



**The Ministry  
and  
Message  
of  
Reconciliation**

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of Reconciliation*

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## Study 1

# *Concerning God, Man and Creation as a Total Unity*

Geoffrey Bingham

### **CREATION THE BASIS OF ALL BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING**

We choose Proverbs 8:22–31 to begin our studies on the unity of all things, on the basis of the utter perfection of God’s creation. Genesis 1:31 says, ‘And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was *very good*’, that is, flawless, perfect, totally functional, wholly sufficient in all its parts and functions:

The LORD created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water. Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth; before he had made the earth with its fields, or the first of the dust of the world. When he established the heavens, I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of the deep, when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep, when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master workman; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the sons of men.

This much discussed passage has been summarised by Derek Kidner:

**Wisdom’s role in creation.** The section is ushered in by the emphatic The Lord. Here is wisdom’s prime credential, presented with wonderful artistry. First, wisdom is what Yahweh as Creator counted primary and indispensable. Second, wisdom is both older than the universe, and fundamental to it. Not a speck of matter (26b), not a trace of order (29), came into existence but by wisdom. Third, wisdom is the spring of joy, for joy breaks out whenever (30b) and wherever (31) the Creator’s wisdom is exercised. Joy of creating and joy of existence—the Maker’s and the creature’s delight—both flow from the exercise of divine wisdom; that is, from God’s perfect workmanship.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Kidner, *The Proverbs*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, IVP, London, 1964, p. 78.

## *Concerning God, Man and Creation as a Total Unity*

In Jeremiah 10:12–16 and 51:15–16 the prophet states the matter of creation by wisdom, ‘It is he who made the earth by his power, who established the world by his wisdom, and by his understanding stretched out the heavens’ (10:12; 51:15). He is contrasting the foolishness of the idols which cannot create anything. The Proverbs 8 passage is not saying that God creates a wisdom which is not already His own, but He personifies wisdom which is His own in order to show how true wisdom delights in creation. So then we come to the wonderful understanding that creation was a matter of delight to God and to wisdom: ‘I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the sons of men’. In Job 38:4–7 God asks Job the question which will set this man’s perspective aright:

*Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?*

Note the joy of the morning stars and the sons of God—all the angelic creatures—as they witness the creation. Creation was a matter of great joy, and why should it not be? God has said ‘It is very good’—with all that that meant. Only Man who has guilt on his conscience sees something forbidding about creation and thinks the worst of it. Note the first couple who knew the unity of all things as they themselves were ‘one flesh’. ‘God’s wisdom’, Kidner says, ‘is the spring of joy, for joy breaks out whenever . . . and wherever . . . the Creator’s wisdom is exercised’. And why not? The whole creation is—in its created essence—a total and beautiful unity and harmony because the God who created—and goes on creating it—is Love. In spite of sin which has gripped the human race, creation still brings universal delight on a large scale, and the growing tourist traffic of today indicates that.

### **THE CREATOR IS LOVE: THE CREATION FLOWS FROM LOVE**

Because we have the whole Bible and all that has happened in history with promises and prophecies as to what is yet to happen, and because God is the living God, that is, the God who is always in action, so then we have views of Him and His nature which are the outcome of coming to know Him as, for example, in Jeremiah 9:23–24:

*Thus says the LORD: ‘Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practise steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth; for in these things I delight, says the LORD.’*

Firstly we will look at the nature of the Triune God. In Christian history we have come to know the Three Persons of the Godhead—the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit—as love. We know that God has the properties of righteousness, holiness, goodness, love and truth, by which we mean that God is One and He acts in the way of these properties. Within the Godhead He is the Community, living within the fellowship in which each Member gives room to the other Members, and each gives to

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and receives from the others. Theologically this is known as *perichoresis*. For us it is to say that, in a human way, the Three are of one mind and one heart. In them is the absolute unity and harmony which is love. Their work of creating, we shall see, makes essentially for a creation of total unity and harmony.

It is clear from the Scriptures that the Father, His Son and the Holy Spirit were one in the work of creation. We know that God (*Elohim*) is designated as Creator in Genesis chapters 1 and 2. Psalm 33:6–9 says:

By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,  
and all their host by the breath of his mouth.  
He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle;  
he put the deeps in storehouses.  
Let all the earth fear the LORD,  
let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him!  
For he spoke, and it came to be;  
he commanded, and it stood forth.

This word of creation commanded all things into being, as Psalm 148:5–6 attests: ‘Let them praise the name of the LORD! For he commanded and they were created. And he established them for ever and ever; he fixed their bounds which cannot be passed.’

We see in Genesis 1:2 that the Spirit of *Elohim* was in the primal action of creation. This is supported by Psalm 104:30, ‘When thou sendest forth thy Spirit, they are created; and thou renewest the face of the ground’, and Psalm 33:6 says that God created ‘by the breath of his mouth’, where ‘breath’ (*ruach*) means ‘spirit’. Again in Job 33:4 Elihu rightly claims, ‘The spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life’. In the New Testament, ‘the Spirit of the living God’ is the Spirit of life in many ways. Again, the Son who is called ‘the Word’ is the one by whom all things were created—‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made’ (John 1:1–3; Col. 1:15–17; Heb. 1:1–3).

When, then, creation was made by the Triune action in concord, it was impossible that creation would not be an irreversible unity. We say that the Father is love (1 John 4:8, 16), the Son is ‘the Son of his love’ (Col. 1:13), and the Spirit is ‘the Spirit of love’ (Rom. 15:30; 5:5), so that all things were—and are—created by love. Theirs is the ontology of love and creation cannot be understood as other than love.<sup>2</sup> We must not take this lightly for it is the key to the meaning and action of creation. If we may anticipate later studies then we can say that the fall of Man put creation in a situation where Man’s sin has restricted the creational liberty of what we sometimes call ‘nature’ (cf. Rom. 8:17–21). It is interesting to note that ‘nature’ is always ‘on God’s side’ if we may use that quaint phrase. Thus Judges 5:20 (cf. Josh. 10:12–14), ‘From heaven fought the stars, from their courses they fought against Sisera’. We remember

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<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that Paul enjoins the Colossians (3:14), ‘And above all these things put on love which binds everything together in perfect harmony’, i.e. love not only harmonises but is harmonic, harmony itself—‘the bond of completeness’.

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how the earth carried the curse relating to Adam's sin (Gen. 3:17–19), and how Cain was 'cursed from the ground' when he spilled the blood of Abel. We know from Romans 8:17–30 that creation will come into its own when the ultimate glorification of all things will have been achieved.

### **THE PRE-CREATION PURPOSES OF GOD**

We cannot understand the harmony and unity of creation as it came from God's hand, unless we also comprehend His purposes for creation. For example in 1 Corinthians 2:7 Paul says, 'But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification'. From before time God had planned the glorification of all things. In Revelation 13:8 John says that before creation the names of God's elect were written 'in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain', and in 1 Peter 1:19–20 Peter follows this up with, 'but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. He was destined before the foundation of the world but was made manifest at the end of the times for your sake.'

In Ephesians 1:3–18 Paul speaks of the plan and intention of God in history, but purposed before time, in regard to the salvation of His people and the ultimate unification of all things. Two verses (1:4–5) indicate that *this was all planned in love*, 'even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us *in love* to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will.'<sup>3</sup> Here we note another evidence of creation in love, because it was the intention of the Father to have *many sons* (Heb. 2:10), that is, to have His family, and true family spells true unity, such as began in creation, especially in Eden.

The pre-creation intention of God needs to be understood in some measure so that we will see creation as dynamic and launched into action which will culminate—as we are told—in 'new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells'. If creation does not have a *telos* then it does not have a purpose other than *its original being as creation*. It is not setting off on a journey, so to speak. In order to understand that the unity of all things at creation is not just pacific—an end in itself—but dynamic, we must look at two special things of creation: (i) God's mandate; and (ii) God's blessing.

### **THE MANDATE AND THE BLESSING AT CREATION**

For creation to be its dynamic self and not just repetition of some templates of existence, it required the *goal* or *telos*, and the *power* to arrive at that *telos*. Genesis 1:26–30 tells us of a mandate given to Man, 'And God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion

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<sup>3</sup> The 'in love' of Ephesians 1:3–5 can refer either to God's intention regarding our holiness or our sonship. Commonsense dictates that it refers to both.

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over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth”’. Man, then, has been given *vocation* which is his very *reason* for being, as it is his *way* of being. Hence the serenity we find in the primal couple. Genesis chapter 2 is better understood in the light of the vocation of 1:28. Even so, the *mandate* is also a *franchise*. It is not a burden imposed but a franchise given. Man is free in the filling out of the command. He is not God’s slave but God’s co-worker, and he delights in being commanded. The key to this is that he is the image of God, and in fact the only image of God in all creation. He is constituted like God and knows his need to be directed. Although he is like God he is other than God, as God is other than him for it is right that God should be other than Man. Created affinity—a gift to Man—makes them one and there is *perichoretic* relationship. At the same time without God’s direction—Torah—Man cannot know what to do. That direction is God’s Law—Torah—not just a set of rules but instruction from the wisdom of God with whom and for whom Man works. Since God is King—as God—so Man is king, as Man! That was the key to the unity of all creation. If we take commands to be also promises, that is, of the certainty of commands being fulfilled and not just enacted,<sup>4</sup> then faith and hope are involved in obedience. God, Himself, is present in and for the action. He is never apart from His Torah, which is why Torah is delight (Ps. 1; 19; 119) and not as the Greek *nomos* or the Roman *lex*. Part of God’s Torah was prohibitive with a view to being prophylactic, namely, that which concerned ‘the tree of the knowledge of good and evil’. This prohibition was intended to inform as to death, but also to aid against such death and so maintain the unity and joy of creation.

With *mandate* goes *blessing*. In Genesis 1:20–22 the principle of creation, mandate and blessing is found:

And God said, ‘Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the firmament of the heavens.’ So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. And God blessed them, saying, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.’

God commands as to the perpetual nature of fish and birds as these are created. He then blessed them in order that they could fill His mandate to them, that is, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth’. Likewise in the mandate given to Man, His blessing precedes it—‘God blessed them and said . . .’ Blessing then is the giving of the power to use the ability God has given to be in His image—and so on. Here we will not examine the details of the mandate—franchise but the prospect of *fulfilling* this Torah must have been one of extreme delight.

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<sup>4</sup> If law (Torah) is simply a set of rules, especially of an ethical and moral nature to be ‘carried out’, then the onus is on the one under law to enact those commandments. If, however, Torah is direction in the operation of the plan and will of God, then obedience is the fulfilling of the direction and accomplishes something rather than just a keeping up to a required moral standard.

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### CREATION AND COVENANT

There remains only one more thing to be discussed in this essay and it is the covenant of God which we will call the creational covenant, noting that all God's covenants are called 'everlasting'. It would appear that the creation of the sun and the moon in Genesis 1:14–18 was of the nature of a covenant, for in Jeremiah 33:19–26 God shows that if that covenant can be broken then no less His covenant with David. Without building anything on the covenant with day and night to make a whole covenant with all creation, it seems we will need to concede that a creational covenant was inbuilt in creation. W. J. Dumbrell argues for such a covenant in his book *Covenant and Creation*. Beginning with the covenant with Noah by God, he argues that God established a covenant already made, rather than cut a new covenant with Noah. He points out that following the Flood, the covenant went back to the creational ground of Genesis chapters 1 and 2. The mandate of 1:28 was once again in action, and he writes:

Gen. 9:1–2 had begun the post-flood era with the renewal of the mandate given to man in 1:28. The remainder of the covenant renewal material of Gen. 9 has been concerned to guarantee the order over which man will exercise his mandate. But the substance of the covenant with which we are concerned is clearly a commitment implicit in the total creation account of Gen. 1:1 – 2:4a. Such a commitment was intended to achieve the purpose of creation. As the emphasis in 9:1–7 by its position in the renewal narrative suggests, it is through man that divine purposes will be realised. Man is set over the created order, yet his future cannot be considered separately from the world over which he is set. The refusal of the Creator to permit the divine purposes to be frustrated, either in regard to man himself or his world, must necessarily therefore have redemptive consequences which will concern not only man, but finally his world as well. For the redemption of the creature will involve nothing less finally than the redemption of all creation and we are well aware that this is the goal towards which biblical revelation progressively moves.<sup>5</sup>

Walter Brueggemann in his commentary on Genesis, speaking from Genesis chapters 1 and 2, but also taking the pericope of Genesis chapters 1 to 11, makes this statement:

The text, then, is a *proclamation of covenanting* as the shape of reality. The claim of this tradition is opposed both to a materialism which regards the world (nature, cosmos) as autonomous and to a transcendentalism which regards the world as of the same stuff as God. The term 'create' asserts distance and belonging to. It is affirmed that the world has *distance* from God and a life of its own. At the same time, it is confessed that the world *belongs* to God and has no life without reference to God. Both characterize the relation of creator and creation. This idiom of covenant applies not only to the creation stories of Gen. 1 – 2, but to all of the materials of Gen. 1 – 11. The whole is a narrative about God's insistence that the creation should be nothing other than his creation. Such a view leaves ample room for every responsible scientific investigation. But it yields not at all on the issue of the fundamental character of reality as *derived from* and *belonging to this sovereign, gracious God* who will seek to have his own way. This *theological* affirmation permits every scientific view that is genuinely scientific and not a theological claim in disguise.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> W. J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: An Old Testament Covenantal Theology*, Paternoster Press, Exeter, 1984, p. 33.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation Series, John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1982, p. 17.

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This paper is not the place to pursue the whole matter of the creational covenant in which all God's covenants—Noahic, Abrahamic, Sinaitic, Davidic and New—are involved. In a book *Love's Most Glorious Covenant* I have sought to point out three basic elements of this covenant: (i) vocation (Gen. 1:28); (ii) the seventh day rest (Gen. 2:1–3); and (iii) marriage (Gen. 2:18–24).<sup>7</sup> We will not attempt, here, to comment at length on these three elements. Of the creational covenant we can say that it provided the substantial basis and background for all elements of the creation—those human and those otherwise. Covenant provided by God is unilateral, non-contractual, issuing from love. Vocation matches Man's need for purposive action and the assurance that he/she is a willing agent of God in a grand plan. Marriage is the unbreakable union of the male and female persons which has children and family in view and so the maturation of all the human race in its sights. The Sabbath rest makes for the restoration of human resources, serenity and tranquillity and the beautiful climax of all creation. None of these three is absent in the creational unity and harmony of creation at its genesis, and all three help us to understand the sheer delight of that happening, and of the ultimate joy it will know in the reconciliation of all things. We need, now, to act upon all we have set out in this paper. Worship, thanksgiving, doxology and joy rise from a true understanding and eagerness to participate in it all as the fruit of such love of God towards us.

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<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, *Love's Most Glorious Covenant*, Redeemer Press, Castle Hill, 1997.

## Study 2

# *The Matter of the Fracture of the Unity Inbuilt in History*

Deane Meatheringham

### **INTRODUCTION**

We run the risk of considering the fracture of the unity in a cavalier fashion. By cavalier I do not intend to be disrespectful of our motives, but to say that our understanding of the seismic fracture, which has opened up because of sin, and the sin, cannot be reduced to simplistic or pious definitions. We will see that the fracture is really a splitting of what should be together, a division within the fabric of being, an inconsolable grief and a separation which is equal to our enmity with God—a catastrophic curse (Gal. 3:13; Rom. 5:10).

The fracture is an evil that finds its origins in sin. Like the fracture, sin is very slippery when attempting to get a handle on it. This is largely because it is the way of sin to lie and to cover its tracks. Sin makes itself unrecognisable, and rationalises the situation within a mindset that has already ascended to be the final judge (Jer. 17:9; Heb. 3:13). The deceitfulness of sin means that even after we have defined it to the best of our biblical and theological ability we discover that we still have not got hold of its essential nature. We will see that the fracture is based on a lie, upon an untruth that does not have a foundational basis. The lie plays its blinding role in our attempting to understand the matter of the fracture inbuilt into history.

### **THE ALTERNATE PLAN**

The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has a covenant plan for creation which has its origin not in time but in eternity. God creates a 'universe' that is very good (as opposed to a multi-verse), and the goal of God's creation is to ultimately unify all things under the headship of Jesus Christ. God's plan is to ultimately save his world into such a sealed communion with himself that rebellion would never again break out.

## *The Matter of the Fracture of the Unity Inbuilt in History*

The plan is fulfilled through God's free grace mediated in creation and recreation in Christ (Eph. 1:1–10). History's destiny is for a new heavens and a new earth, wherein the good creation is ultimately sanctified and through the incarnate Redeemer saved humanity participates within the fellowship within the Triune Godhead (Isa. 66:22f.; Rev. 21:1–8; Heb. 10:19ff.; 2 Pet. 1:4).

The author of the alternate plan is satan. He deceives the whole world (Rev. 12:9). Jesus says that the devil was a murderer and a liar from the beginning:

He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44).

Eberhard Jüngel expounds the view from this text that it is unacceptable to contrast murder and lying by saying that murder is bad but lying is less harmful:

The Johannine devil is not a murderer on the one hand and a liar on the other, but he begins his murderous work by lying. In being untruth and spreading untruth, he splits what should be together, the context of life, the life context of God and people together, of person and person, human beings and the world. And in doing that he splits the life of the one he possesses: the life context which forms a human being's self-relationship . . . the sinner's life becomes a sham existence.<sup>1</sup>

In being a liar the devil spreads untruth. He spins a tale about a utopia without God. Sin dissimulates (Gen 3:1ff; Rom. 7:11), it makes itself unidentifiable and desires to be something in itself and independent.

A mimic/false word comes to the original couple to undermine the truth of the essential unity of the creation. He proffers an egotistical plan and goal for the history of the world (Gen. 3:1ff.; Matt. 4:1–11; Rev. 18:1–3, 7–15). Within the world based upon the falsehood of a lying word, humankind would make its own laws. These laws drawn from idolatry are set out for the furtherance of humankind's own causes, using its religion, philosophy, power and technology to attain it, while it still parasitically lives off the essentially unified creation.

We can only begin to grasp what the fracture is in the light of the unity of the creation and even more significantly in the light of God's ultimate intention to fill the whole earth with his glory. The original creation and the final eternalising of the creation are too vast for us to imagine or compute, but the prophetic hope of scripture shows us our final home. It is in this light that we see that the fracture wrought by sin is an attempt to measure up to the dimensions of God's goodness. So vast is the nature of the fracture and the sin that drives it.

Whatever humankind's rebellion may have done to itself in relation to the creation, it cannot alter the essential unity or purpose of creation or God's purpose for it. God remains a faithful creator. He has no need of contingency plans. But insurrectionist humankind now has to live in two worlds. In developing an alternative plan, man still has to live in the world that God has made and which is progressively moving, under

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<sup>1</sup> Eberhard Jüngel, *Justification: The Heart of the Christian Faith*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 2001, pp. 109f.

## *The Matter of the Fracture of the Unity Inbuilt in History*

Christ's Kingship, to God's ultimate new creation. The dualism entailed by attempting to live in a world set up by humankind and yet living against God's ordered world brings man pain; pain that he may imagine comes from his being made up of two separate substances, or which he philosophises comes from his finitude in the face of infinitude.

Within this process the Triune Lord uses the pain for his redeeming purposes. In his judgments he brings out the sin of man and deals with it. The corruption of the world set up prior to the flood is brought to a head and instead of the evil of humankind destroying the world, God reaffirms his covenant that the earth shall remain (Gen. 9:8–17).

### **PERVERTED TOGETHERNESS**

Harmony, vocation and togetherness are the way things are structured to be. I am pressing the idea that togetherness is ontological. This is true biblically and within the microbiotic sphere as it is also true personally. It is not, then, a freakish phenomenon that human beings seek togetherness, because this is inherently the way things are meant to be. Ontologically we are driven to it so that sinful humanity will continue to seek it but on humanity's own terms. The result is a perverted togetherness.

