that Jesus used for forgiveness, like having debts wiped off, and a prodigal son's being given clothes and a ring on his finger, also stress the one-sided, undeserved nature of forgiveness. Being forgiven is receiving a great gift of God. Baptism and the Lord's Supper in their own ways are evidences of reception. A person who is being baptised, entering the kingdom of God as an infant, is doing nothing to earn what he or she is receiving. In the Lord's Supper we eat and drink as receivers.

Our reconciliation has come at great cost, through the death of Jesus (Rm 5:10), when God made Him sin for us. Through this substitution we have been made the righteousness of God in Him (2 C. 5:21). As a result, the love of Christ controls believers (2 Cor 5:14). Although the old is still very much with us and we continue to sin, we no longer live for ourselves, but for the One who died for us and was raised again (2 Cor 5:15). God has overcome our selfish disposition and created fellowship with Himself. He is our God, and we are His people. Although we have been nothing but receivers in this reconciliation, we do not remain passive, but God makes us active in love to Himself and to our neighbours. In Ephesians 2 God's abolition of the Law through the cross of His Son means that He has reconciled both the Israelites, who had been under the Law, and Gentile people to Himself and also to each other. He has made peace between them as if they were one man, and so that they are members of the one body of Christ. Christ's cross has killed the hostility between them (Eph 2:13-18). God's reconciliation has made us kindly disposed toward Him and also towards one another.