

QUESTIONS ABOUT RECONCILIATION

In the New Testament, the passages about reconciliation consistently say that God has reconciled us through the death of His Son (2 Cor 5:18, 19). In passive formulations, we have been reconciled to God by the death of His Son (Rm 5:10; cf. 2 Cor 5:20). Similarly, we have received the reconciliation (Rm 5:11).

On the other hand, the Lutheran Confessions often speak of the Father as being reconciled to us (AC XX, 9), etc. They say that God cannot be reconciled by the observance of human traditions (AC XXVI, 21). The heart is unable to love God until He is shown to be reconciled. (Apol IV, 36). God is reconciled on account of Christ (Apol. IV 45). It is said that we should not think that a ceremony without faith is a sacrifice that reconciles God (Apol XXIV, 89). There are other such passages in the Confessions that speak as if God is the One who is reconciled. They speak as though a change takes place in God. So, it may be asked, Should such formulations have been used when they differ from the New Testament usage? Is this difference important? Should we think of Christ's cross as working a change in God, from wrath to favour?

The basic meaning of "reconcile" is to bring together as friends people who had been hostile to each other. Actually, the noun "reconciliation" and the verb "reconcile" are used infrequently in the NT. Nevertheless, the whole concept is wider than these two words, especially when it is acknowledged that reconciliation presupposes an eventual change in the attitudes of both of the parties, the offending ones and the offended One. God is the One who has changed first (Rm 5: 6, 8 "while we were still sinners", "while we were enemies"). The imperative "Be reconciled" in 2 Cor 5:20 refers to the change in human beings who respond to the message about God's prior reconciliation of the world to Himself, or His non-imputing of sin.

When we examine words such as "propitiate" and the sacrificial language of the Bible, we see that they indeed speak about a change in God's attitude, from wrath to favour. The OT sacrifices, which pointed forward to Christ's cross, are said to "propitiate" Him. Even the tax collector's prayer (Lk 18) is, literally, "God, <be propitiated> to me, the sinner!" In spite of the tax-collector's desperately bad relationship with God, he at least knew that the sacrifices that were made at the temple could bring about a change in God's relationship to him.

In the atonement of the sinful human race God is the Initiator, the One who has provided atonement. "<God> has publicly displayed [Jesus Christ] as the atonement-cover through faith in His blood" (Rm 3:25).

In a long series of passages in connection with Old Testament sacrifices [Gn 8:21; Ex 29:18, 25, 41; Lv 1:9-26:31 (in many verses); Nm 15:3-29:36 (in many verses); Ezk 6:13; 16:19; 20:28, 41] it is said that God smelled a "soothing aroma." It was first said of the sacrifice that Noah offered after the flood. Without using that expression, Moses had already written, about Cain's and Abel's sacrifices: "The LORD looked favourably at Abel and his offering. However, He did not look favourably at Cain and his offering" (Gn 4:4-5). In the passages that say that God smelled a "soothing aroma", God was the One whose wrath against sin was placated through the sacrifices. The sacrifices brought appeasement. They made a soothing odour in the nostrils of God as the offended party. It is not only the Old Testament that speaks in this way. St Paul also used the OT concept of a "soothing odour" but in connection with Christ's sacrifice to God (Eph 5:2).

The Book of Hebrews is important in this connection, even though it does not use the words "reconciliation" or "reconcile." Although those repeated animal sacrifices could not permanently remove sin in the OT. Christ's cross, as the ultimate sacrifice, has done this. Although human priests offered the OT sacrifices, their sacrificing was different from human beings' trying to reconcile God by their "works". The ceremonial Law of the OT was, in this respect, not Law but Gospel, because it foreshadowed Christ's work.

It is important not to be hung up on particular words, but to see the whole picture. Some NT books do not use the word "justify" and some do not use "reconcile." "Forgive" and "justify" are really the obverse of the same thing. If God does not reckon my sins against me through my faith in Christ, I am forgiven. If God reckons to me the obedience, or the righteousness, of Jesus Christ through faith, I am justified. The opposite of forgiveness is retention. The opposite of justification is condemnation. Reconciliation is another way of expressing the same truth as justification or forgiveness. The opposite of "reconciliation" is "hostility." Justification and reconciliation are parallel in Rm 5:9-10. Reconciliation and non-imputation are parallel in 2 Cor 5: 18-21. Another way of expressing the same Gospel truth is that God has made us His children. In the Gospel according to Luke, "forgive" and "forgiveness" are used quite rarely. Jesus expresses the concept in concrete ways, like debts wiped off, a lost sheep found, etc.

There is another difference. Some of these verbs cannot be used the other way around. It would be blasphemous to say that God is justified by Christ's death, or that He is forgiven. Conversely, it would be blasphemous to say that we are appeased or propitiated. God is appeased by the soothing aroma of Christ's sacrifice. Even if the NT passages do not say so in so many words, "God is reconciled" by Christ's cross, the concepts of appeasement and propitiation allow us to say that God is reconciled to us, through Christ's cross.

We must all think of ourselves, before coming to faith, as corrupted through inherited sin and by sin in thoughts, desires, words, and deeds. Without Christ we are "alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise" (Eph 2:12). We were objects of God's wrath (Eph 2:1-3). Original sin is truly sin, not merely a tendency, and continues to be with us. We are in solidarity with Adam and all his other descendants (Rm 5:12-21). It is not enough simply to say that God hates the sin but loves the sinner. According to the Law we must say that God hates both sin and the sinner. According to the Gospel, God loves the sinner, justifies the ungodly person, forgives his sin, reconciles him to Himself, and adopts him as His dear child, through faith, because of the cross of Jesus Christ. Another word for "reconciliation" is "peace." That word was used by the angels who sang at Christ's birth, "On earth peace to people whom He favours!" (Lk 2:14). He had been born as a human being for us human beings and for our salvation. The first words of the risen Saviour after His resurrection to His disciples in the locked room were, "Peace to you!" (Lk 24:36).

It is quite proper to speak of Christ's sacrifice placating or soothing God's hostile attitude to us, and thus reconciling us to Him. It is quite wrong to think of our good works as placating God's wrath against our sin, or of any prior

change in us meriting God's favour. The Lord, who had said, at the close of His sacrifice for us on the cross, "It is finished", has the right to utter His word of reconciliation. For He had been set forth as the atoning sacrifice to remove God's wrath and the accusation of the Law, which cried out against us for redress. His sacrifice has propitiated, or reconciled, the Father.

There is mystery in this. We say that God does not change (Mt 3:6). Yet God regretted that He had made human beings on the earth before the flood, and, when Moses interceded for the Israelites after they worshipped the golden calf, God relented from the harm that he had intended for them (Gn 6:6; Ex 32:14). What were these but changes in His attitude?

God is not merely the aggrieved party who must have His wrath removed by conciliatory action on our part. He is also a God who has loved the sinful world, loved His own from eternity, in Christ, and provided for their reconciliation in Christ's cross, which has taken away the sin of the world. Because God loved us, Jesus did what He did and suffered what He suffered so that we might receive the reconciliation. In the parable of the prodigal son, the prodigal did not come all the way home and have to perform some difficult and meritorious work to change his father's attitude. His father had been watching for him, and saw him coming from a distance. In oriental countries it was not considered dignified for an older man to run. However, he ran, threw his arms around his wayward son, and called for the best calf to be killed, a ring for his finger, and the best robe for him, sandals for his feet, and a party to celebrate. That is what God is like in His love for us undeserving people. Jesus is the Friend of sinners and has given His life to make atonement for them.