Evil begins with a false 'Yes'. It says 'Yes' to God *and* 'Yes' to ourselves. The division comes in saying 'Yes' while at the same time meaning 'No'. The goal of the lie is to undermine, for example, 'Did God say?' This is an aggressive untruth. It spreads untruth. Thus the fugitive, Cain, sets up the togetherness of a city for security that will hold itself together by violence, and totalitarianism if required to force the unity (Gen. 4:17–24). Babel's builders were involved in a unifying project which would culminate in collective humanity being divine. The project ended in confusion (Gen. 11:1–11). Korah's mob gathered *together* against the Lord as an ungodly gang against God and his community (Num. 16:1–35). The judgment following this rebellion was a split earth that swallowed up the rebels. The ungodly nations breathe together in a common conspiracy against the rule of the Lord (Ps. 2). On the basis of a lie Ananias and his wife Sapphira acted together in a plot to split the early community of Christ (Acts 5:1–11). The harlot Babylon forges a community of wealth, power, pleasure and idolatry which is raked with social injustice (Rev. 18:1ff.). Humanistic society wants and legislates for unity at all costs, and while Christians are to pray for peace and good order, such a society can be an illusion and a legal force to embrace corrupt forms of deviant behaviour (Gen. 6:1–6).

The false 'yes' lies even when it quotes the truth. It falsifies what is true. Untruth splits the truth and negates what is true. There can be no community life where it is built on a lie. It spreads and divorces what should be one flesh. The lie makes any form of community life impossible. Isaiah 59:1–15 is one example in scripture of the great grief felt by society that has lost the truth and longs for its true home. Evil does not begin with an abstract *no* but with a false *yes* to God. Instead of being glad receivers of all that God gives we become givers in our own right. This kind of giving to God is idolatrous as it expects a reward and makes a claim. The false *yes* becomes a

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destructive *no* that breaks up fellowship with Cain and God and with Cain and his brother (Gen. 4:3–5).

### **SEPARATION FROM GOD**

The pursuit of an alternate plan and an ambitious independency against the rule of God, separates man from the goodness and love of the Father, bringing a relational split and a hostility of horrifying proportions, between God and humankind (Gen. 3:8ff.; Luke 15:11–32):

The Christian concept of sin is not to be gained in a vacuum, *remoto Christo*, but from the Gospel to the extent that the Gospel itself, as good news of man's liberation by and for the free God, has also the character and form of the true Law of God, the promise of the grace of God containing His no less gracious claim, as the ark of the Old Testament covenant contained the tables of the Decalogue. In all its forms sin is man's perverted dealing with the stern goodness and righteous mercy of God addressed to him in Jesus Christ. It is their denial and rejection, their misunderstanding and misuse. It is man's direct or indirect enmity against the promise of God which as such is also His demand. Proving itself to be such it is unmasked, discovered and judged as man is confronted by the Gospel, by the living Jesus Christ in the Gospel.<sup>2</sup>

The horrifying proportions will not be seen unless we realise that true wholeness, goodness and wellbeing is found in unity. God is good. God is not a lone being to be found in splendid isolation. Through the unique revelation of God in the incarnate Son, Jesus the Messiah, we know that the living God of love is a triunity and a community of persons:

God is good; the divine existence is the epitome of good. The divine existence is for ever and ever an existence together, a fellowship existence, one which relates to others. That is why it is good. This is true by analogy for the creation. Created existence is also togetherness, a fellowship existence, one which relates to others . . . To that extent, and to that extent only, can we claim with the scholastic theologians: 'every being is as such good'.<sup>3</sup>

Separation from God is enmity with God, it is aggressively opposed to God and it entails the curse (Rom. 5:10; Gal. 3:13). The separation counters the unity of God, aiming to reach to the immeasurable goodness of God as it attacks the holiness of the Lord. Sin makes this separation unrecognisable, blinding the eyes of unbelievers. Sin contradicts the goodness of God. It acts contrary to the truth. It is a lie.

The law of God gives knowledge of sin (Rom. 3:20). This is a significant and indispensable function of law in the NT. As essential as this is in God's maintaining the unity of his creation, legal exposure of sin will not ultimately reveal the deadly nature of sin. This is because it is the nature of sin to contradict the law and even argue that it does not understand that there is a fracture of the unity inbuilt in creation. It is also true that sin is violation of the law (1 John 3:4). But it is the gospel of forgiveness that

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<sup>2</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 4, pt 3, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1988, pp. 369f.

<sup>3</sup> Jüngel, *Justification*, p. 104.

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arrests sin. The revelation of the grace of God in the cross enables us to see and feel the judgment of the law, and in that judgment of the atoning cross see the nature of sin as condemned sin (Phil. 3:2–11).

Separation is an aggressive attack on the very being and nature of God:

. . . the sinner, beginning with indifference, must keep flying from God until he actually hate God as a persecutor, unless he grasp the pursuit as God's mercy. Indifference could not stop at indifference, but goes on through aversion to hate.<sup>4</sup>

Separation from God brings an attack on the whole moral fabric of the objective universe. Trevor Hart in an essay on P. T. Forsyth entitled 'Morality, Atonement and the Death of Jesus', says the moral order cannot be tampered with or suspended:

. . . it is an eternal and unchangeable ordinance the demands of which must be met. It inheres in the very nature of reality, is as much part of the fabric of the universe as the molecular structure of hydrogen or the force of gravity, and it cannot be set aside or indeed broken without the moral structure of reality being placed at risk. Thus, when its laws are broken, restitution must follow; holiness, says Forsyth, must assert itself in the face of evil, must *heal* itself . . . God, therefore, could not waive his moral order, but must honour it, for the guilt of humanity is no mere matter of private and personal affront, but rather of a public justice, a public truth, in which God must safeguard not his own honour or his own feelings, but truth itself.<sup>5</sup>

The human conscience and penalty is bound up within the fabric of moral order and separation. Guilt entangled with the lie of sin divides man against himself for the liar can no longer agree with himself, he is split at the foundation of his being as the untruth takes hold and he presses against the ontological nature of creation and is pressed in upon by God who is all the time working to destroy evil in judgment (Rom. 1:16ff.):

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith . . . For in it the righteousness of God is revealed . . . For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all forms of ungodliness and wickedness of those who suppress the truth . . . They exchanged the truth of God for a lie.

Separation from God, coupled with lawlessness, brings confusion and disorder, contradiction and double-dealing. Holiness for God's people means order and integrity. Uncleaness disfigures humanity, putting it outside the camp. Evil is the sin of separation where there can be no community life, for the lie falsifies all that is true. All is destabilised and everything becomes unreliable. Within the chaos of the fracture and its untruth there remains nothing to give life any legitimate meaning, while anger and violence erupt from the seed of discontent and self assertion (Isa. 57:19–21).

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<sup>4</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1994, p. 165.

<sup>5</sup> Trevor Hart (ed.), *Justice the True and Only Mercy: Essays on the Life and Theology of Peter Taylor Forsyth*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1995, pp. 27f.

## **GOD DIRECTS THE DISUNITY**

The essential unity of creation remains, as does God's plan for the ultimate harmonising of all things under Christ' headship. Adam's fall in accepting the untruth of the devil brings into the light the gracious promise of victory through the seed of the woman. The flood over humanity's corruption confirms God's covenant with the creation. Israel's enslavement in the idolatrous culture of Egypt brings liberation for Israel who receives the true worship. The Messiah is born into the stubborn covenant-breaking community of God. Meanwhile, God is working in all the cultures and nations, through their idolatry, to ultimately reveal his glory in the face of his redeeming Son. In the context of man's alienation, hostility and deprivation God exchanges places with all, so that through his Son the world is reconciled with himself.

The revelation of the gospel in the face of Christ shows us how far the lie and the fracture of sin have taken us. It is by the Word of God that we recognise something of the dimensions of our alienation and the actual divisions in human society. We know, by faith, that we are sinners. Faith also tells us what God has done to overcome the lie of sin with the assertion of the truth, reconciling all things through Christ's death on the cross. In Christ we have peace.

## Study 3

# *The Unified Community*

Ian Pennicook

If the world in which we live is beset with deep, humanly irreconcilable divisions then, as the previous session has shown, it is also acutely aware that such a situation ought not to be. But every attempt to bring unity, well meaning as it may be, still faces an ingrained centrifugal tendency, so that any achieved unity remains conditional.

It would be very easy for us to argue certain things as being true, when in fact we are only using syllogisms,<sup>1</sup> human logic starting with certain presuppositions and working from them to a conclusion. Often, of course, that is perfectly valid, but all too often as well logical conclusions do not fit the human situation nor satisfy the fundamental dissatisfaction of humanity. Logically, human attempts to reconcile warring parties should succeed:

. . . modern man is both baffled and disturbed by the states of society which he encounters, and in general the world in which he lives. His primary problem seems to be that he cannot make sense of everything.

He does try to make sense of it, hence his various philosophies, religions, and ideologies which are supposed to correct the ills and spills of society, and bring the nations into line with sensibility. It seems that none of these rationalisations of man and the world about us is fully satisfying. The application of any ideology seems to compound the general problem of human living, rather than eliminate it.<sup>2</sup>

### **REVELATION AS ENCOUNTER**

The apostle Paul wrote that ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself’ (2 Cor. 5:19) and he wrote that because the God who reconciled had first met him and

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<sup>1</sup> A syllogism: A form of reasoning in which from two given or assumed propositions a third proposition may be logically concluded. For example, if A = B and A = C, then B must = C. I sense that so much of our theological reasoning is like this; because we can see a connection between various verses of scripture we assume that that somehow brings us to the truth of the situation. A logical conclusion may be quite different from a *theological* conclusion.

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey C. Bingham, *Creation and Reconciliation*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1987, p. ix.

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reconciled Paul to himself. Paul's doctrine of reconciliation was contingent upon his experience of reconciliation. Hence:

I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus (1 Tim. 1:12–14).

Only then did it become plain that the faith he now had and through which he had received the reconciliation was the way it had always been. From that Paul could argue, against those insisting on the Jewish legal requirements, that Abraham was a man of faith.

This is the way it was with all the apostles. Jesus 'opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written . . ."' (Luke 24:45f.). James recognised that 'the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," and he was called the *friend* of God' (James 2:23). The writer of Hebrews, having 'been enlightened, and [having] tasted the heavenly gift, and [having] shared in the Holy Spirit, and [having] tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come' (Heb. 6:4–5) was then able to recognise the extent to which God had always been in the action of reconciliation. All the ancestors who received approval had been people of faith (Heb. 11:2). First, Abel:

By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith he still speaks (Heb. 11:4).

God's 'approval' meant that Abel was a man 'reconciled' to God. In terms of God's declaration to Cain, 'If you do well, will you not be accepted?' (or, 'Is there not forgiveness'<sup>3</sup>), this would mean that, as a son of Adam, Abel stood in no less need of reconciliation than his brother—and that he received it! What is more, though the details in Genesis are scanty, it would appear that his reconciliation with God was of such a wonder that it provoked his brother to intense hatred and murder.

Then Enoch. Hebrews says that 'he had pleased God' (11:5) and Genesis that 'Enoch walked with God' (5:24). From these two people alone we ought to see that, from a humanity under the curse, God reconciled people to himself. Also, at the time of Seth, himself a son of Adam, 'people began to call on the name of the LORD' (Gen. 4:26). Given that Seth's father had been afraid of God and hidden himself from him, this is surely a tremendous transformation!<sup>4</sup>

God's choice to save Noah and his family was in the context of the horrible evil of all humanity and his purpose to blot out all living things that God had created:

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<sup>3</sup> See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (WBC, vol. 1, Word, Dallas, 1987), pp. 104f.

<sup>4</sup> We might say, 'Of course it was only the outworking of the promise of Genesis 3:15', and we would be correct, but that may only be the syllogistic approach which can reason out biblical details as if they were an equation. That a human being should call on the name of the Lord should leave us almost breathless with wonder.

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The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually (Gen. 6:5).

This wickedness was later specified as the earth being filled with violence (Gen. 6:13), the direct antithesis of unity. Then, out of that mass of corrupt humanity, ‘Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord’ (Gen. 6:8). Wenham points out that ‘find favor’ *wj (chen)* usually occurs when someone without status makes a request to a superior or in asking a favor of God, but that it is rare to find it said outright that one has found favor with God. (One other example of a person finding favor with God is Moses [Exod. 33:17].<sup>5</sup>) Genesis continues:

Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God (Gen. 6:9).

Hebrews again identifies Noah as a man of faith:

By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith (11:7).

Righteousness is essentially what you do. Noah was a man of faith and he did what was right, over against what the world did. Noah walked with God. He was a man reconciled to God and who lived in, who habituated, that reconciliation. That does not mean that Noah was perfect, as the sad events of Genesis 9 demonstrate, so it is plain that reconciliation does not depend on human success. But he was a man ‘linked by a pre-existing covenant with God’,<sup>6</sup> a covenant which was entirely unilateral.

The story of Noah is the story of a new beginning, of creation being taken back to water being over the face of the earth and humanity once more commanded to ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth’ (Gen. 9:1). But the story also shows that the disunity within humanity continues, as the curse on Ham demonstrates (Gen. 9:25). The list of Noah’s descendants in Genesis 10 concludes with the earth being populated as ‘the nations spread abroad on the earth after the flood’ (Gen. 10:32). But the fundamental disunity continues as the story of the tower of Babel demonstrates.

Apparently reconciled with each other, the nations were not reconciled to God so God confused their languages and the result was that the filling of the earth was not the true fulfilment of the mandate given to Adam at creation. There are men and women reconciled to God, but there is no unified community. The only unity is ‘against the LORD’ (Ps. 2:2).

## **THE UNIFIED COMMUNITY**

Out of the fragmentation following Babel, ‘The God of glory appeared to . . . Abraham’ (Acts 7:2). This time, however, it was with the formation of a new com

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<sup>5</sup> *Genesis 1–15*, p. 145.

<sup>6</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, p. 206. See also William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation* (Baker, Grand Rapids, 1984), pp. 25f.

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munity in view and, through that community, the restoration of creational blessing for all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:1–3). No amount of rational expectation could have prepared Abraham for the process by which this would take place.<sup>7</sup> Given the promises of God, he could do nothing else than trust God. The alternative was laughable (Gen. 17:17; 18:12f.). So ‘“Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness”, and he was called the friend of God’ (James 2:23).

The formation of the nation of Israel was because God remembered the covenant made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Exod. 2:24), which, of course, never implies that he had ever forgotten it. But the community formed by covenant at Sinai was also the result of God’s direct encounter with them:

. . . has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by terrifying displays of power, as the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? To you it was shown so that you would acknowledge that the LORD is God; there is no other besides him. From heaven he made you hear his voice to discipline you. On earth he showed you his great fire, while you heard his words coming out of the fire (Deut. 4:34–36).

By their obedience to the covenant made at Sinai, Israel was to be the special possession of the God *whose voice they heard*. (As with Abraham, so with his descendants; it is ‘by faith from first to last’.) The Israelites were totally set apart for God in order to represent him to all the nations (so Exod. 19:5–6). As a ‘priestly kingdom’, Israel is to mediate the blessings of the covenant of creation to the nations. The covenant formed with them was to establish them and to keep them in this great role.

How can the nations be restored to unity?

Many peoples shall come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.’ For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more (Isa. 2:3–4).

‘Instruction’ is *Torah*. Israel at Sinai was given the Law, *Torah*, the instruction or guidance, by which as a sanctified, free and united people<sup>8</sup> they were to live. As such, the *Torah* would have a dual role, positively directing and bringing rich blessing on obedience, and also negatively exposing and delineating behavior which threatened the purpose of the covenant and so bringing the curses which such behavior deserved (Deut. 30:19–20).

The vocation of the community, and not merely of individuals within it, was preserved in the laws of Israel.<sup>9</sup> It was the whole community that was to bear witness to

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<sup>7</sup> Note the full restatement of the promises of Gen. 12:1–3 and 15:5 is made only after Abraham is tested by the command to sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22:16–18).

<sup>8</sup> ‘God’s laws sanctify, free and unite his people.’ Christoph Barth, *God with Us*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1991, p. 139.

<sup>9</sup> See the discussion in Barth, *God with Us*, pp. 147f.

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the truth of God and his character and purpose. Internally, therefore, Israel must avoid those things which would divide them. Thus:

You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD (Lev. 19:17–18).

The reason for this is simply, ‘I am the LORD’. This phrase appears almost fifty times in Leviticus alone, mostly as a statement as to why laws must be obeyed. In other words, whatever pragmatic value the laws may have, in the long run the issue was the community reflecting the character of the Lord who, in faithfulness to his covenant, brought them out of Egypt (see Exod. 20:2). Put positively, ‘you shall love your neighbor as yourself’ means that Israel was to actively seek the good of others because that is what God does.

And that behavior was not only to be ‘in-house’:

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God (Lev. 19:33–34).

God loves the whole world and his intention is blessing for the nations. Israel’s later refusal to recognise that, illustrated by the story of Jonah, was also confronted by Jesus in Matthew 5:43–48. The same reason is given there:

. . . so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous . . . Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matt. 5:45, 48).

‘You shall have one law for the alien and for the citizen: for I am the LORD your God’ (Lev. 24:22) of course assumed that the alien was residing in Israel and participating in Israel’s covenant life (see Exod. 12:43–49). And such was the case: ‘A mixed crowd also went up with them’ (Exod. 12:38). From the beginning peoples not physically descended from Abraham were receiving the blessings promised to him.<sup>10</sup> Sadly, their unity around God was still fragile. In Numbers 11:4 the complaining about the manna was initiated by the resident aliens, ‘the rabble among them’, but soon the Israelites joined them. Nevertheless, the goal of the nations, including Israel, united in worship remained:

On that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, ‘Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage’ (Isa. 19:23–25).

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<sup>10</sup> They ‘became Israelite by theological rather than biological decendancy’: John I. Durham, *Exodus* (WBC, vol. 3, Word, Waco, 1987), p. 172.

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Many of the commandments tended towards the maintenance of the unity which God had brought into being and provided Israel with an ordered structure. But the fundamental unity was still around God himself and so was always a dynamic and not merely a structural unity. Likewise it was always under some sort of attack. It would seem that some of the laws which appear somewhat obscure to us were intended to preserve Israel's identity as *God's* unified people. For example, twice in Exodus (23:19 and 34:26) and once in Deuteronomy (14:21), there is the prohibition against boiling a kid in its mother's milk. Evidently there was something like this practice in Canaanite worship,<sup>11</sup> and to have done the same in Israel would have been to veer dangerously close to doing what the nations around them were doing. The same applies to such items as Deuteronomy 14:1–2 concerning mourning rites. Israel is God's people and must not be like the nations. As Israel is godly, the other nations are to become *like them*.

Israel was the *qahal* of God, the people gathered together by God who redeemed them from their misery, who bore them on eagles' wings and brought them to himself and who spoke to them from the mountain. The idea of Israel not gathered around the living God and hearing the word of the LORD is anathema. It was when Israel detached the *Torah* from God and treated it as a 'thing' to be dealt with in isolation that God said, through the prophet, 'I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings' (Hosea 6:6; cf. Isa. 1:10–17). This problem was by no means uncommon, as Samuel said to Saul:

Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams. For rebellion is no less a sin than divination, and stubbornness is like iniquity and idolatry (1 Sam. 15:22–23).

Whatever redemption meant to people of faith in Israel, the centrifugal tendency remained strong in the population as a whole. Furthermore, the worship of other gods was always a present factor in Israel's corporate life. Joshua told the people:

Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods . . . Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD (Josh. 24:2, 14–15).

Israel had kept the gods of old and the gods of Egypt with them all those years. And they knew what went with the worship of those gods. Perhaps that was a strong part of the attraction (see Exod. 32:6; Num. 25:1ff.). When Israel later demanded a king 'like other nations' (1 Sam. 8:5), they also knew what attached to that, since there was no separation of 'church and state' in the ancient world.<sup>12</sup> King and cultus may sometimes disagree, but they needed each other.

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<sup>11</sup> See Durham, *Exodus*, pp. 334, 462.

<sup>12</sup> The separation of church and state was not formalised until the eighteenth century with the American and then the French revolutions.

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The climax of Israel as a political entity was under David and Solomon. The people were as numerous as the sand by the sea (1 Kings 4:20) and the nations came to Israel, amazed at the prosperity: ‘The whole earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his mind’ (1 Kings 10:24). The high-priestly blessing of Numbers 6:22–27 promised **שְׁלוֹם** (*shalōm*) peace, and it certainly seemed to have come, with **שְׁלֹמֹה** (*Shelomo*) Solomon, and to be centred in **יְרוּשָׁלַיִם** (*yerushalaim*) Jerusalem, both names having a strong similarity to **שְׁלוֹם**.<sup>13</sup>

But the unity, though impressive and even some sort of a paradigm (see Ezek. 34:15–24; etc.), was superficial still. Solomon’s political alliances were also religious compromise (1 Kings 11:1–8), so that under Rehoboam and Jeroboam the disunification of the kingdom became total.

### **THE HEART OF UNITY**

How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! (Ps. 133:1). The question is, how do kindred do it? The remainder of the Psalm provides an answer:

How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!  
It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard,  
on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes.  
It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion.  
For there the LORD ordained his blessing, life forevermore (Ps. 133:1–3).

This unity is unity in Israel’s worship. Central to the worship is the person of the high priest. Zion, though later an alternate name for Jerusalem, was also the name of the mountain on which the Temple stood. To people of faith in Israel, Jerusalem and the worship in the Temple were synonymous. The ‘precious oil’ is the oil used to anoint Aaron to the role of high priest (Lev. 8:12; Exod. 29:7). The oil was poured on the head of Aaron and represented the blessing of God on all the nation. The task of the high priest and his associates was to ‘bless the Israelites’ meaning they were to pronounce the blessing of God on them:

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them,  
The LORD bless you and keep you;  
The LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;  
The LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.  
So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and *I will bless them* (Num. 6:22–27).

When this blessing is seen in the context of the work the high priest actually did in Israel then the richness of the blessing becomes clear. God gives ‘peace’, the **שְׁלוֹם** (*shalōm*) referred to above, because the high priest has made atonement for the sins of the people and, by implication, the people were willing participants in all that he did.

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<sup>13</sup> The etymology of the names is uncertain.

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The events of the Day of Atonement described in Leviticus 16 are paramount in all this. The chapter begins with a reference to the events of Leviticus 10:1–3, where the death of Aaron’s sons is recounted. They offered ‘unholy fire before the LORD’ and Aaron was reminded that:

This is what the LORD meant when he said, ‘Through those who are near me I will show myself holy, and before all the people I will be glorified’ (Lev. 10:3).

All the people must know the holiness of God. In consequence, an elaborate ritual was established. First the high priest, Aaron, must come into the ‘sanctuary inside [behind] the curtain’ (Lev. 16:2) only at the time God appoints. What is more, he may only come into the sanctuary with the blood of the sin offerings, the first for himself and his family (Lev. 16:6, 11–14) and then the second for the people. During this section of the ritual, the high priest was not to wear his usual vestments but to wear only special linen garments.

Next was the ritual of the live goat:

Then Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away into the wilderness by means of someone designated for the task. The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness (Lev. 16:21–22).

Whatever questions may remain about details of this ritual, there can be no doubt about its significance. The sins of the people of Israel were now gone! First there had been the blood of the sin offerings, without which priest and people could not even consider entering the presence of God. But with it, and on the basis of it, he and they were able to physically stand in the worship. ‘The blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified’ (Heb. 9:13). Then their sins were removed from them. But the point that is often unnoticed is what took place after that:

Then Aaron shall enter the tent of meeting, and shall take off the linen vestments that he put on when he went into the holy place, and shall leave them there. He shall bathe his body in water in a holy place, and put on his vestments; then he shall come out and offer his burnt offering and the burnt offering of the people, making atonement for himself and for the people (Lev. 16:23–24).

What is remarkable here is that, once the preceding events had taken place, Aaron could then offer his burnt offering and that of the people. This seemingly unimportant detail actually highlights the fact that with the ritual of the Day of Atonement complete, the usual elements of Israel’s worship could proceed. The heart of Israel’s worship, the sacrificial system, though not totally for ‘atonement’ since there were also ‘peace offerings’ and so on, was only possible on the basis of the removal of guilt. Israel, the unified community, could only understand its identity and vocation on the basis of its forgiveness.

The priestly blessing, then, meant far more than a closing ecclesiastical benediction; it meant that the LORD gives them peace by removing their guilt, the very thing which

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would otherwise fracture the community as it had fractured the nations round about and all humanity.

### **A SCHOOLMASTER TO BRING US TO CHRIST**

If there was a conspicuous problem in Israel, it was that the events of the Day of Atonement needed to be repeated:

*This shall be an everlasting statute for you, to make atonement for the people of Israel once in the year for all their sins. And Moses did as the LORD had commanded him (Lev. 16:34).*

Furthermore, even with the annual ritual, the full purpose of God was yet to be achieved, namely the restoration of the blessing, not merely to Israel but to all the families of the earth. The physical centre of Israel's worship, the tabernacle and later the temple, was not yet 'a house of prayer for all peoples' (Isa. 56:7). The foreigners who join themselves to the LORD were not yet joyful in the house of prayer (Isa. 56:6f.). That was still to come. What is more, sadly, Israel itself was often resistant to it happening. But it would be a mistake not to see that there were, indeed, men and women of faith in Israel who were overwhelmed with joy at all that God had done and was doing. 'How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!'

In describing the function of the priesthood and the sacrificial system, Christoph Barth entitled his section, 'God Granted Reconciliation',<sup>14</sup> and describes the priests as having 'the ministry of reconciliation'. There was truly great joy in Israel:

*Aaron lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them; and he came down after sacrificing the sin offering, the burnt offering, and the offering of well-being. Moses and Aaron entered the tent of meeting, and then came out and blessed the people; and the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people. Fire came out from the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the fat on the altar; and when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces (Lev. 9:22–24).*

This was 'an explosion of pent up feeling',<sup>15</sup> of overwhelming joy that God had received their offerings. And with that awareness came a sense of sweet satisfaction:

*Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit (Ps. 32:1–2).*

*How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light (Ps. 36:7–9).*

*Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever . . . But for me it is good to be near God (Ps. 73:25–26, 28).*

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<sup>14</sup> Barth, *God with Us*, pp. 149ff.

<sup>15</sup> Barth, *God with Us*, p. 152.

## Study 4

# *Unity 'Fails' in All the Earth*

Martin Bleby

### **A PRELIMINARY REFLECTION: DO WE KNOW WHAT TRUE UNITY IS?**

*We come at unity from a disparate understanding—of putting things together, patching up brokenness, reconstituting apartness. So we see unity as effected by contractual arrangements, as we try to fit things together and match up the pieces. This is the coming-together of independent units, by mutual agreement, according to what suits.*

*But what if our basic assumption—that reality is made up of atomistic units that can be joined—is wrong? What if this notion arises from our false and sinful preference for individual autonomy and independence—from God and from each other? No true unity can ever come from that.*

*A jigsaw puzzle, even when completed, has in it the lines of its multiple divisions. It depends on these lines to hold it together. To then frame the completed jigsaw puzzle and hang it on the wall, as if it is eternal, is to entrench dividedness, and to hold up a travesty of unity, of oneness.*

*We do not know what unity is, except by revelation. Except by the action of that revelation whereby we become integrated in ourselves with God and with others. We come to know the true unity that has always been, and to experience it as love. We realise with shame that it is this that we have been battering against, to our own and others' great harm.*

*Why do we do it? There can be no good reason. There is the deceit of autonomy that thinks itself to be God. The myth of isolated splendour. The killer instinct, that brooks no rivals. This is perpetuated by the self-constructed idolatrous infrastructure, driven by the hounds of hell.*

*God takes on the disjointedness with all the power of love—of Himself. Creation itself was a risk—who can hold together a universe flying apart? This love must be greatly trustworthy to be equal to the hazard. To absorb all the disjointedness and flying-apart in itself and remain intact. Not only to remain intact in a self-preserving way, but dynamically to effect the unbroken unity and communion-in-action that is love.*

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### **THE NATURE OF THE UNITY**

Paul the apostle makes a ground-breaking assertion in 1 Corinthians 8:5–6:

Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

Here he asserts the oneness of God, in the face of ‘many gods and many lords’.

We can see here a deliberate reference on Paul’s part to Deuteronomy 6:4–5:<sup>1</sup>

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

The phrase ‘The LORD our God, the LORD is one’ is literally ‘YAHWEH, our God, YAHWEH, One’.<sup>2</sup> Various translations of this include:

- The LORD is our God, the LORD alone
- The LORD our God is one LORD
- The LORD is our God, the LORD is one (*NRSV* text and footnotes)

The most faithful rendering would appear to be the one we have chosen here (from the *NRSV* footnote). This comports with Jesus’ rendering in Mark 12:29: ‘the Lord our God, the Lord is one’. This is referring to something more than singleness or aloneness. It is more also than the uniqueness of God over against the multiplicity of ‘gods’ and ‘lords’. God has a oneness within Himself. That the words, ‘the LORD is *one*’, are followed by the words, ‘You shall *love* the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might’, suggests that we are being asked to do something here that matches the way God is, and indicates that this oneness of God is the oneness, not of unitary singleness, aloneness, or uniqueness, but of love.

For this to be so, God could not be monadic or monolithic (like a single block of stone). Genesis 1:26–27 (‘let *us* make man in *our* image’), Isaiah 6:8 (‘Whom shall *I* send, and who will go for *us*?’) and other passages point to a plurality in God, with a unity that is not just composite, but integral.<sup>3</sup> To ‘love’ this God is to cleave to this God in a relational way that matches the relationality of His oneness.

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<sup>1</sup> N. T. Wright in *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Lion, Oxford, 1997, pp. 66–9) masterfully points out how in 1 Corinthians 8:6, Philippians 2:5–11 and Colossians 1:15–20, Paul actually incorporates Jesus into such classic Hebrew texts as Deuteronomy 6:4, Isaiah 45:23, and the monotheistic Psalms, to say that, for Paul, ‘the meaning of the word “God” includes not only Jesus, but specifically the crucified Jesus’.

<sup>2</sup> See a thorough treatment of this passage in Geoffrey Bingham, ‘The Reconciliation of All Things—II’, in *The Vandal* (NCPI, Blackwood, 1990), pp. 148–9.

<sup>3</sup> Bingham, *The Vandal*, p. 150.

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In what amounts to 'a radically revised Jewish picture of the one true God',<sup>4</sup> Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 8:6 that Jesus Christ is part of this oneness of God as Creator, Upholder and Goal of all things. This is where the mystery of God's oneness as love, not only within Himself but towards us, comes out into the open:

. . . God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another (1 John 4:8–11).

No less is the Spirit an essential part of this oneness-relationship-in-action. The coming of this Son, as the one in whom 'God is with us' to 'save his people from their sins', is by the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:20–23); as it is also 'through the eternal Spirit' that Christ 'offered himself without blemish to God' (Heb. 9:14)—as, we may say, the Spirit is inextricably in all places before, after and between the birth and death of the Messiah. Thus Jesus is able to speak of 'the [one] name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Matt. 28:19).

The point Paul is making in the verses leading up to this remarkable statement in 1 Corinthians 8:6 is that, in a humanly divided situation, such as existed in the Corinthian church, it is not enough to know stuff, not even theological stuff:

Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but *anyone who loves God is known by him* (1 Cor. 8:1–3).

The unity is wholly relational—it is love.<sup>5</sup>

### **UNITY AND HEADSHIP**

At the risk of repeating what may have been said already in this School, we continue to investigate the nature of this true unity, that we might more clearly delineate what was under attack in the 'failure' of this unity.

Passages such as John 10:30 ('The Father and I are one') and 14:28 ('the Father is greater than I') indicate that in this oneness of the Godhead there is a relational ordering, of super- and sub-ordination. Geoffrey Bingham, in hesitating to use the phrase 'hierarchical order of authority' because of its corrupted connotations, says 'Their unity is that of ontological precedence of being'.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 74.

<sup>5</sup> In contrast to what we say here, we could say that in the religion of Islam, for instance, Allah is one, but Allah has no son, and relatedness to Allah is anathema. This is not to say that followers of Islam, being made, with all human beings, in the image of God, do not find human and even godly ways of loving.

<sup>6</sup> Bingham, *The Vandal*, p. 155. He also has here an effective rebuttal of the claim that this ordering is confined to Christ's incarnate Sonship only. This whole area, and its implications for love and unity, is powerfully set out in Geoffrey Bingham, *The Authority and Submission of Love* (NCPI, Blackwood, 1982).

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In Zechariah 14:9, the unity of God is linked with God's kingship over all things in the end time:

And the LORD will become king over all the earth; on that day the LORD will be one and his name one.

Paul in Ephesians 1:10 speaks of the Father's 'plan for the fullness of time, to gather up [unite] all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth'. The word for 'gather up' or 'unite' is *anakephalaaiosasthai*, which means literally to 'head up'. These two references come together as one in 1 Corinthians 15:28:

When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all.

There is an obvious correspondence here between unity and headship, authority and love.

A reflection of this correspondence may be found in the subtle but clear relational ordering of husband and wife in marriage, parents and children in family, employers and employees in the workplace, elders and brethren in the church, and rulers and governed in society.<sup>7</sup> This range shows something of the dimensions of wonderful unity when it is present, and of fearsome disorder when this relational ordering and unity is contested. Even within the human body it has been graphically postulated: 'Cancer is a cell that refuses to live in love with the rest of the body'.<sup>8</sup>

We only need to look on the human scene to know that a vacuum in leadership brings about a disjunction of constituent elements and, often, a jostling for positions. Even when good leadership is in place, the contesting of that will give rise to destabilisation and disunity. On the cosmic scene, if authority is integral to the unity that is love, hatred and disunity will come from a contesting of true headship.

### **DEMONIC DISORDER AND HUMAN MAYHEM**

We can now see more clearly what happened when this unity of God and all things was contested. If this unity is the way things are by creation ('ontologically'), then as long as God continues to be God, there will be no real rupture in the seamless robe. Hence the inverted commas around the word 'fails' in the title of this study: *Unity 'Fails' in All the Earth*. If that unity holds, then it cannot be said to have failed. But that this was really at issue in the most serious way is shown in the cataclysm of the Cross. Make no mistake: the very throne of God Himself was under assault. In the end it would have to be either God or us—either the will of God or the will of the devil and his human subjects would have to prevail. Whether the love–authority would hold and the relational oneness be maintained and expanded out into all the

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<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Mark 10:42–45; 1 Cor. 11:1–16; Eph. 5:21 – 6:9; Col. 3:18 – 4:1; 1 Thess. 5:12–28; 1 Tim. 5:17–22; Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 2:13 – 3:12.

<sup>8</sup> Dr Ian Murdoch at an earlier NCTM Pastors' School. See also Siew Kiong Tham, 'The Body of Christ and the Human Body', NCTM Monday Pastors' Study Group, August 2001.

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earth—and that not by force but by nothing other than the power of its own love—was by no means certain until Christ had said ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit’, and breathed his last (Luke 23:46).

Isaiah 14:13–14, directed against the king of Babylon, spells out the dynamics of Satan’s assault upon the throne of God:

You said in your heart,  
‘I will ascend to heaven;  
I will raise my throne  
above the stars of God;  
I will sit on the mount of assembly  
in the far north;  
I will ascend to the tops of the clouds,  
I will make myself like the Most High.’

Nothing less than the death of God, and His replacement by Satan, is envisaged. Is this why Jesus says of the devil, ‘He was a murderer from the beginning’—and that on the basis of lies and untruth (John 8:44)?

Since that is the same agenda that Satan inveigled us into (Gen. 3:5, ‘you will be as God’), then we will all be heading for the same place, and at each other’s throats to get there. It is not hard to see that there will be no inherent unity in this quest. Its rationale of self-advancement will in the end pit its participants against each other, however much it may suit them to be in cahoots with each other along the way.<sup>9</sup> A classic depiction of this is in Revelation 17. Here we see the harlot Babylon riding on the beast with seven heads and ten horns, standing for the world system that is opposed to God and His people, and the ruling powers that have given over their power to the alternate ‘ruler of this world’. There is a measure of unity represented here, in their concerted though doomed opposition (as in Psalm 2) to God and His Messiah:

These are united in yielding their power and authority to the beast; they will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful (Rev. 17:13–14).

But we soon come upon the inexplicable but understandable breakdown of the unholy alliance:

And he said to me, ‘The waters that you saw, where the whore is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages. And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the whore; they will make her desolate and naked; they will devour her flesh and burn her up with fire. For God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by agreeing to give their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God will be fulfilled. The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth’ (Rev. 17:15–18).

Fuelling this rebellion is the resort to idolatry. Here human beings, built for unity with and worship of God, find their alternative sources and foci of energy to maintain

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<sup>9</sup> The song ‘*I’ll Pat Your Back, You Pat Mine*’ (New Creation Hymn Book, no. 283, Martin Bleby), traces the demise of this ‘unity’ based on mutual self-advantage.

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'life' in their disregard and defiance of God.<sup>10</sup> These idols are intended to endow their worshippers with the ultimate freedom of self-expression. Through them and their false worship, however, the demons come to exercise a fierce tyranny (see 1 Cor. 10:19–22). None of this is conducive to unity—there will be as many self-projected 'gods' as there are individuals or ethnic groupings, and all of them will be sectarian rivals in the end.

### ***'This Thing Is from Me'***

In the midst of this break-up, we need to note how God gets on with being God, with regard to the structural integrity of His created universe. The words in Revelation 17:17, 'God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose', gives us a keynote.

In Genesis 11:1–9 we see an attempt to subvert God's purpose for human beings to 'fill the earth' (Gen. 1:28; repeated in 9:1), as they build a tower to 'make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth' (Gen. 11:4). God Himself aborts the project by bringing about disunity through the confusion of languages. This results in the scattering of them 'over the face of all the earth'—thus God's intention is carried out. Only at Pentecost is this disunity healed—not by reversion to a single language, but by the turning of all the languages, disreputable and sinful in their origin, to a unified declaration of the mighty works of God (see Acts 2:8–11).

We may take it that even the prevalence of idolatry is subject to the purposeful directives of the living God. Deuteronomy 32:8–9 could indicate that the divided nations had their 'gods' allocated to them by God:

When the Most High apportioned the nations, when he divided humankind, he fixed the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the gods; the Lord's own portion was his people, Jacob his allotted share.

Certainly the inception, migration, territorial occupation, and the rise and fall of nations is all intended on God's part to serve His purpose of bringing people to Himself:

And he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him (Acts 17:26–27).

Disunity will be readily imposed by God as judgment on an unsatisfactory situation. Following the apostasy of Solomon, the recalcitrance of Rehoboam precipitated the break-up of Israel into the northern and southern kingdoms. This 'was a turn of affairs brought about by the LORD that he might fulfill his word, which the LORD had spoken by Ahijah the Shilonite to Jeroboam son of Nebat' (1 Kings 12:15; see 11:29–36). Jeroboam resorted to the deliberate idolatry of the golden calves, with a fabricated priesthood, to perpetuate the division (see 1 Kings 12:25–31). When Rehoboam

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<sup>10</sup> For a thorough treatment, see Geoffrey Bingham, *Dear Darling Idols: Lords and Gods Piffing and Appalling*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1981 (also pub. as Study 45 in *Living Faith Studies*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1981).

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sought to reunite the nation by force of arms, however, God forbid him, with the words, 'this thing is from me' (1 Kings 12:24). God's prophetic vision of the end-time envisages a restored and idol-free unity between Judah and Ephraim, under the 'one shepherd . . . my servant David' (see Ezek. 37:15–28).

### ***The Holy Seed***

Isaiah the prophet, at the time of his call, was given to see the coming dismemberment of Israel, until it was virtually annihilated:

Then I said, 'How long, O Lord?' And he said:  
'Until cities lie waste  
without inhabitant,  
and houses without people,  
and the land is utterly desolate;  
until the LORD sends everyone far away,  
and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land.  
Even if a tenth part remain in it,  
it will be burned again,  
like a terebinth or an oak  
whose stump remains standing  
when it is felled' (Isa. 6:11–13).

Isaiah was called upon to warn Ahaz against setting this terrible process in train by his ill-advised invitation to the Assyrians to help him oppose Aram and Ephraim (see Isa. 7), and his penchant for Assyrian worship in preference to the dictates of Yahweh (see 2 Kings 16:10–18). It was a crucial moment in the history of Israel, which was about to plunge it into centuries of irreversible subjugation. God was prepared to move heaven and earth to give Ahaz a sign that would prevent him, and Ahaz piously refused.

The sign that God gave nevertheless to Ahaz was the sign of 'a son . . . Immanuel [God is with us]'. This is the 'holy seed' (Isa. 6:13) that is the stump of fractured and devastated Israel. This is the one who is called 'Prince of Peace' (Isa. 9:6), whose righteous rule will bring a unity to the whole earth that is pictured as former predators and their victims living in trustful peace with each other, in an earth that 'will be full of the knowledge of the LORD'—in all His relational unity—'as the waters cover the sea' (see Isa. 11:1–10).

## Study 5

# *The King Comes to Reconcile and Unify*

Grant Thorpe

Jesus Christ has come to guide our feet in the way of peace (Luke 1:79). Zechariah had been awakened to what God would do through his Christ. He was now alive to the meaning of the promises that God would send a King in whom Israel would be freed to serve God in holiness, be saved through the forgiveness of their sins and be guided in the way of peace.

Given the ‘fracture’ and ‘failure’ of unity in the earth, it is no small undertaking to guide the world in the way of peace. We should be assured and settled in our minds who it is this Christ whom God has sent to us that is about this ministry. The way of peace is not in ourselves. Nor do we have mere principles of reconciliation. Rather, we have a reconciling Lord and we are his servants. It is on his behalf that we entreat people to be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:20).

By peace, we mean reconciliation with God, healing of persons whose lives are torn apart, and reconciliation between the unruly and hostile elements in this world. We will need to be clear about what Christ has done and what he does, and so, what it means for us to announce ‘Peace!’ (Isa. 52:7). I will begin with a prophecy of Isaiah concerning peace, and describe the role of Israel’s king. Then I will speak about Jesus as the King and his powerful ministry of gathering into one all the children of God who are scattered abroad (John 11:52).

### **‘THE WAY OF PEACE’ IN ISAIAH 59**

Isaiah said of Israel: ‘the way of peace they do not know’ (v. 8). Paul quotes this with reference to both Jews and Gentiles (Rom. 3:17). In other words, the gospel of Christ speaks to the situation mentioned in Isaiah 59.

The LORD was ready to save his people (v. 1), but Isaiah says, ‘your iniquities have made a *separation* between you and your God and your sins have *hidden His face*

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from you, so that He does not hear' (v. 2). Then he speaks of violence (v. 3), injustice (v. 4) and lack of truth (v. 15) in the arenas of public life. Lack of community among ourselves is of one piece with lack of communion with God. Israel was 'denying the LORD' (v. 13).

The prophet confessed his sins and the sins of his people, even anger on account of the havoc these sins caused in the community (v. 11; cf. John 11:38; Rom. 8:22–23). He knew that he, with Israel, stood under God's judgment. This, of itself, could have immobilised him and he would have remained part of the problem, but he was shown that God would act.

There was no man to act on behalf of Israel, but the LORD intervened (v. 16) and came as Redeemer (v. 20). He would save Israel because of his promise. That is, he would judge the evil and turn the tide of evil in the land, and he would do this by judging his enemies (v. 18), teaching people to fear him (v. 19) and redeeming those who turned from their sins (v. 20). He would reconcile Israel to himself and grant peace in their borders. The two actions are always of one piece.

### **THE KING WHO WOULD MAKE PEACE**

The task of the Davidic king was not only administrative or military, though these were important. The king was called to have a copy of the law and lead his people in fulfilment of this covenant with God (Deut. 17:14–20; e.g. 1 Kings 2:4; 2 Kings 23:21, 25) so as to receive the blessing promised by the covenant. If they did not keep the covenant, they would suffer God's wrath. In line with this, Israel prayed that God would give Solomon righteousness and justice, so that the righteous would flourish and peace would abound (Ps. 72:1, 7).

Covenant breaking is, first of all, idolatry. Every person or nation devoted to idols is caught up in the pollutions of those idols and with the frustrations of those idols not being able to deliver what they promise. Then, there is the hostility that arises when people are devoted to different objects of worship. Then again, behind all idols are evil spirits, and so we, and our lands, are caught in the machinations, recriminations and destructions of Satan and his demons.

There could be no peace for Israel while they worshipped idols and lived under God's wrath. What should amaze us, then, is that God did not merely moralise with his people when they failed. He did not just tell them what to do to have his blessing. He promised them a future when he would lead them out of his judgments and told them about the King who would defeat their enemies. This should be linked with Isaiah 59 in which God himself would arise to lead his people in righteousness and peace.

Isaiah tells us about the Prince of Peace: 'Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end' (Isa. 9:7). When King Ahaz would not believe in God's promise of protection, Isaiah was taught not to fear what everyone else feared but to fear the Lord who would be a sanctuary to them (Isa. 8:11–14). To these people, God promised a Son (of David) who would break the oppression under which they lived.

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He would be called ‘Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace’.

Clearly, Christ fulfils this prophecy. His counsel did and does work wonders, his presence was and is God’s presence among us. Because of his presence, we are no longer orphans (John 15:18) but are provided for, and redeemed (Isa. 63:16; cf. 11:4), and we are led into peace. Alec Motyer writes: ‘The *Prince of Peace* is himself the whole man, the perfectly integrated, rounded personality, at one with God and humankind, but also as a Prince, these are the benefits he administers to his people’.<sup>1</sup> Peace can only come from Christ, the true man of integrity, who is one with God, who is also wholly related to sinful humanity through grace and goes out to meet the need of his neighbour—on the cross. It is this man that God has given to us as King and his peace touches all over whom he reigns.

All this would not happen in a corner. Such a restored kingship would mean an end to violence because the whole earth would know God (Isa. 11:1–9; also Ps. 72:7). Micah tells about the child of Bethlehem who would ‘shepherd His flock in the strength of the LORD’ and be their peace (Micah 5:4–5). When God established his Son in power (Ps. 2:7ff.), the raging of the nations would be of no avail. Rather, the nations would be the inheritance of God’s King. He would rule among his foes (Ps. 110:1–2).

Zechariah announced that the King would come, victorious but meek, and bring peace to the nations. God would do this because of the blood of his covenant with his people (Zech. 9:10–11; with Matt. 21:5). In the light of such promises, God called his people to live in his peace with one another (Zech. 8:10–19).

Only in the reign of God’s anointed Messiah can the powerful forces of disarray and disunity be subdued. They are the result of fear and ambition and every vileness of sinful humanity and demonic incitement and torment. These, in turn, are God’s judgment on those who seek peace without their Maker. Therefore, we should see the coming of Jesus as what it is, a revelation of grace and restoration for enemies.

### **CHRIST ANNOUNCING PEACE**

We can now see the significance of God identifying Jesus as his Son after his baptism (Matt. 3:17). He would be the King who would unify the nations by reigning in righteousness (Ps. 2:1). The Father’s address to his Son linked this prophecy with another one—Isaiah 42:1–4—the chosen Servant in whom he delighted. This King would establish justice in a ‘quiet, unaggressive, unthreatening ministry’,<sup>2</sup> and, as the subsequent ‘Suffering Servant’ songs show, he would do this through great suffering on behalf of his people.

Jesus came ‘announcing peace’ in terms of the kingdom. God’s King had come to reign (Mark 1:14). As he moved among the people of Israel, he proclaimed peace to one whom he healed (Mark 5:34; Luke 8:48), and to a sinner he restored (Luke 7:50).

The apostles bestowed peace to villages they visited, that is, where there were ‘son[s] of peace’ or those who received the King of peace (Luke 10:5–11). The mission of the

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<sup>1</sup> Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, IVP, Leicester, 1994, p. 103.

<sup>2</sup> Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, p. 320.

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seventy-two was to proclaim the presence of the kingdom and give evidence of this by healing those who were sick. The dynamics of this mission are made clearer by the instruction of Jesus to the disciples when they returned. He had given them enormous authority to act but said, 'do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven' (Luke 10:18–20). Peace was not just healing and exorcism but the acceptance with God that that healing demonstrated.

Zechariah had said Messiah would 'guide [our] feet into the way of peace'. This links with the longing Jesus expressed as he rode into Jerusalem—that Israel would know the way of peace (Luke 19:42). In fact, it was not only Israel but the apostles as well who did not know the way of peace.

### **THE SERVANT KING'S TEACHING**

Jesus was both Messiah and Suffering Servant. He came in meekness. The whole action of reconciliation and establishing of peace is done through gentleness, humility and suffering.

The Sermon on the Mount is a revelation of life under the King. While Jesus constantly speaks of 'your Father', he is revealing what he knew of his Father and the life of reconciliation and unity which he had come to establish. As King of the kingdom, he would bring to his subjects the peace that he himself had.

He begins by speaking of the kingdom—that it belongs to the poor in spirit (Matt. 5:3). He says the earth will be inherited by the meek (Matt. 5:5). Later, as King of the kingdom, he came riding into his inheritance humbly (Matt. 21:5). The children of the Father's kingdom would be merciful (Matt. 5:7) and they would be peacemakers—or children of God (Matt. 5:9). Again, kingdom people are salt and light for the world (Matt. 5:13–16). This is the way of peace for his people and for the world.

Jesus said anger with another person is subject to the judgment of God as much as is murder (Matt. 5:21–26). We stand in danger, not just of reprisal from the one we offend, but from God. He who announces peace calls on us, under severe threat, to be reconciled to those we have offended. Similar processes are provided for those who are the offended (Matt. 18:15–20). Jesus assumed that we would not primarily want to gain our rights but rather gain our brother or sister who had offended us. Christ is with his Church as she undertakes this action.

Teaching in the Sermon on the Mount continues with teaching about lust, divorce, retaliation, love of enemies and care for the needy. All of these show that he was introducing a way of peace with God and neighbour that surpassed anything Israel had been taught before and certainly replaced any false teachings that had gathered around the law. Jesus taught us to pray, to store treasure in heaven rather than on earth, to turn from anxiety and to our Father, to reject a critical spirit and treat others as we would wish to be treated. Clearly, these things are all an agenda for unity, but they cannot be separated from him who spoke them or from his presence to effect them.

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He is the King and it is his presence that makes these things, not merely the right way to live, but the way of life.

Peace making was not a natural activity for the disciples. Rather, it was 'natural' for them to compete with one another and dispute their relative positions in the kingdom. Jesus said to them, 'Be at peace with one another' (Mark 9:50) and he taught them to serve one another (Mark 10:42–45).

### **CHRIST BRINGING PEACE**

Christ brought his own peace, as distinct from that of the world. His peace had to do with his going to the Father and the coming of the Spirit (John 14:27) and on being in him who had overcome the world (John 16:33).

At the time of his resurrection, Jesus announced peace to his disciples (Luke 24:36ff.; John 20:19, 21, 26). D. A. Carson quotes Beasley-Murray:

Jesus' 'Shalom!' on Easter evening is the complement of 'it is finished' on the cross, for the peace of reconciliation and life from God is now imparted . . . Not surprisingly it is included, along with 'grace,' in the greeting of every epistle of Paul in the NT.<sup>3</sup>

Carson also calls this peace 'the unqualified well-being that would characterize the people of God once the eschatological kingdom had dawned'.<sup>4</sup>

### **SUMMARY**

Jesus came to reconcile and unify, to bring peace with God and among men and women. This peace relied on his own presence and power and his defeat of both demons and death. Jesus was the King of Israel and Lord of the earth and his 'agenda' for peace was the body of prophecy that announced his coming.

He had no time for peace where there was no peace (cf. Jer. 6:14; 8:11). For him, lack of peace was not just a social disaster but the sign of a broken covenant (Isa. 24:5). He did not attempt to sedate the guilt of God-haters and idolaters. He demonstrated the presence of the kingdom by being free of prejudicial assessments. He gave evidence that now was the time for God to favour those who turned to him.

Then, he would 'lay down' his life and 'die for the nation' so that there would be one flock and one shepherd (John 10:16) and so he could gather into one all the scattered children of God (John 11:52). His followers are to live in the same manner as he did and bear witness to his reconciling life.

We can now see the significance of the Father identifying his Son as the King. We can also appreciate the power of Jesus announcing peace to this or that person, and to us all in the resurrection. Jesus had come to people at war with God, and far from him. However, he would not fail or be discouraged until he had established justice, and peace, in the earth.

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<sup>3</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Apollos, Leicester, 1991, p. 647.

<sup>4</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 647.

## Study 6

# *The Divisive Sin, the Wrath of God, and God's Righteousness–Reconciliation*

Geoffrey Bingham

### **THE PLAN OF THE STUDY**

Under this most comprehensive heading we have three themes and each one deserves a substantial study on its own. In fact 'divisive sin' has been dealt with in Studies 3 and 4, and the matter of 'reconciliation' in Study 5. Even so, we need to bring them together in one treatment as sin is the cause of division and disunity and the provoking of God's wrath. Hence there is the need for that righteousness of God which will reconcile Man to God.

### **THE DIVISIVE SIN**

In this section we do not have the space and opportunity to expound the nature of sin. We can only view it as to its divisiveness. Sin is linked with Satan (cf. 1 John 3:7–8) and has its action in deceit. Unity only exists in the truth. The unity which creation knew and which Man experienced before the Fall was a harmony most beautiful between God and Man, God and all of creation, and Man and the creation of which Man was part. We saw the factors which combined to make this perfect peace and joy. They were God's own creative Triune Being of love producing love unity; His creation of Man in His own unitive image; His pre-creation purposes for Man and for the rest of creation thus shaping the form and scheme of all things; His giving of the mandate–franchise of the earth to Man as its king; the giving of His own law (Torah) to Man; the giving of blessing to both Man and creation for fulfilling 'the counsel of his will'; and the giving of the gifts of His covenant, that is, vocation, the seventh-day rest and human marriage.

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To understand something of the nature of sin<sup>1</sup> we must first see it as the primal couple's rejection of God's word in favour of the word of the serpent—a principle which was to be seen down through all history—and so was a rejection of God, His law and His purpose for all history. This was a blank refusal to be God's co-worker in 'the counsel of his will' and so in the wellbeing of the whole creation. We often think of sin as breaking or opposing the law of God, and whilst it is certainly that, such sinful action is the 'fruit' of sin whereas sin's root is in the rejection of God, the refusal to depend on His blessing for the accomplishment of His will, and the thinking that makes law as Torah a bondage instead of freedom. Because we are going to deal with the wrath of God on sin, we need to see the heinousness of it and devilry that rages through Man's history as he either spurns the mandate—franchise as unworthy of his attention in the light and practice of idolatry, *or*, in pride and arrogance decides that he can accomplish it in his own strength, imagining himself to be righteous when such an endeavour is dangerously self-righteousness. This latter approach is taken because the law innate to Man by creation demands such 'righteous' living by law, and is the key to the joy and delight of the human race which God intended.

It can be seen that when Man in arrogance—self-righteous or deliberately evil—goes his own way, dreadful divisions result throughout the tribes, families and persons of humanity. All unity, harmony, love and relationships are dependent on Man as the image of God being one with God in His plan for history and the Torah which is His own, as also it is implanted in Man for true living and true (human) being and doing. It is the law of love shown in the perichoresis of the Divine Community, and intended for perichoretic living in the human community, fed by its union and communion with God who created it. The division between the primal man and woman show the principle of Isaiah 59:1–2, 'Behold, the LORD'S hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you so that he does not hear'. In Romans 1:18–32 (cf. 3:9–18) the divisions between Man and God and all humans is because of sin and the account should be read thoughtfully. Utter union and communion of the human race cannot happen until atonement (at-one-ment) is made, Man being reconciled to God and then all human beings to one another and their creation. How then can it be made? The fact of God's wrath on Man stares us in the face and without atonement the human situation cannot be remedied and relationships restored.

### **THE WRATH OF GOD**

Again it is impossible for us to deal generally with the nature of God's wrath in this short section.<sup>2</sup> If we look at the Scriptures then we are faced with the fact that God is

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<sup>1</sup> By nature of the case it is impossible to comprehend the essence of sin, if indeed 'essence' is a word which can be used. Romans 3:20 states that 'through the law comes knowledge of sin' but Paul is scarcely saying we actually know sin by the law, but is showing that the law is not there to justify us but bring us to the fact of sin.

<sup>2</sup> See my book *The Wrath of His Love: Studies in the Wrath of God and of Man* soon to be published, pp. 1–2. It is dealt with in *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, Leon Morris (Tyndale Press, London, 1965), pp. 147f., 179f.; John Baillie, *God Was in Christ* (Faber and Faber, London, 1948); Emil Brunner, *The Mediator* (London, 1942); John Carroll, *Guilt* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1985); Geoffrey Bingham, *The Revelation of St. John the*

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angry in both Testaments. We may not like the idea at all, but we have to say that God's wrath is a biblical fact, however we may dislike it or disagree with it. I quote from my book *The Wrath of His Love: Studies in the Wrath of God and Man*:

We need, then, to observe a few helpful rules in order to make sense of the subject. The first is that we should not be seeing God's wrath as anthropomorphic. By this we mean that we should not use human wrath as an analogy of Divine wrath, picturing it as a kind of enlarged human wrath. There is little about human wrath which is attractive for it is often expressed in violence, in irrational modes, and is generally quite dangerous since it is not the wrath of righteous persons. If it is the expression of self-righteousness, self-justification or the operation of a 'bleeding heart', that is, anger at what seems to be injustice, then it is, itself, to be feared, for over history so much homicide has resulted from these irrational attitudes. The sight of a person in rage can be quite chilling. No wonder we shudder at the idea of wrath or anger and, if we see God's wrath to be of this ilk, of course we will refuse to believe the God who is love has anger, this kind of rage. Certainly His wrath is not an uncontrollable fury such as we see in human rage. Sadly enough the words 'anger', 'rage', 'wrath' and 'fury', which are often used of God's wrath in the Bible, are wrongly interpreted so that we think He is virtually irrational.

Another rule for understanding Divine wrath is to see God is essentially love, and not essentially wrath. If this revelation should ever come to us it will be breathtaking, for to know that God is love is to know Him personally (1 John 4:8, 16) and to live in Him as love. Even so, the Scriptures depict God as having wrath. If we read the text closely we will see that God is provoked *to* wrath rather than *is* wrath. This is by no means a quibble over words. Most of us would agree that Paul's 'Be angry but do not sin', has a depth of sensible meaning. Call it indignation if we will, but we disapprove of certain despicable, cowardly and evil forms of conduct. Hence we have judges, judgments, courts, and war-crimes trials. We do not think this sensitivity to wrong thinking and wrong action to be a bad thing. Indeed that kind of ethical wrath helps to keep society to some degree in check. This rule, then, should help us to see that there can be a hatred of evil on God's part which is the expression of a wholesome moral mind. The more one loves—so to speak—the more one will disapprove of unloving and impure action. We need to be careful that righteous indignation does not pass over to self-righteousness indignation which is the heart of hypocrisy.

Probably none of this advice will be taken by those who have a hateful dread of Divine wrath. Experiences of irrational human anger in childhood will certainly give us bad images of any kind of wrath, be it Divine or human. It will need a revelation of God as essentially love, and His use of retributive and juridical judgments to be seen as the actions not of Divine irrationality but of His love. We need to be able to speak of 'the wrath which comes from love'. Indeed we will speak of this in this present study. Surely we recognise that sometimes in us there is anger which springs from love and not venom. We must credit God with that kind of love.

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*Divine* (NCPI, Blackwood, 1993); James Denney, *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation* (James Clarke & Co., London, 1959), and *St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (The The Expositor's Greek Testament, vol. 2, pt 2, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1951); F. Godet, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1969); Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1980); John G. McKenzie, *Guilt: Its Meaning and Significance* (Allen and Unwin, Great Britain, 1962); Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (New International Commentary on the New Testament, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1996); Alan Richardson, *An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament* (SCM, London, 1974); R. V. G. Tasker, *The Biblical Doctrine of the Wrath of God* (London, 1951); Paul Tournier, *Guilt and Grace* (Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1962).

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Our aim is to show the nature of God's wrath in Romans 1:18 – 3:20. To do this we have to understand that Paul is not out simply to speak of God's wrath as a subject or using it as a threat. In Romans 1:16–17 he is saying that the gospel is powerful in that a person is saved just by believing the righteousness of God as it is shown in the gospel. In 1:18 he uses the connecting word 'for' (*gar*), his aim being to show that all have sinned and are under the wrath of God, and that the gospel saves us from this wrath, the matter we shall deal with in our next section (see Rom. 3:21–26). If we do not understand, or believe in, God's wrath then we will not understand the gospel of salvation for it is the gospel which saves us from wrath. In 1:18–32 Paul is saying that God's wrath is being revealed from heaven and is being revealed in the act of God in giving Man up to *his* sin and *its* guilt (vv. 24, 26, 28). Man experiences this wrath as his sins and their guilts. This causes Man to compound his sins and so the guilts of the sins.<sup>3</sup> This *is* the wrath of God! I now quote from a few commentators:

James Denney says:

With ver. 24 the Apostle turns from this sin [idolatry] to its punishment. Because of it [*dio*] God gave them up. To lose God is to lose everything: to lose the connection with Him in constantly glorifying and giving Him thanks, is to sink into an abyss of darkness, intellectual and moral. It is to become fitted for wrath at last, under the pressure of wrath all the time. Such, in idea, is the history of humanity to Paul, as interpreted by its issue in the moral condition of the pagan world when he wrote. [*paredoken*] in all three places (vss. 24, 26, 28) expresses the judicial action of God.<sup>4</sup>

Ernst Käsemann comments:

The threefold [*paredoken autos ho theos*] . . . marks the changing from guilt to fate . . . Guilt and punishment remain materially the same . . . Portrayal of guilt is increasingly shorter and that of corruption increasingly extensive, culminating in the list of vices in vv. 29–31 . . . The cosmos which will not recognise God's deity in service becomes a chaos of unfettered perversion . . . The manifestation of God's wrath . . . does not remain in the purely private or . . . moral sphere. It leads from the inner darkening of existence to the objectifying of folly in idolatry. In its cosmic scope it anticipates the eschatologically public character of the last judgment'.<sup>5</sup>

Leon Morris, speaking on verse 24 and following, has this to say:

The verb *gave them over* shows that God is active and not passive in the process (cf. Ps. 81:12; Acts 7:42). This does not mean it is vindictive. That would be untrue both to the facts of the case and to the apostle's thought. Throughout this epistle Paul insists that God's purpose is one of mercy (cf. 11:32). Elsewhere the situation is viewed from another angle: people gave themselves up to licentious behaviour (Eph. 4:19); they are responsible human beings. But here the thought is that God is active in the process. He shuts people up to the consequences of their sin so that they will see their error and look to him for mercy and for a better way. Notice that Paul does not call

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<sup>3</sup> For the guilt of sins see Psalm 32:5, 'the guilt of my sin', and Jeremiah 33:8, 'I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me'.

<sup>4</sup> Denney, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, p. 593.

<sup>5</sup> Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, p. 44.

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on God to punish sinners. Rather, he has the profound thought that their immersion in their sins is itself their punishment (cf. 'one is punished by the very things by which he sins', Wis. 11:16).<sup>6</sup>

Douglas J. Moo similarly speaks of the present wrath of God on sinners and their sin. He says:

If, then, 'reveal' indicates the actual inflicting of God's wrath, when, and how, does it take place? Although God will inflict his wrath on sin finally and irrevocably at the end of time (2:5), there is an anticipatory working of God's wrath in the events of history. Particularly, as vv. 24–28 suggest, the wrath of God is now visible in his 'handing over' of human beings to their chosen way of sin and all its consequences. As Schiller's famous aphorism puts it, 'The history of the world is the judgement of the world.' It is this judgment of the world that the present infliction of God's wrath is intended to reveal. For the present experience of God's wrath is merely a foretaste of what will come on the day of judgment. Furthermore, what both the warning of 'wrath to come' and the present experience of wrath demonstrate is the sentence of condemnation under which all people outside Christ stand. It is this reality that Paul wants to get across to [his] readers here.<sup>7</sup>

One more quote in regard to the nature and power of guilt will help us to see we are not talking about sin as something we do not commit—a disease caught by one, unaware, and from which we suffer, as victims but not as perpetrators, wholly responsible for our actions and their consequences. To the contrary we are the sin perpetrators, wholly responsible:

Guilt alone is the absolute evil, the absolutely terrible and unbearable, the simply irrevocable loss. Compared to guilt all else that may be terrible in the world is very slight indeed. If one weighs guilt against all other suffering in the world, unhappy love which makes life a hell, life-long hard labour in the mines of Siberia, continuous suffering from cancer without any hope but the prospect of a painful death, softening of the brain leading to madness, epilepsy with increasing stupefaction—the guilt will easily outweigh all the other evils in the scale. And if on the other hand we think of all that the world offers by way of good things, then all the riches, power and happiness of the world cannot balance and replace the damage caused by one guilty act. 'For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and damages his soul?' (Mt. XVI.26; 'forfeits his life', R.S.V.). If I gather all the treasures of the world in my hand, if I get everything that I could desire, political influence, an invincible military force obedient to my command, if I am admired and feared by the whole world, and I have one guilt on my conscience, then I am a miserable man, a poor beggar in the midst of all the splendour of world dominion. Luther says, 'Conscience is a far greater thing than heaven and earth. If it did not exist, hell would have no fire or even pain. But this untamed creature lights and strengthens death and hell and arms the whole creation against us.' 'Consequently hell will be nothing other than a bad conscience. If the devil did not have a bad conscience, he would be in heaven. But a bad conscience lights the fire of hell and causes inwardly in the heart the terrible pain and the infernal work of the devil.'<sup>8</sup>

What we must see clearly is that the wrath of God was provoked by Man suppressing the truth (*aletheia*) in acts of unrighteousness (*en adikia*) for the truth is expressed in actions of righteousness (*dikaiosune*) when Man had been created after the likeness

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<sup>6</sup> Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, pp. 147f., 179f.

<sup>7</sup> Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1996), p. 101.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Heim, *Jesus the World's Perfecter: The Atonement and Renewal of the World*, Oliver and Boyd, London, 1959, p. 15.

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of God in the righteousness and holiness of the truth (Eph. 4:24). We can see, now, why Paul began his description of the gospel by referring to God's wrath in Romans 1:18ff., that is immediately after his claim for the saving power of the gospel. This leads us, then, to the last section.

### **GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS-RECONCILIATION**

It is not our intention in this section to emphasize the 'reconciliation' part of the heading but concentrate on the justifying righteousness of God without which there is no reconciliation and by which there is reconciliation.<sup>9</sup> For this we need to read Romans 3:19-31:

Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus. Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On the principle of works? No, but on the principle of faith. For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of their faith and the uncircumcised through their faith. Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

A running commentary of the above would go something like this:

Because all have sinned and all are under law this means that all are guilty before God because none has kept the law so the way of law cannot be the way of justification. The law simply keeps us up to the matter of sin. In the face of the righteousness of God which is there in holy wrath to reveal that wrath and visit it upon sinners, it seems God's righteousness means only our judgment, but wait! Look! God's righteousness is now shown apart from the law, although the whole body of the law and the prophets witness to it is as God's righteousness. This is the righteousness in a way which differs from His judgment. We call it 'the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe'. What do we mean by this? We mean that since all have sinned and are far short of the glory which was once the full glowing image of God, yet by this righteousness of God—a saving righteousness (Rom. 1:16-17)—we are now justified by His act of grace (the Cross) as a gift through the redemption accomplished by Christ on the Cross. God, as righteous, set Christ Jesus forth as a propitiation through the act of shedding his blood, so that when we believe—that is, receive this by faith—then we are justified. It may have seemed that down through history God had passed over innumerable sins, but Christ's death on the Cross was the place and time when he dealt with all our sins (unrighteousnesses), so what is now clear is that there is no

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<sup>9</sup> See the May 2003 Monthly Ministry Study 'God's Mission in the World—the Righteousness of God and Man' (NCPI, Blackwood).

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sin in all history which has not been dealt with in the propitiation. So, then, this proves that God is righteous in dealing with sin in judgment and that, when he justifies a person who believes in Christ and his propitiatory death, He is not going against His own righteousness but is fulfilling it.

What then of human boasting about justifying itself? It is excluded for we must now work on the principle of faith, for we insist that a person can only be justified by faith (in the grace act of God). It always has to be apart from works of the law. If it were by the (Mosaic) law then Gentiles would have to be excluded, but God from all creation has been the God of all. So, law or no law, Jewish or Gentile law, it all comes down to this gospel of salvation by faith in Christ's work—that work we call 'the righteousness of God'. Does this mean there is no point to the law or that we go in the face of the law by this faith? Not at all! The fact is that the law which demanded the judgment of the sinner has been 'satisfied', that is, fulfilled by the judgment of the cross—the very propitiation of the Cross where all sin was totally dealt with.

So much then for those who say propitiation is wrong, the concept being based on the idea of giving a bribe to God, that it is as a human attempt to appease an angry God, and indeed a bloodthirsty Deity who causes His own Son to be killed. Of course the Cross is the act, from beginning to end, of the Father and the Son who, with the Holy Spirit, have ever been in concert and of one will and intention, long before the world was made (Rev. 13:8; 1 Pet. 1:19–20). Man has nothing to offer to 'appease' God. Leviticus 17:11 had long ago taught that, 'For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and *I have given it for you* upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement, by reason of the life'. This being the case, we had better honour the high place of Christ's blood throughout the New Testament and its references linked with the Old Testament. We should never cease to revel in that righteousness of God in the mortal governance of the creation, that righteousness which judges evil and punishes it, that righteousness which gives its delight to human creatures in living out the law of God, and that righteousness which justifies sinners, which justifies the ungodly and ultimately brings the nations of the world to everlasting peace. The taking away of the guilt its inhabitants are the fruits of love's reconciliation. No human reasoning—however well intentioned it has been—can explain the mystery of the Cross.

## Study 7

# *The Matter of Reconciliation and Justification*

Siew Kiong Tham

The scope of this paper is undefined in the title. It involves an examination of the relationship between reconciliation and justification. This will require some discussion of reconciliation and justification. As many of the issues in these topics are discussed in the other sessions of this School, they will not be dealt with in any detail but will be mentioned with reference to the respective papers for the sake of completeness.

### **THE MATTER OF RECONCILIATION**

Reconciliation is not a theme that looms large in the New Testament or in Christian thinking. It is mentioned only in a few passages in the New Testament. The term ‘reconciliation’ καταλλαγη is found in Romans 5:11, 11:15, and 2 Corinthians 5:18–19; and the verb ‘to reconcile’ καταλλασσειν is found in Romans 5:10, and 2 Corinthians 5:18–19. The term is used with reference to the relationship with God. We need to note first of all that the subject of the term is God. It is God reconciling—‘in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself’ (2 Cor. 5:19).<sup>1</sup> Only once, in 1 Corinthians 7:11, is it used with reference to the husband–wife relationship and this is consistent with the imagery of the relationship of marriage depicting the relationship of Christ and the church in Ephesians 5:25.

In the history of the church, the theme of reconciliation has not had the attention given to themes like the Incarnation and the Trinity. Denney points out that it was after the Reformation that ‘various branches of the Church began to frame explicit official statements about the way in which Christ reconciled man to God’.<sup>2</sup> In recent times, Barth structured his *Church Dogmatics* on the work of Christ and the Spirit

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<sup>1</sup> All bible references are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version* (1989) unless otherwise stated.

<sup>2</sup> J. Denney, *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation* (James Clarke, London, 1959), p. 28.

## *The Matter of Reconciliation and Justification*

under the theme of 'Reconciliation' and he includes 'Justification' as a subsection of that.<sup>3</sup>

However, this does not mean that, prior to this later period, the church had little knowledge of reconciliation. Though the word 'reconciliation' was not used often, yet in the early period of the church, the thoughts inherent within the theme of reconciliation were expressed in the doctrine of the Person of Christ in terms of sacrifice and ransom.<sup>4</sup> Denney traces this in quite some detail in the history of Christian thought in the second chapter of his book, *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*.<sup>5</sup>

It has been emphasised in the School so far that reconciliation is the work of God. It takes place in the person and work of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:19). It does not require human input for its fulfilment. Unfortunately, reconciliation is often talked about in contractual terms, referring to a mutuality of response for it to be fulfilled. We need to emphasise the absolute priority of God in reconciliation. Reconciliation happened while we were yet unaware. Paul made this clear when he wrote to the Romans:

But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation (Rom. 5:8–11).

The enmity has been overcome while we were yet unaware. Paul also writes in Ephesians, 'But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ' (Eph. 2:4–5). It is clear that humanity is not a party to the process of reconciliation. The process is accomplished in the Trinity of the Godhead through the incarnation and work of Jesus Christ. It is true that there is a response from humanity. However, this is not the response towards the fulfilment of reconciliation but a response to a reconciliation that has already been fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The response of humanity is 'a passive imperative'.<sup>6</sup> Through Jesus Christ, we have now received (or have been given) this reconciliation (Rom. 5:11). So, Bultmann writes:

That is, the 'reconciliation' precedes any effort—indeed any knowledge—on man's part, and 'reconciliation' does not mean a subjective process within man but an objective factual situation brought about by God . . . God's 'reconciling' is His restoration of peace by no longer letting His 'wrath' . . . prevail.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 4, pt 1 (T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1956).

<sup>4</sup> J. Denney, *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, pp. 28–29.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* pp. 26–120.

<sup>6</sup> O. Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, vol. 2 (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1983), p. 185.

<sup>7</sup> R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 1, tr. K. Grobel (Scribner's, New York, 1951–55), pp. 286f. Quoted in O. Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, vol. 2 (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids), p. 180.

## *The Matter of Reconciliation and Justification*

The enmity that is present in creation as a result of sin has been spoken of in previous sessions. The discussion of reconciliation needs to proceed in this context. As Calvin writes, ‘But reconciliation has no place except where an offense precedes it’.<sup>8</sup> Our attention has already been drawn to what Paul has written that ‘in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, *not counting their trespasses against them*’ (2 Cor. 5:19). As a result of the work of God in Christ, there is now an absence of enmity. Peace results from this. What is referred to is not the idea of some kind of peaceful co-existence, but a peace that is in the person of Jesus Christ; as Paul says, ‘for he [Christ] is our peace’ (Eph. 2:14).

Geoffrey Bingham points out that ‘Reconciliation is the restoration of those relationships natural to created man, and which thus image the nature and action of God’.<sup>9</sup> What is implied in this restoration of relationship is the union of humanity in Christ. Paul says in Ephesians that Christ would ‘reconcile us both [Jews and Gentiles] to God in one body through the cross’, thus putting to death that hostility through it (Eph. 2:16). This restoration of relationship is also implied when Paul refers to the resulting peace in the person of Christ. So reconciliation takes place in Christ, a work brought about by the Triune God, as Paul continues this theme of reconciliation in his Letter to the Ephesians when he writes, ‘in whom [Christ] you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit’ (Eph. 2:22, *RSV*). We need to embrace this in order to appreciate fully the meaning and significance of this reconciliation. This is the work of the Triune God. This union with humanity has been achieved in Christ. In this, the themes of sacrifice, redemption, righteousness and propitiation are essential to interpret the work of Christ who makes the response from the side of humanity. Geoffrey Bingham has already dealt with these issues in last evening’s session. However, for the discussion in this paper, we need to mention in particular the righteousness of God, a matter that we should have given prominence at the beginning of the paper. The matter of reconciliation needs to begin with the righteousness of God ‘so that in him [Christ] we might become the righteousness of God’ (2 Cor. 5:21).

### **THE MATTER OF JUSTIFICATION**

‘Justification by faith’, an expression which we use so frequently, is really shorthand for ‘justification by grace through faith’.<sup>10</sup> As in the matter of reconciliation, the matter of justification cannot be discussed without reference to the righteousness of God. In the Letter to the Romans where Paul deals with the matter of justification, he repeatedly points out the righteousness of God as the pivot on which the whole matter rests:

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<sup>8</sup> Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.17.3, LCC vol. 20 (The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1977), p. 531.

<sup>9</sup> G. Bingham, ‘The Reconciliation of All Things—II’ in *The Vandal*, (NCPI, Blackwood, 1990), p. 158.

<sup>10</sup> N. T. Wright, ‘Justification’ in S. B. Ferguson and D. F. Wright (eds), *New Dictionary of Theology* (IVP, England, 1988), p. 360.

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But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed . . . the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe . . . He did this to show his righteousness . . . it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:21–26).

As such, it must also address the sinfulness of humankind which Paul does in the above passage. There is a tendency today to speak of justification not in the context of the righteousness of God and the sinfulness of humankind, but in a context where the wrath of God and the sin of humankind are denied and thus the judgment and the cross are bypassed. What results is mere religiosity from the barrenness of the human soul and the adoration of a god beheld through the narcissistic mirror.

Paul develops the theme of justification in the New Testament with particular attention in his Letters to the Galatians and the Romans.<sup>11</sup> The central argument is given in Romans 3:21–31. The early church did not speak much of the doctrine of justification, but that does not mean that they had no knowledge of that. They lived by faith in the Son of God and that is more than can be said of many who came after them. The same may be said of the doctrine of the Trinity of God. Though the official formulation of the Trinity of the Godhead did not come till 300 years later, the early Christians lived in the Trinitarian faith.

Augustine brought to the fore the doctrine of justification when he wrote:

Wherefore, says the apostle, 'the law was our schoolmaster in Christ Jesus.' Now this very thing is serviceable to proud men, to be more firmly and manifestly 'concluded under sin,' so that none may presumptuously endeavor to accomplish their justification by means of free will as if by their own resources; but rather 'that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Because by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in His sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets.'<sup>12</sup>

In this brief passage here, Augustine links together the themes of the righteousness of God, the guilt of humankind and the inability of the 'resources' of humankind 'to accomplish their justification'. He goes on in the rest of his book, *On the Grace of Christ*, to argue that this justification has been accomplished through Jesus Christ.

It was Luther who brought the doctrine of justification to a head at the Reformation.<sup>13</sup> For Luther it became 'the fundamental and central dogma of Christianity'.<sup>14</sup> For him it meant that 'the person of the acting Christ . . . not only provides the *basis* of a future justification to be appropriated by an individual but he is objectively the real justification of the sinful world. The world *has been* reconciled to

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<sup>11</sup> See the study given by G. Bingham, 'The Doctrine and Power of Justification', at the New Creation Teaching Ministry, Monday Pastors' Group, February 8th 1993.

<sup>12</sup> Augustine, *On the Grace of Christ*, book 1, ch. 9 (Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol. 5, 'Augustin—Anti-Pelagian Writings', Hendrickson Pub., Peabody, 1995), p. 221.

<sup>13</sup> A succinct summary is given in C. Braaten, *Justification: The Article by Which the Church Stands or Falls* (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1990), pp. 22–8, in the section titled, 'Justification and Faith in Luther and the Reformation'.

<sup>14</sup> C. Braaten, *Justification*, p. 23.

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God, whether anyone consciously acknowledges that or not.’<sup>15</sup> This process of justification takes place in Christ as Paul points out, ‘they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus’ (Rom. 3:24). It is not a contractual deal requiring a person to be a signatory to the process. It takes place in Jesus Christ. Calvin develops this theme of justification rather fully in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

However, the doctrine underwent steady deterioration after Luther. Rather than being understood as covenantal and experiential, it became a doctrine governed by forensic and intellectual considerations. This distortion is well summarised by Carl Braaten in his book, *Justification*, and I quote:

In Protestant orthodoxy justification tended to become petrified in a system of scholastic categories, enshrined in the coffin of ‘pure doctrine.’ In pietism the focus was on the individual’s experience of repentance and faith, justification being one aspect of the way of salvation, along with regeneration and the pursuit of holiness. In the Enlightenment religion became a private affair, divorced from the worldwide dominion of God in all expressions of life. These three trends in Protestant Christianity have been described as a modern ‘Babylonian captivity’ of the church, with crippling effects on the doctrine of justification, because of its doctrinal objectivization in Protestant orthodoxy, its individualization in pietism, and its privatization in Enlightenment rationalism.<sup>16</sup>

Or, in the words of P. T. Forsyth, ‘And one of the sources of difficulty and confusion to-day is that problems of the Church, collective problems, are constantly treated amateurly, that is on the mere individual scale, with a mere individual instinct, or a mere individual piety, and often without a due individual equipment’.<sup>17</sup> So when the priority of the work of God in justification is ignored and becomes subordinated to human subjectivity, then, ‘Justification of the unbelieving sinner [has become the] justification of the believing sinner’.<sup>18</sup> This is because of the failure to see justification as grace and gift in Christ Jesus:

. . . they are now justified by his grace as a gift [δωρεᾶν], through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (Rom. 3:24).

But the free gift [χάρισμα] is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man’s trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift [δωρεᾶ] in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. And the free gift [δωρημα] is not like the effect of the one man’s sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift [χάρισμα] following many trespasses brings justification (Rom. 5:15–16).

It is heartbreaking to hear the talk of justification in terms of the grace of God given to us and our response of faith in a reciprocal exchange between God and humankind. The notion of justification as grace and gift in Jesus Christ precludes the active

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> C. Braaten, *Justification*, p. 12.

<sup>17</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God* (NCPI, Blackwood, 1988—a reprint of the 1917 edition), p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> C. Braaten, *Justification*, p. 32.

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intervention of humankind. ‘The grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many’ (Rom. 5:15). This understanding of the grace and gift in justification is expounded by S. Peura and I quote a short summary of his work:

This interpretation is based on the thesis that both grace and gift are a righteousness given in Christ to a Christian. This donation presupposes that Christ is really present and that he indwells the Christian. Christ on the one hand is the grace that is given to the sinner . . . and on the other hand he is the gift that renews and makes the sinner righteous . . . All this is possible only if Christ is united with the sinner.<sup>19</sup>

However, this understanding of our union with God may be taken to an extreme level as in the case with Osiander (1498–1552), a Lutheran who, though agreeing with Luther on the union with Christ, exaggerated this to the point of achieving an ‘essential righteousness’ within the human person, thus losing the Lutheran tension, that of ‘always a sinner, always justified’.<sup>20</sup> This failure to understand the doctrine in terms of the covenant and union with God was taken up by Calvin. He refuted the claim of ‘essential righteousness’ by stating that, ‘we hold ourselves to be united with Christ by the secret power of his Spirit’.<sup>21</sup>

### **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RECONCILIATION AND JUSTIFICATION**

We have seen that both justification and reconciliation, understood biblically, are dependent solely on the work of God in Jesus Christ. While we may say that there is no room for human synergism in the process, yet we must not disregard the ‘human synergism’ from the man Christ Jesus. He makes the peace from the side of humankind, thus achieving what fallen humankind is not able to do. The uniqueness of Jesus Christ as God Incarnate is a matter of central importance in the framework of theology. He mediates the things of God to created humanity and mediates the things of humanity to God. It is through what God has done in the incarnate Christ that both reconciliation and justification have been effected. The merits of what Christ has achieved are ours only when we are in union with Christ. This union is effected by the work of the Spirit of God.

We often do not see the work of Christ from the side of humanity. John McLeod Campbell saw the atonement through the humanity of Christ and His oneness with the Father.<sup>22</sup> His distinctive contribution in his conception of the atonement ‘was that the

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<sup>19</sup> S. Peura, ‘Christ as Favour and Gift’ in C. Braaten and R. Jenson (eds) *Union with Christ* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1998), p. 48.

<sup>20</sup> C. P. Williams, ‘Osiander, Andreas’, in *New Dictionary of Theology* (IVP, Illinois, 1988), pp. 483–4.

<sup>21</sup> Calvin’s *Institutes*, III.11.5.

<sup>22</sup> J. McLeod Campbell, *The Nature of the Atonement and its Relation to Remission of Sins and Eternal Life* (James Clarke, London, 1959).

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work of Christ included an offering to God from within humanity'.<sup>23</sup> The difficulty with the subject is our lack of appreciation of this aspect of the ministry of Christ. As the 'last Adam' and the 'second man' (1 Cor. 15:45–47), His humanity embraces ours as one in His ministry to the Father:

Thus it is written, 'The first man, Adam, became a living being'; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit . . . The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven (1 Cor. 15:45, 47).

Therefore, the second man—God Incarnate, in His 'collective' humanity—ministered to the Father on behalf of all humanity. Denney quotes from Campbell:

That oneness of mind with the Father, which towards man took the form of condemnation of sin, would, in the Son's dealing with the Father in relation to our sins, take the form of a perfect confession of our sins.<sup>24</sup>

During the Reformation, justification was considered synonymous with reconciliation. Weber points out that the theology of the Reformation makes no distinction between reconciliation and justification.<sup>25</sup> The themes of reconciliation and justification seem to be identical in the thinking of that period. Calvin sees that reconciliation was nothing other than justification. He writes:

For a little later Paul adds by way of explanation: 'Christ, who was without sin, was made sin for us' [II Cor. 5:21], to designate the means of reconciliation [cf. vs. 18–19]. Doubtless, he means by the word 'reconciled' nothing but 'justified'.<sup>26</sup>

While Denney warns that we do not complicate the matter by regarding justification as forensic,<sup>27</sup> he also regards justification as synonymous with reconciliation.<sup>28</sup> He does not think that the distinction is important when he writes, 'Whether we call it the life of the justified, or the life of the reconciled, or the life of the regenerate, or the life of grace or of love, the new life is the life of faith and nothing else'.<sup>29</sup> It appears that Denney seems more concerned with the life of faith resulting from justification and reconciliation than with the theological distinction of the terms.

There is good ground for taking this viewpoint as, in both reconciliation and justification, the trespasses were passed over. We note this in comparing the passages quoted above on the respective subjects. It is this comparison that led to Calvin's comment that reconciliation is synonymous with justification:<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> G. M. Tuttle, *John Macleod Campbell on Christian Atonement: So Rich a Soil* (Handsell Press, Edinburgh, 1986), p. 126.

<sup>24</sup> J. McLeod Campbell, quoted in J. Denney, *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, p. 117.

<sup>25</sup> O. Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, vol. 2, p. 179.

<sup>26</sup> Calvin's *Institutes*, III.11.4. The way Calvin reasoned this out in the passage referred to will be pointed out later.

<sup>27</sup> J. Denney, *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, p. 290.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.* p. 297.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.* p. 301.

<sup>30</sup> Calvin's *Institutes*, III.11.4, *ibid.*, p. 729.

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. . . that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, *not counting their trespasses against them* (2 Cor. 5:19).

He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance *he had passed over the sins previously committed*; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:25-26).

Furthermore, Paul seems not to make that distinction in reference to the peace that results from the work of Christ in justification or reconciliation:

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father (Eph. 2:14–18).

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:1).

Most importantly, the understanding of reconciliation and justification are anchored on the righteousness of God:

. . . we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:20–21).

. . . it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:26).

So we see that both terms are obviously linked in some way as they refer to the work of God in Jesus Christ and not to any human contribution for its accomplishment. While they are both anchored on the righteousness of God, His forgiveness of sins and the resulting peace that ensued from both, yet we need not necessarily conclude that their usage is synonymous. C. K. Barrett comments:

. . . the initiative to reconciliation was God's, who found in the death of his Son (Rom. 3:25f.) a way in which his love for the sinner and his wrath against sin could be accommodated, so that he might both be righteous himself, and justify man—the sinful man—who relies on faith in Jesus.<sup>31</sup>

He continues, 'Since transgressions no longer counted against men<sup>32</sup> . . . the way was open for reconciliation: nothing remained but for men to take it'.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> C. K. Barrett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (BNTC, A & C Black, London, 1973), p. 175. Quoted in C. Brown (ed.), *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 3 (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1971), pp. 168–9.

<sup>32</sup> This phrase refers to justification.

<sup>33</sup> Barrett, p. 177, in Brown, p. 169.

## *The Matter of Reconciliation and Justification*

What Paul wrote in the fifth chapter of Romans, especially in verses 8–11, sums up this relationship between justification and reconciliation:

But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation (Rom. 5:8–11).

Commenting on the doctrine of justification as expounded in the fifth chapter of Paul's Letter to the Romans, Geoffrey Bingham notes:

*Chapter Five* takes us to the heart of life lived in justification. In 5:1–11 Paul develops what we might call 'the dynamics of justification', that is, that justification reconciles us to God, places us within continual grace, brings hope of glory to the heart and sets in motion a process that involves suffering that will issue in hope's fulfilment. In verses 6–11 he shows that the Cross is the basis for realised love, and that that love is of God and accomplishes reconciliation.<sup>34</sup>

Karl Barth writing in his *Church Dogmatics* has put the work of Jesus Christ under the broad heading of 'Reconciliation'. The theme of 'Justification' is a subsection of this. His theology revolves around the doctrine of reconciliation.<sup>35</sup> The work of Jesus Christ and of the Spirit is seen from this viewpoint. However, he does not regard justification as any less important to reconciliation but as one element in reconciliation. He sums the issues up this way:

The task of the doctrine of justification is to demonstrate the righteousness of God which over-rides in the reconciling grace of God, and the grace of God which truly and actually overrules in the righteousness of God. It is the task of finding a reliable answer to the question: What is God for sinful man? and what is sinful man before the God who is for him? The basis of the community and the certainty of faith stands or falls with the answer to this question. The doctrine of justification undertakes to answer the question of this presupposition. Hence its importance and theological necessity.<sup>36</sup>

He goes on to add:

The *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae* is not the doctrine of justification as such, but its basis and culmination: the confession of Jesus Christ, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col. 2<sup>3</sup>); the knowledge of His being and activity for us and to us and with us.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> G. C. Bingham, 'The Doctrine and Power of Justification', pp. 5–6.

<sup>35</sup> See O. Webber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, vol. 2, p. 177.

<sup>36</sup> K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 4, pt 1, p. 518.

<sup>37</sup> K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, *ibid.*, p. 527.

## **THE WONDERFUL EXCHANGE**

The outcome of the work of reconciliation is seen in the beautiful exchange. Based on the objective reconciliation in the person of Jesus Christ, this is the beautiful outcome for fallen humanity. The derivation of the word καταλλάσσω for ‘reconcile’ comes from the compound of ἀλλάσσω meaning to alter or exchange. In the Epistle to Diognetus there is the mention of the ‘sweet exchange’ in reference to the righteousness of God and the justification of the ungodly:

For what other thing was capable of covering our sins than His righteousness? By what other one was it possible that we, the wicked and ungodly, could be justified, than by the only Son of God? O sweet exchange! O unsearchable operation! O benefits surpassing all expectation! that the wickedness of many should be hid in a single righteous One, and that the righteousness of One should justify many transgressors!<sup>38</sup>

This expresses beautifully the response from the depth of the soul of the reconciled.

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<sup>38</sup> ‘The Epistle to Diognetus’, in *Anti-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1 (Henrickson Pub., Peabody, 1995), p. 28. An anonymous letter written under the name of Mathetes (meaning ‘disciple’, presumably of the Apostles) to Diognetus about 130 AD. We also have no idea as to who Diognetus was.

## Study 8

# *2 Corinthians 5:11–21*

Ian Pennicook

Perhaps this session ought to begin with 2 Corinthians 5:9, though even then that might be somewhat unsatisfactory. The Apostle did not write little bits of a letter; he wrote a whole letter with a particular purpose. That purpose, I suspect, is Paul providing an *apologia* for his apostleship, which others were calling into question. Given that the Corinthians were real people facing real issues, it hardly seems unreasonable that the letter should, at least at first, be understood in the context of those first readers. After that, the implications for the church born out of the apostolic message should be more easily discernible.

Having described himself as a minister of the new covenant (3:6), Paul states the contrast between the glory of the old covenant and the greater glory of the new (3:9–11), declaring that we who now behold the glory of the Lord, that is, Jesus (1:2, 3, 14; 4:5, 14) who is the image of God (4:4) are being transformed into his image, from glory to glory (*ἀπὸ δόξης δόξαν*, *apo doxē eis doxan*). The glory of the old covenant has given way to the glory of the new (3:18), though the process of the transformation of the believers is not yet complete (4:16–17).<sup>1</sup>

This work of proclamation is the means by which the new creation is brought into being:

For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (4:5–6).

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<sup>1</sup> It is possible that 'from glory to glory' refers to the glory of the old covenant giving way to the glory of the new, a glory which is not yet fully seen (i.e. we see it 'as though reflected in a mirror'). This is not the way this verse is usually taken in some circles and I am not trying to be clever and call into question the wisdom of the ancients (and the not so ancients). But I am asking myself if the text actually supports the traditional understanding or if I have become a slave to what has become, for me, an unexamined cliché. Certainly, *RSV* and *NRSV*, 'from one degree of glory to another' and *NIV*, 'with ever-increasing glory' should be seen as commentary rather than translation.

## Concerning God, Man and Creation as a Total Unity

The fullness of this cannot yet be seen (4:18) and Paul is eager to know the completion of the process; he walks by faith and not by sight for he wants to be ‘at home with the Lord’ (5:7–8; cf. 1 Cor. 13:12). Merely leaving the body (via death; 4:7–12) is not the goal, of course; the ultimate is the resurrection of all believers and them being brought into Jesus’ presence (4:14).

In the meantime, Paul simply wants to please Jesus: ‘So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him’ (5:9). However, this is more than an emotional desire to make Jesus happy. Paul is fully aware that when he is brought into the presence of Jesus it will be to the presence of Jesus the ‘judge of the living and the dead’ (Acts 10:42; 2 Tim. 4:1; and, possibly, 1 Pet. 4:5):

For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil (5:10).

Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, Christ, has all authority in heaven and earth given to him, which specifically includes the authority to judge (Matt. 28:18; John 5:22–23; etc.). He has his ‘judgment seat’ (βῆμα, *bēma*, John 19:13; Rom. 14:10; Acts 12:21; etc.). God ‘has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man [n.b. Gk. ἐν ἀνδρὶ, *en andri*, by a man, a *male*, that is, a specific human being] whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead’ (Acts 17:31).

Paul is conscious that there must be a moral seriousness in his life and ministry, and in the lives of all. Justification by grace does not remove the obligation to righteous living; it is actually the work which liberates us into righteous living. Romans 6:1–11 is followed by verse 12. Since ‘justification’ and ‘righteousness’ can both<sup>2</sup> translate the same Greek word, δικαιοσύνη, *dikaiosunē*, it is worth observing that a person could hardly be declared righteous in order that he or she may continue in unrighteous living. Righteousness is the true nature of things and, so, the true nature of the new creation (so 2 Pet. 3:13). Romans 8:4 is instructive:

... so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

‘Might be fulfilled’ is an Aorist tense, implying a single action, but the just requirement of the law is fulfilled by the single act of righteousness of the one man Jesus (Rom. 5:18) for those who *now* walk according to the Spirit. So Paul is not saying to the Corinthians that he fears the judgment seat of Christ as if his justification was uncertain. Rather he is saying that by his righteous living he will demonstrate that which Christ has accomplished in him. Paul did not become righteous by his righteous living, nor does he maintain his righteousness by it. Righteous living is nothing more or less than the truth of the new creation.

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<sup>2</sup> In Romans 4:25 and 5:18 ‘Justification translates δικαίωσις, *dikaiōsis*, the act of pronouncing righteous, acquittal. In Romans 5:16 the Greek word is δικαίωμα, *dikaiōma*, the result of the declaration.

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**Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others; but we ourselves are well known to God, and I hope that we are also well known to your consciences (5:11)**

The *King James Version*<sup>3</sup> has ‘knowing . . . the *terror* of the Lord’. The word for ‘fear’ is the usual word φόβος (*phobos*), which can mean ‘terror, that which causes flight’.<sup>4</sup> That extreme meaning would seem to flow from the preceding mention of ‘the judgment seat of Christ’, and that approach determines the way that most commentators approach this.

Is this Paul’s view of his future? Given such passages as Romans 8:18–38, and particularly 2 Timothy 4:8:

From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing,

this hardly seems likely. What is more likely is that ‘the fear of the Lord’ means to Paul here what it meant to the Old Testament writers. Only on two occasions, 2 Chronicles 14:14 and 17:10, does the phrase<sup>5</sup> imply terror, and then only to Israel’s enemies. However, on a number of other occasions ‘the fear of the Lord’ is far from terror. For instance, Psalms 19:9; 34:11; 111:10; Proverbs 1:7, 29; etc., and Isaiah 11:2–3 and 33:6:

The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear (Isa. 11:2–3).

. . . he will be the stability of your times, abundance of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge; the fear of the LORD is Zion’s treasure (Isa. 33:6).

Although the phrase is not used in the LXX, which seems to have mistranslated the Hebrew,<sup>6</sup> Psalm 130:3–4 would seem to provide a thoroughly consistent background for Paul’s meaning:

If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.

‘Forgiveness’ in the LXX is ἵλασμος, *hilasmos*, which occurs twice in the New Testament, 1 John 2:2 and 4:10, as ‘propitiation’. Elsewhere, in Leviticus 25:9 and Numbers 5:8, it is translated as ‘atonement’.

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<sup>3</sup> And the *NKJV*.

<sup>4</sup> See G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1937, p. 472.

<sup>5</sup> Of course there are variations such as in Psalm 2:11, ‘serve the LORD with fear’, but this discussion is limited to the actual phrase.

<sup>6</sup> Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, WBC, vol. 21, Word, Waco, 1983, p. 192.

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From this we might understand Paul's statement to mean that he comprehends 'the fear of the Lord', the mighty action of God's wisdom expressed in propitiation, atonement and forgiveness and so he persuades others.<sup>7</sup> He is not doing it because of any fear of future judgment; this 'persuading' is his morally serious response to his call.

In saying this, he is not setting out to defend himself before the bar of Corinthian opinion. It is sufficient that he is 'well known', thoroughly manifest 'to God'. His hope is that the Corinthians likewise need no proof of his position (cf. 3:2).

***We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you an opportunity to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast in outward appearance and not in the heart (5:12)***

Paul is not 'commending' himself to them (cf. 3:1) by means of appearing successful. If he does commend himself it will only be by means of 'the open statement of the truth' (4:2). He is, though, giving the Corinthians an opportunity to respond to those who boast in outward appearance.<sup>8</sup> These people are evidently the letter-bearing peddlers mentioned in 2 Corinthians 2:17 – 3:1, who set out to present themselves in a good light.

***For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you (5:13)***

'Beside ourselves' seems to have the implication of being slightly insane and that is one way that this verse has been understood from earliest times. Chrysostom wrote:

If any one thinks us to be mad, we seek for our reward from God, for Whose sake we are of this suspected; but if he thinks us sober, let him reap the advantage of our soberness.<sup>9</sup>

But Paul could well be referring to more than insults he has received. This could be a reference to his 'ecstatic'<sup>10</sup> speaking in tongues, perhaps, or to the experience of being 'caught up into Paradise' (12:2–4). He would be saying, 'Well if I've had these experiences, and continue to have them [he uses the present tense], then it is for God'.

But why mention it at all? In all probability he does so because his opponents were trying to legitimise themselves to others, and against Paul, by the same sort of experiences. Barnett writes, 'In the Greek world religious madness was seen as divine inspiration'.<sup>11</sup> For his opponents, religious ecstasy was used to validate their claim to inspiration. For Paul, those things were 'for God', whereas the 'sobermindedness' of his persuasion was for them. Barnett, says:

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<sup>7</sup> ἄνθρωπος, *anthropous*, meaning 'men' as in mankind.

<sup>8</sup> Lit. 'in face'.

<sup>9</sup> 'Homily 11 on 2 Corinthians', *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers I*, Sage Digital Library.

<sup>10</sup> The word used in v. 13 is ἐξίστημι, *existēmi*, which can refer to being mad, but also to being amazed (Matt. 12:23; etc.). The related word, ἐκστασις, *ekstasis*, often means a trance (Acts 10:16; etc.).

<sup>11</sup> Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT), Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1997, p. 284.

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But Paul, who does not deny such speech, will not point to it in support of his ministry. He will make no 'horizontal' or public appeal to legitimacy as a minister based on 'vertical' ecstatic behaviour.<sup>12</sup>

### ***For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died (5:14)***

Paul *is* controlled by something outside of himself, but it is the love of Christ which does it. What is more, however much there may be an experiential aspect to this, the love of Christ has significantly informed Paul's whole outlook.

To the question whether 'the love of Christ' is a subjective or objective genitive, the final answer would obviously be that it is both. But Paul does not speak of people loving Christ in this way.<sup>13</sup> From what follows, it is plainly the great action of Christ's love which is in view. Paul's outlook has been changed because he came to the judgment that: (i) one man died on behalf of all; and (ii) in consequence, all died.<sup>14</sup> This is the basis for his proclamation of reconciliation.

One man died on behalf of<sup>15</sup> all. Once Christ was thought of as being accursed by hanging on a tree, giving evidence of his own guilt. But now Paul sees that his death, far from being because of his own guilt, was on behalf of all. It was a substitutionary death. It was also a vicarious death, for by it 'all died'.

The apparent problem of the universality of Christ's death 'for all' is really not a problem at all when the whole biblical picture is examined. The 'one man' who died for all is obviously 'Christ', but 'Christ' is the Jewish Messiah,<sup>16</sup> Jesus, and he stands as 'the last Adam' (1 Cor. 15:45). This is a given that has already been explained to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians chapter 15 and is also spelled out in many other places in Paul's writings. Thus Romans 5:12–21, Ephesians 1:22, and 2:15; etc.

Just as all died in Adam, all belonging to the old creation, so all in the 'new creation' have died in Christ. The later Jewish book, 4 Ezra,<sup>17</sup> understands the relationship to Adam this way:

I answered and said, 'This is my first and last comment: it would have been better if the earth had not produced Adam, or else, when it had produced him, had restrained him from sinning. For what good is it to all that they live in sorrow now and expect punishment after death? O Adam, what have you done? For though it was you who sinned, the fall was not yours alone, but ours also who are your descendants. For what good is it to us, if an immortal time has been promised to us, but we have done deeds that bring death? And what good is it that an everlasting hope has been promised to us, but we have miserably failed?' (4 Ezra 7:116–120).

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<sup>12</sup> *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 285.

<sup>13</sup> See 1 Cor. 16:22, 'if anyone does not love the Lord', εἰ τις οὐ φιλεῖ τὸν κύριον, uses a different word, φιλεῖ, *philei*, and a different construction.

<sup>14</sup> The English may require a perfect tense, as in the quoted text, but the Greek uses the Aorist tense, implying a single action. All died in Christ's death.

<sup>15</sup> 'On behalf of', ὑπέρ, *hyper*, is used on seven occasions in this section, with only v. 12 being unrelated to the Christ/us relationship.

<sup>16</sup> See my paper, 'Jesus the Messiah: Messianic Truth', in the studies for the NCTM 1998 Pastors' School.

<sup>17</sup> 2 Esdras, composed about 90 AD.

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***And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them (5:15)***

The purpose of Christ dying on behalf of all, and so the death of all, was that those who live (which has not been mentioned in this context previously) might live for him, who not only died but was raised on their behalf. ‘Those who live’ either refers to those who are alive (spiritual) because they are in Christ who is alive, or to those who are alive on the earth (physical) and who are the recipients of Christ’s work, but either way they must now live no longer for themselves, repeating the sin of Adam, but for Christ. He died for all in order that all might live for him. Either we live for Adam, by validating his rebellion, or we live for Christ, by validating his act of righteousness.

Righteous living means living *for* God, *for* Christ, with obligation and love functioning in their ontological unity.

***From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way (5:16)***

‘Therefore’ means that Paul can no longer act as he did. He must see people differently and no longer ‘according to the flesh’. This would apply to the way he presents himself to others (cf. v. 12) and to the way he regards those to whom he is sent, including his readers. That is why he now renounces the disgraceful, underhanded ways used by others (4:2). And, of course, it may imply that he now sees men and women not merely as sinners but as sinners for whom Christ died. Hence the ministry he has been given (v. 19).

Once he had known Christ ‘according to the flesh’ and did his utmost to destroy his followers. He had the mindset of the flesh, but when he received the Spirit (Acts 9:17), ‘he immediately began to proclaim Jesus . . . saying, “He is the Son of God”’ (Acts 9:20).

***So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (5:17)***

The consequence of no longer seeing according to the flesh is immense! It means that if anyone is in Christ (as once they were in Adam) then this is the new creation.<sup>18</sup> This is what God has been about from eternity and within all of history. What follows is not merely isolated statements concerning reconciliation but a declaration of all that the action of God in bringing the new creation into being involved.

If the new creation is known by being in Christ, then it is surely a hidden thing and contrasts with the more obvious things seen according to the flesh. In Galatian terms:

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<sup>18</sup> ‘Creation’, κτίσις, *ktisis*, can mean either the act of creation or the result of that act. So while this verse is often taken in a personal sense, ‘I am a new creation’, it is probably saying far more.

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May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! (Gal. 6:14–15).

The implications are amazing! It means that the old things (τὰ ἀρχαῖα, *ta archaia*) went! They passed away and are not to be remembered.<sup>19</sup> This applies to more than just personal details of guilt and so on but to the totality of the old creation. So ‘Look! [the promised] new things have come’ (cf. Isa. 43:19). Perhaps it could be said that the old things have become new,<sup>20</sup> brought back to their created state.

### **All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation (5:18)**

What does all this mean? Firstly, it means that God has reconciled us to himself through Christ. It means that God has done it all. The hostility which made us God-haters has been rendered totally ineffective. Thus Colossians 1:21–22:

And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him.

See also Romans 5:10, and Ephesians 2:8–10 (n.b. ‘created in Christ Jesus for good works’, the works of the new creation).

Secondly, it means that the ministry which Paul has is that of reconciliation. However, the word ‘ministry’ has become somewhat clichéd so perhaps it could be said that ‘God reconciled us to himself and has given us to be servants of that reconciliation’.

### **that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us (5:19)**

Instead of ‘marking iniquities’ (Ps. 130:3), God, in Christ, was reconciling the world to himself. The world, κόσμος, *kosmos*, means the world of people. God did not count their trespasses, which C. K. Barrett calls ‘sin that has become visible in concrete acts’,<sup>21</sup> against them.

Mention was made earlier (on v. 14) about Paul’s apparent universalism, and it becomes an issue again here. James Denney’s comment is invaluable:

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<sup>19</sup> See Isa. 43:18–19 (LXX) where τὰ ἀρχαῖα links with the former things, τὰ πρῶτα, *ta prōta*, and is also followed with ‘behold’, ἰδοὺ, *idou* and ‘new things’, καινὰ, *kaina*.

<sup>20</sup> The Greek is ambiguous. γέγονεν καινὰ, *gegonen kaina*, can mean either ‘they [the old things] have become new’, the singular verb having the neuter plural subject τὰ ἀρχαῖα, with καινὰ as the object, or ‘new things have come’, taking καινὰ as nominative.

<sup>21</sup> C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, Adam and Charles Black, London, 1973, p. 177.

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It is in this same passage that St. Paul gives the fullest explanation of what he means by reconciliation (*καταλλαγή* [*katallagē*]), and an examination of this idea will also illustrate his teaching on the death of Christ. Where reconciliation is spoken of in St. Paul, the subject is always God, and the object is always man. The work of reconciling is one in which the initiative is taken by God, and the cost borne by Him; men are reconciled in the passive, or allow themselves to be reconciled, or receive the reconciliation. We never read that God has been reconciled. God does the work of reconciliation in or through Christ, and especially through His death. He was engaged, in Christ, in reconciling the world—or rather, nothing less than a world—to Himself (2 Cor. v. 19). He reconciled us to Himself through Christ (v. 20). When we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son (Rom. v. 10). Men who once were alienated and enemies in mind through wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death (Col. i. 21f.). It is very unfortunate that the English word reconcile . . . diverge[s] seriously, though in a way of which it is easy to be unconscious, from the Greek *καταλλάσσειν* [*katallassein*]. We cannot say in English, God reconciled us to Himself, without conceiving the persons referred to as being actually at peace with God, as having laid aside all fear, distrust, and love of evil, and entered, in point of fact, into relations of peace and friendship with God; But *καταλλάσσειν*, as describing the work of God; or *καταλλαγή*, as describing its immediate result, do not necessarily carry us so far. The work of reconciliation, in the sense of the New Testament, is a work which is *finished*, and which we must conceive to be finished, *before the gospel is preached*. It is the good tidings of the Gospel, with which the evangelists go forth, that God has wrought in Christ a work of reconciliation which avails for no less than the world, and of which the whole world may have the benefit. The summons of the evangelist is—‘Receive the reconciliation; consent that it become effective in your case.’ The work of reconciliation is not a work wrought upon the souls of men, though it is a work wrought in their interests, and bearing so directly upon them that we can say God has reconciled the world to Himself; it is a work—as Cromwell said of the covenant—*outside of us*, in which God so deals in Christ with the sin of the world, that it shall no longer be a barrier between Himself and men.

. . . Reconciliation is not something which is doing; it is something which is done. No doubt there is a work of Christ which is in process, but it has as its basis a finished work of Christ; it is in virtue of something already consummated on His cross that Christ is able to make the appeal to us which He does, and to win the response in which we *receive* the reconciliation. A finished work of Christ and an objective atonement—a *καταλλαγή* in the New Testament sense—are synonymous terms; the one means exactly the same as the other; and it seems to me self-evident, as I think it did to St. Paul, that unless we can preach a finished work of Christ in relation to sin, a *καταλλαγή* or reconciliation or peace which has been achieved independently of us, at an infinite cost, and to which we are called in a word or ministry of reconciliation, we have no real gospel for sinful men at all.<sup>22</sup>

***So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God (5:20)***

We are ambassadors for Christ. Paul represents the Messiah and when Paul speaks it is the God who was in the Messiah effecting reconciliation who makes his appeal through the Messiah’s ambassador.

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<sup>22</sup> James Denney, *The Death of Christ: Its Place and Interpretation in the New Testament*, Keats, New Canaan, 1981, pp. 143–7.

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The word 'you' is found in just about all English translations but is not what Paul wrote.<sup>23</sup> Paul is spelling out his 'word': this is what he, as an apostle, says when he speaks, this is the word that brings repentance and faith: 'Be reconciled to God'.

### ***For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (5:21)***

If Paul is giving an *apologia* for his apostleship, then this statement shows exactly why he behaves as he does. It summarises all that he has just said but returns to the implications of verses 9–10.

On our behalf, God made Christ (to be) sin, even though he did not 'know' sin. Christ was righteous. Paul is obviously referring back to Isaiah 53:11, indeed to that whole section of Isaiah from 52:13 onwards:

Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.

In order to make many righteous he must bear their iniquities, meaning he must bear the judgment which would otherwise have destroyed them. By doing so, he has removed the offence which caused the hostility and the separation. The goal was the new heavens and new earth in which righteousness dwells, meaning that the new creation actually effects righteousness. For this reason, Paul makes it his aim to please him. The moral seriousness of our salvation and the obligation of love all are present in the judgment that 'he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them' (5:15). Or, in Peter's words: 'He himself bore our sins in his body on the [tree], so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed' (1 Pet. 2:24).

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<sup>23</sup> The *AV*, *RV* and *ASV* put 'you' in italics, indicating that it has been inserted by the translators. In my supply of translations only the Jerusalem Bible simply omits it: 'the appeal we make in Christ's name is: "Be reconciled to God" '.

## Study 9

# *Ephesians 2:11 – 3:6— The Reconciling of the Nations*

Noel Due

### **INTRODUCTION**

It is possible to argue that the theological burden of Ephesians is ‘front-end loaded’, particularly in the extended sentence/paragraph that runs from Ephesians 1:3–14. Here the action of God the Father in executing and revealing his plan and purpose is set forth, in the context of a clear Trinitarian pattern.<sup>1</sup> The Trinitarian pattern for this compact and densely argued pericope governs the rest of the letter, and is no less evident in the passage before us (so Eph. 2:18).

If we can accept that the heavy loading is at the front end of the epistle, it is possible to argue that the rest of the letter is essentially an exposition of the things Paul prays that his readers would be enlightened to see, as in Ephesians 1:15–23. In other words, he does not pray that they would be given eyes to see something of which they are not aware, but that they would be enabled to comprehend the very things that Paul enumerates in his letter. This indeed matches with the Pauline doctrine of the ‘mystery of Christ’, which is not Gnostic in its tone, but revelatory. It is an ‘open secret’, and should be fully comprehended by those in Christ. Moreover, it is not something to be held as an item of knowledge or belief simply, but the teaching about the mystery in the New Testament always relates to action. One lives in accord with the mystery, and the full comprehension of the mystery lies in relational obedience to its content (e.g. Col. 2:2).

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<sup>1</sup> In certain circles debates move back and forth over the nature of the centre of Pauline theology, especially with reference to the two issues of spiritual union with Christ and justification by grace through faith. While these should not be seen as mutually exclusive, they both serve a wider purpose in Paul, expounding from different perspectives (yet both immersed in Old Testament background/precedent of juridical and participatory categories) the work of God the Father in redemption. It is here that we should seek the centre of Paul’s thought. See, for example, D. N. Howell, ‘The Center of Pauline Theology’ in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151:601 (Jan–Mar 1994), pp. 50–70. Note the accent placed on the self-glorification of God in Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14.

## *Ephesians 2:11 – 3:6—The Reconciling of the Nations*

In the opening section of Ephesians 2, Paul has expounded the sovereign and gracious action of God's saving work. Those who have been dead have been made alive by the mercy of God. In a very real sense, every conversion is a resurrection, and is demonstrative of the power that raised Christ from the dead. Those thus resurrected to new life have been raised up to the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, awaiting the eschatological revelation of the full inheritance that is theirs (so 2:7). This action is entirely of grace thus excluding boasting of any sort (2:8–9). Significantly, however, this gracious resurrection action of salvation has brought the Church into the position of obedient sonship. The Church is 'his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them' (2:10, *ESV*). Whether on bare exegetical grounds we can discern a creational echo here or not, theologically it is clear that the redeemed community is now restored to its creational destiny. Just as Adam had been formed from the dust of the ground to do the will of the Creator–Father, so the Church—the re-created humanity in Christ—has been fashioned for obedience to the Father. Instead of doing deeds of evil and wickedness (2:1ff.) this new community lives to do deeds of goodness and love. As someone, somewhere, has said, 'works is what grace is all about'.<sup>2</sup>

On the basis of all this, the apostle begins to move into the exhortation to his readers to live in accordance with their newly found status in Christ, such exhortation taking its fullest flight from chapter 4 onwards.

### **EPHESIANS 2:11–22—ONE TEMPLE**

The image that underpins this passage is that of Temple, and the discussion about the enmity between Gentile and Jew is founded upon the separation of these groups in their worship. To move from the end of the passage backwards: the end point of the plan and purpose of the Father is the formation of a new, spiritual temple.<sup>3</sup> The fullness of the Spirit in the new people/Temple of God is linked to the actions and attitudes of love (Eph. 4:30 in context, cf. 5:1ff.), which in turn is to walk with God (Eph. 5:17ff.).<sup>4</sup> Those who do not walk with God (e.g. the Gentiles who have not

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<sup>2</sup> The New Testament teaching on this theme is extensive. See Matt. 5:16; 2 Cor. 9:8; Col. 1:10; 2 Thess. 2:17; 1 Tim. 2:10; 2 Tim. 2:4; Titus 2:7, 14; 3:1, 8, 14; Heb. 10:24; 13:21; etc. It is significant that Paul describes his ministry as being to bring about the 'obedience of faith' among the Gentiles. These verses act as a sort of *inclusio* in Romans (1:5 and 16:26). Given the widespread witness to the deeds of love mentioned above, the phrase must refer not simply to the obedience which faith is (i.e. in believing the gospel as in Acts 6:7), but the obedience which flows from faith (as in Heb. 11:8). For Paul, 'in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love' (Gal. 5:6 cf. 1 Cor. 7:19; Gal. 6:15).

<sup>3</sup> This is consistent with the wider New Testament teaching that sees the physical Temple in Israel as being replaced by the Temple of Christ's body (as in John 2:13–22), and the subsequent transformation of Old Testament cultic language into relational categories (see, for example, Rom. 12:1ff.; 15:14ff.; 1 Pet. 2:4ff.; etc.). The end point of history is expressed in Temple/Garden language in Revelation, matching the original status of Eden as the sanctuary of God and Adam as king–priest over creation.

<sup>4</sup> The idea of walking with God draws on rich Old Testament imagery, but includes concepts such as being in fellowship with God, being accepted by him, and at peace with him. Overall, however, it relates to the matter of obedience to him. One may be a member of covenant Israel, but not be walking with him in this sense. For more see D. Sherriff's, *The Friendship of the Lord: An Old Testament Spirituality* (Paternoster, Carlisle, 1996, esp. ch. 2).

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submitted to the gospel—Eph. 4:17–19) do not share in this worship, but rather have hardened hearts and darkened minds, characteristic of idolatry (by comparison with Rom. 1:18–32). Just as everything that took place in the Old Testament Temple was regulated by the Law of God (expressed in the Sinai covenant) so now all worship in the New Testament Temple is regulated by the Law of the New covenant. This is the real and more substantial regulatory principle that governs New Testament worship. Clearly the worship of the New Testament Temple is not a free-for-all, but is expressive of the Love–Law of God who has created the Church as his dwelling place to be his image bearer in the earth.

In Ephesians 2:19ff. the apostle indicates that Jew and Gentile in the Church are being built into the dwelling place of God (as was the Tabernacle/Temple in the Old Testament), and although he does not use the language of ‘living stones’ the relational reality and unity of the situation is plain. The Church is the Temple, one that is not made by human hands, in which God dwells (cf. Acts 17:24). This building of the stones together is Trinitarian: through the initiative of God the Father, to whom all have access in the Spirit, by virtue of the sacrifice of reconciliation made by Christ the Son.

The question of access to God through the Temple was a hallmark of all that separated Jews from Gentiles. To say that now both have free and unhindered access in Christ (Eph. 2:18) is to make a statement of momentous dimensions, flying in the face of multiplied centuries of division. All focuses on Christ, however, who is the cornerstone of the Temple. The ministry of apostles and prophets is consequentially essential to the growth of the Church, being expository of the person and work of the Cornerstone. The defining feature of the Temple is the spiritual union with Christ ‘in whom’ all growth and edification takes place (2:21, 22).

That which provided the difficulty between Jew and Gentile was ‘the barrier of the dividing wall’ (Eph. 2:14). The image here probably refers to the wall that separated the court of the Gentiles from the court of the house of Israel. According to one of the pillars of this wall unearthed in 1871, the warning inscription ran, ‘No man of another race is to enter within the fence and enclosure around the Temple. Whoever is caught will have only himself to thank for the death which follows.’<sup>5</sup> The real nature of this barrier, however, was spiritual rather than physical. The barrier wall represented the gulf between Jew and Gentile in terms of the privileges given them in salvation history, as embodied in the covenant(s), law and its associated worship. The epithets ‘circumcision’ and ‘uncircumcision’ (2:11) operated as shorthand titles to indicate the vast chasm that stood between the two groups.<sup>6</sup>

While the plan and purpose of God has been orientated to all the nations from the beginning, it is clear that Old Testament Israel was God’s chosen people of the earth,

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in A. T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC Series, vol. 42 (Word Books, Dallas, 1990), p. 141.

<sup>6</sup> ‘The objective situation of hostility because of the law’s exclusiveness engendered personal and social antagonisms. The laws which forbade eating or intermarrying with Gentiles often led Jews to have contempt for Gentiles which could regard Gentiles as less than human. In response, Gentiles would often regard Jews with great suspicion, considering them inhospitable and hateful to non-Jews, and indulge in anti-Jewish prejudice . . . This lively mutual animosity was one of the uglier elements in the Greco-Roman world’ (Lincoln, *Ephesians*, p. 142).

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as his *'am segullah*. In being the object of his gracious choice, Israel possessed gifts and a status not shared by the rest of the nations (2:12; cf. Rom. 9:4–5). There was a vast difference between Jew and Gentile, as clearly spelled out in 2:12. The very act of circumcision indicated that Israel shared in the promises made to Abraham. The Gentiles' position ('the uncircumcised') is expressed in the bleakest terms, which serve to emphasise the contrast with their current situation in the Church.

Of all the elements of Israel's life and worship that separated them from the Gentiles, perhaps none was of more significance than the Old Testament cultus. The Gentiles had no access to God, since they could not share in Israel's sacrificial system. They had to stay behind the barrier, while sacrifices were offered by and for the people of Israel. Now, the Gentiles in the Church are urged to remember their former position (2:11), and see that they have been brought near in Jesus Christ (2:13). Where once they had been far off (2:13; cf. Micah 4:3; Isa. 5:26; 49:1; etc.), they had now been brought near to God in the work of Jesus on their behalf. Indeed, the one who is designated as the Prince of Peace in Isaiah 9:6, is the One who himself is our peace (Eph. 2:14). He and he alone is shown to be active in bringing about peace between estranged, un-reconciled (and un-reconcilable) communities. Both Jew and Gentile have been given the gift of peace, proclaimed to them by Christ himself (as in Isa. 57:19; quoted in Eph. 2:17).

How has this remarkable state been brought about? The answer lies in the nature of Christ's work. The Gentiles have been brought near 'by [lit. "in"] the blood of Christ' (2:13b). For Paul this phrase connotes many things. Through it comes redemption and forgiveness of sins (Eph. 1:7); propitiation, justification and redemption (Rom. 3:23ff.); justification, deliverance from wrath, and reconciliation (Rom. 5:9–10); and, by association with these concepts, adoption and the gift of the Spirit (Gal. 4:1–6). In short, without the shedding of Christ's blood there can be no unification (so also Col. 1:21–22). The end point of the sacrificial action of Christ is that Christ 'might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility' (Eph. 2:16, *ESV*). There are both vertical and horizontal dimensions to this action.

The language of blood sacrifice indicates that *both* groups needed reconciliation with God. The Jews may have been nearer by virtue of their covenantal status and heritage, but they too needed this atoning sacrifice to be made for them, and they too have only come into the new community by believing the message preached to them, as in Ephesians 2:17. Through this action there is a horizontal reconciliation brought about also. The enmity of the Law has been taken away, as Christ in his body bore its curse and suffered God's just judgment for its transgression. This means that the Gentiles and Jews together were brought into a completely new relationship with God and with one another. The Gentiles did not have to become Jews (cf. the Gal. heresy), but neither did the Jews have to become Gentiles. The new community was one in which 'cultural meltdown' had taken place to forge a new entity in the earth. In this it stands as the witness of God, as his eschatological community:

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If the Church in Eph. 2 stands for the overcoming of that fundamental division of humanity into either Jew or Gentile, it stands for the overcoming of all divisions caused by tradition, class, color, nation, or groups of nations. Anything less would be a denial of that nature of the Church which [Paul] takes as axiomatic.<sup>7</sup>

So, how does the shedding of Christ's blood effect this new unification? The answer lies in Ephesians 2:14–15. Through this action, 'the barrier of the dividing wall is broken down'. This refers not to the physical removal of the Temple's restrictions (although the destruction of the Temple in AD 70 should have made this plain enough to see!), but to the removal of the spiritual barrier that it represented. In Christ's flesh (2:15a, here standing as a parallel to 'the blood', as a comment on the Cross rather than the Incarnation),<sup>8</sup> the Old Testament distinctions which separated Jew from Gentile had been taken out of the way, and the enmity had been destroyed. The 'enmity' (both in 2:15a and 2:16c) is only removed in the Cross. That which Christ there removes is not simply the hostility of xenophobia, but the nature of the Law as an instrument of separation between Israel and the nations. The (believing) Gentiles have now undergone a true circumcision (cf. Col. 2:11ff.), to bring them into full covenant membership, but not into membership of the restricted Sinaitic covenant with Israel. Through faith in Christ, Jews and Gentiles become members of a 'new man', which may also be described as 'one body', that is, the Church:

The new 'man' is Christ insofar as he represents and realizes the Church in himself. Christ and the Church are not thereby identical; the Church is grounded 'in him' and should grow into him (2:21; 4:13, 15) and Christ, the Head of the Body (1:22; 4:15; 5:23) remains her basis (2:30), the source of her growth (4:16) and her inner life through the Spirit (2:18, 22; 4:4a). In that he leads the two formerly separated groups of Jews and Gentiles in his own person to a new, indissoluble unity, he establishes ultimate peace between them.<sup>9</sup>

### **EPHESIANS 3:1–6—ONE INHERITANCE**

The apostle here moves from the predominating imagery of the Temple, to that of the family of God and its associated concept of inheritance.<sup>10</sup> That Paul is going to further expound the matter of Fatherhood and the family is plain from the later connections (Eph. 3:14 picks up 3:1), but it has already been addressed in the theological introduction to the letter (1:3ff.) and in the implicit connection with Fatherhood

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<sup>7</sup> Lincoln, *Ephesians*, pp. 161f.

<sup>8</sup> This point is well made by Rudolph Schnackenburg, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1991), p. 115.

<sup>9</sup> Schnackenburg, *Ephesians*, p. 116.

<sup>10</sup> In reality, the matters of worship and inheritance are not far away from one another in biblical thinking. In Romans 9:4 the worship and the promises are juxtaposed, and throughout the Old Testament there is a close connection between the concepts. Patriarchal worship, for example, is most commonly reported in connection with the covenantal promises of God concerning the seed, land, blessings etc., and other constituent parts of the inheritance of God. In the exodus, Israel, God's covenantal son, is brought out from Egypt for the purposes of worship. The Tabernacle/Temple acted as continual reminder to Israel that it was his '*am segullah*', and all the promises that this embodied. Many of the Psalms link the themes of praise and thanksgiving with inheritance.

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embedded in the ‘household’ imagery of 2:18–19. In the excursus of 3:2–6 he focuses on the matter of inheritance. Throughout, there are very close parallels between Ephesians 3:1–7 and Colossians 1:21–29.

In this passage, Paul essentially argues that his ministry as an apostle relates to his proclamation of the mystery of God. The mystery (3:3, 4; cf. 3:9; 5:32; 6:19)<sup>11</sup> was once hidden, but has now been made plain through the Spirit via the apostles and prophets (3:5). The mystery is not an esoteric secret to be hidden away, but a gospel to be proclaimed, for all (both Jew and Gentile) to enter and enjoy. The fact that not all understand or embrace it has to do more with the plan and purpose of God and blindness of the human heart without the illumination of the Spirit, than with its inherently cryptic character. Here, as an apostle (particularly to the Gentiles, who are mainly in view here) Paul reiterates the revelation that he has received (3:3; cf. Acts 22:17ff.; 26:15–19; Gal. 1:12, 16–19) and which he is now commissioned to declare (and which he needs spiritual power to be able to declare, so Eph. 3:7; cf. 6:19).

The summation of the mystery is ‘that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel’ (3:6). The verse contains three adjectives all prefixed with the Greek *sun*, most of which were probably coined by Paul to emphasise the astounding nature of the revelation he has been given. The Gentiles are *sunk-lroma* (fellow heirs, cf. Rom. 8:17; Heb. 11:9; 1 Pet. 3:7 where the term also occurs); *suss<ma* (fellow body); *summetocha* (fellow sharers/partners/partakers,<sup>12</sup> in this case of the promises of God in Christ) through the gospel. The terms serve to stress the completeness of Gentile participation in the inheritance on the one hand, and the indissoluble union created between Gentile and Jew in the Church on the other. It also stands in sharp contrast with the excluded status of the Gentiles, as described in 2:12. Thus, ‘the totally *new entity* of the church gives no precedence to Jews, nor makes the Gentiles to be appendages to Jewish blessings and promise’.<sup>13</sup>

We cannot overstate the ‘newness’ aspect. However much Old Testament prophetic voices may have indicated that Gentiles would share in God’s promised blessings with Jews, particularly in the matter of worship (e.g. Isa. 2:1–4; Jer. 31:6; Zech. 8:20–23), the Church as such is a completely new creation in the world, a *novum, sui generis* in its creation, nature and destiny. It has been built by Christ (Matt. 16:18) who has been constituted by the Father to be its head (Eph. 1:22f.), and it lives in union with the Son in the most inexpressibly wonderful communion (so Eph. 5:25–33). While there is undoubtedly continuity with the Old Testament congregation of Israel, the Church in the New Testament is discontinuous with it in terms of its membership, its experience of the Trinitarian life and its eschatological destiny. The Church may have arisen out of the seedbed of Israel, but it is far more than Israel with the numbers ramped up!

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<sup>11</sup> The concept of mystery is pervasive in the New Testament. Many verses could be adduced (e.g. Matt. 13:11 and parallels; Rom. 11:25; 16:25; 1 Cor. 2:1, 7; 4:1; 15:51; Col. 1:26, 27; Rev. 1:20; etc.). Throughout, however, the idea is linked with God’s gracious purposes being revealed to his people, rather than esoteric/Gnostic categories.

<sup>12</sup> cf. the same word used in Eph. 5:7.

<sup>13</sup> G. C. Bingham, *Ephesians: A Commentary*, NCPI, Blackwood, n.d., p. 35. Author’s italics.

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Importantly, everything that is said of the Jewish/Gentile union with Christ is ‘through the gospel’ (3:6c). There is no union of Gentile and Jew without spiritual union with Christ, which comes about through belief in the gospel. Where unbelief remains, reconciliation remains uneffected, and Jew and Gentile continue in hostility. Paul knew that the conquest and unification of the nations could only ever come through their submission to the word of Christ in the gospel. The biblical concept of reconciliation is not to be confused with the Eastern ideas of harmony and balance. The union of antagonistic factions cannot be balanced into existence, but can only come about by both being aligned to God, through the reality proclaimed in the gospel.

### **CONCLUSION**

A number of elements emerge from the above comments. Firstly, the work of Christ is the objective ground of reconciliation for the nations. There can be no reconciliation by divine fiat, since the cause of enmity and strife is essentially moral. The God who comes preaching peace to us can only proclaim peace on the basis of his work in removing the enmity. This is accomplished in Christ’s crucifixion, or to use Denney’s phrase, ‘by Christ in his death’. This enmity is both vertical and horizontal, and both elements must be dealt with. The latter cannot be dealt with apart from the former. The actual status of human beings (as under God’s wrath, hostile to him and counted as his enemies, as in Eph. 2:3; cf. Col. 1:21f.; Rom. 5:10) must be changed.

Secondly, the reconciliation between Jew and Gentile in the Church is the embodiment of God’s plan and purpose to reconcile formerly irreconcilable sinners in an actual, visible relational unity. Reconciliation between opposing factions, peoples and classes is not an ideal to be aimed for, but an actuality that has been achieved. The apostle is thus urging his readers to live in accordance with the status that has been given them in Christ. They are not to create, but to maintain the unity that they have been granted in the gospel.

Thirdly, it is plain that the reconciliation of hostile groups must come through the preaching of the gospel, and that this preaching must focus on the work of Christ on our behalf. It is through this gospel that the knowledge of forgiveness, reconciliation and all associated benefits is brought to a sinful world. Believing this gospel brings one into spiritual union with Christ, and with one another in him. The actual experience of the unifying power of the gospel lies in our congruence with what has already been accomplished. We can forgive, as we have been forgiven; we can show mercy, as we have received mercy; we can love, as we have been loved, and so on. To refuse to live in congruence with the consequences of our reconciled state with God is to transgress the law governing the worship of the New covenant, leading to the grieving of the Spirit of God among us.

Fourthly, it is also plain that the redeemed community is the community of hope. The plan and purpose of God, as expounded in Ephesians 1:3–14, is dramatic and expansive (to say the very least!), and it all hinges on Christ’s atoning work. This work has been accomplished, in all its fullness. God’s purposes in Christ have not

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failed, and this is the guarantee that his ultimate purposes will yet be completed, and that the reconciliation of all things will be seen to be the goal of history. ‘Till then, we live in present hope, in patience of the coming sight’! Where hope is lost, the practical expressions of God’s reconciling work in the community of faith shrivel up.

## Study 10

# *The Matter of Community and Personal Peace through Reconciliation*

Martin Bleby

### **DO WE KNOW TRUE PEACE?**

We see peace as something desirable for us to come to—freedom from threat and conflict. It is something that we strive to achieve: whether peace in the Middle East, or a peaceful (secure) neighbourhood, or a family life that is relatively free from conflict, or a personal life that is free from stress. Can we see it rather as the state that we have originally come from, to which we must be brought back?

How would that make a difference in the way we understand and seek for peace? Peace, then, would not be something that we achieve. It could be something that moves out and establishes itself, over all that has attempted to bring about the breakdown of peace. This peace, in the end, is something that cannot be broken.

### **THE GOD OF PEACE**

Paul says to the Romans: ‘The God of peace be with all of you’ (Rom. 15:33). Paul is looking forward here to being with the believers in Rome. His desire is ‘that by God’s will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company’—a wonderful anticipation of peace. He is also engaged in a ministry that he hopes will be ‘acceptable to the saints’ in Jerusalem, while he is only too aware of opposition from ‘the unbelievers in Judea’. Paul appeals to the Romans ‘by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit’ to pray earnestly for him to God (Rom. 15:30–32). It is in this context that he prays, ‘The God of peace be with all of you’.

Who is this God, and how is He ‘the God of peace’? Is it because He makes peace over troubled waters, or is it something more than that?

### ***The Sabbath rest***

God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude.

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And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation (Gen. 1:31 – 2:3).

God's 'rest' following the work of creation was not the rest of exhaustion and recuperation. It was the rest of completeness, satisfaction and fulfilment. Deep within God is a peace and contentment with all that He is, and all that He has done.

It is not a 'rest' of inactivity, but of God's ongoing dynamic and purposeful action. Even though the initial work of creation was completed, God was still active in His work of sustaining His creation and of bringing it to the goal He had planned for it. Jesus could say, even on the sabbath day, 'My Father is still working' (John 5:17). All of God's action comes from the deep peace and fullness of satisfaction that is at the heart of God's nature.

### ***The Sabbath commandment***

This is the peace and rest that God desires His human creatures, made in His image, to participate in with Him, as 'participants of the divine nature' (2 Pet. 1:4). The fourth of the 'ten words' (Exod. 20:8–11) enjoins rest from work on one day in seven. The reason given is:

For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day.

The thrust of the commandment is that God's people should 'keep holy' this sabbath day, the day that the Lord has blessed and consecrated. To keep the sabbath day is not just to have some rest and recreation, but by this to participate somehow in the holiness of God Himself—in the rest and peace that pertains to His own nature and action.

### ***Relational rest and peace***

Jesus showed us more of the inner dynamic of this rest and peace when he opened out to us his own relationship with the Father. He showed how he was personally engaged, at the Father's instigation, in all that the Father was doing:

My Father is still working, and I also am working (John 5:17).

Jesus himself knew the rest and peace of being in active relationship with the Father as the true Son:

All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him (Matt. 11:27).

This is the rest and peace that he has come to bring us into; for he goes on to say:

Come to me, all of you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest (Matt. 11:28).

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That the Spirit of God is no less in this action of peace, we find in Isaiah where he speaks of God's people being brought into the promised land:

Like cattle that go down into the valley,  
the spirit of the LORD gave them rest.  
Thus you led your people,  
to make for yourself a glorious name (Isa. 63:14).

Equally in the New Testament, when we are told that we are justified by faith and so have peace with God and the hope of the glory of God, we find that this is because 'God's love [in the cross of Christ] has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (see Rom. 5:1-6).

God's peace, then, is not just God being inwardly satisfied with Himself. It is the entire action in relational, saving love together of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

### ***Ultimate rest***

Hebrews 3 and 4 speak of 'a sabbath rest' that 'still remains for the people of God', by which we 'enter God's rest' in a way that surpasses all former participation in it (Heb. 4:9-10). Participation in it is by faith and obedience, in relation to the 'good news' that has come to us. Disobedience and unbelief preclude entry into it (Heb. 3:18-19; 4:2-7). We are to make every effort to enter that rest, and to take care that none of us should seem to fail to have reached it (Heb. 4:11, 1). This is the ultimate goal God has for His human creatures in the 'new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home' (2 Pet. 3:13). This is represented in the vision given to John as the depth, serenity and purity of 'something like a sea of glass, like crystal' (Rev. 4:6).

### ***The peace of God***

Thus we see that God is 'the God of peace' not just because He makes peace, but because He is peace in Himself, and He purposes us to share with Him in the dynamic action of that peace. This is the original peace that was there for us at creation.

The fact that we have sought to abandon that peace and to disturb it with wickedness means also that God moves out with this peace of His to counter evil and sin and restore us to His peace and take us on to His goal of our full participation in it. Thus He is also the Maker and Restorer of our peace when it has been lost to us. This is the action of reconciliation.

This, too, is reflected by the 'ten words' in the version that appears in Deuteronomy 5:12-15, where the reason given for keeping the sabbath day is to remember the saving action of God's redemption from slave labour:

Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm (Deut. 5:15).

It is in the light of this understanding that we can now consider the matter of communal and personal peace through reconciliation.

## **PEACE AS FREEDOM FROM THREAT AND CONFLICT**

There is a sense, naturally, in which peace is the absence of threat and conflict. This is part of what is promised by God to Israel:

I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and no one shall make you afraid; I will remove dangerous animals from the land, and no sword shall go through your land (Lev. 26:6).

This is the blessing that will come 'If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully' (Lev. 26:3), over against the curse of being 'struck down by your enemies', when 'you shall flee though no one pursues you', and 'I will let loose wild animals against you', that will happen 'if you will not obey me, and do not observe all these commandments . . . and you break my covenant' (Lev. 26:14–15, 17, 22).

We see this dynamic being played out in the Book of Judges, in the repeated cycle of apostasy and deliverance. After God's deliverance at the hand of a judge, we commonly read:

And the land had rest forty years (e.g. Jud. 5:31).

## **PEACE AS WELL-BEING**

Peace, however, is much more than simply the absence of strife. The words *shalom* (Hebrew) and *eirene* (Greek) denote a wide-ranging fullness of personal and communal well-being. Micah 4, after speaking of the beating of 'swords into ploughshares' and 'spears into pruning hooks', of sword not being lifted up and of war being learned no more, gives this beautiful picture of prosperity, security and enjoyment:

. . . they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees,

and no one shall make them afraid (Micah 4:4).

This fullness of peace is what will come as peoples of many nations are taught by God to know His ways and walk in His paths (see Micah 4:2).

A similar picture is given in Zechariah 8:12:

For there shall be a sowing of peace: the vine shall yield its fruit, the ground shall give its produce, and the skies shall give their dew; and I will cause the remnant of this people to possess all these things.

This will be when God reverses the fortunes of His people from cursing to blessing:

Just as you have been a cursing among the nations, O house of Judah and house of Israel, so I will save you and you will be a blessing (v. 13).

This is more than just a passive thing on the part of the people, but one in which they will be fearlessly active:

Do not be afraid, but let your hands be strong (v. 13).

## **PEACE, RIGHTEOUSNESS, AND THE OBEDIENCE OF FAITH**

We have seen enough so far to note that this peace is not apart from obedience to God and His law. Since the law of God is the expression of God's nature in relation to Himself, to us, and to others, and since this peace is of the very essence of God's own being and action, we would expect this to be so. Frequently we find that peace is associated intimately with righteousness, and with the trust and obedience that fit with God's righteousness.

Psalm 85 speaks of God's salvation in these terms:

Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;  
righteousness and peace will kiss each other (Ps. 85:10).

That there should be a place for sinners where the assertion of God's righteousness, without diminution, should engender and establish peace with them, rather than destroy them outright, is indeed a remarkable thing. Such has happened in the salvation that has come to us in Christ, where the fulfilment of all God's righteous requirement in him has brought us to pardon and peace with God. This is there for all who are righteous through faith in the redeeming God:

Open the gates,  
so that the righteous nation that keeps faith  
may enter in.  
Those of steadfast mind you keep in peace—  
in peace because they trust in you (Isa. 26:2-3)

Isaiah speaks of a time when 'a spirit from on high is poured out on us':

Then justice will dwell in the wilderness,  
and righteousness abide in the fruitful field.  
The effect of righteousness will be peace,  
and the result of righteousness quietness and trust forever.  
My people will abide in a peaceful habitation,  
in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places (Isa. 32:16-18).

There can be no peace from God without the righteousness from God, which entails the doing of God's will in the keeping of God's commandments. Thus Psalm 119 observes:

Great peace have those who love your law;  
nothing can make them stumble (Ps. 119:165).

God's peace is perpetuated through the maintaining of God's law:

These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another, render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace . . . love truth and peace (Zech. 8:16, 19).

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While this peace is there for all who have a heart for God in trust and obedience to the way He is in His law, those who refuse to live this way cannot ever know the peace of God:

Peace, peace to the far and the near, says the LORD,  
and I will heal them.  
But the wicked are like the tossing sea  
that cannot keep still;  
its waters toss up mire and mud.  
There is no peace, says my God, for the wicked (Isa. 57:19–21; cf. 48:22).

Thus we are told to ‘Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace and pursue it’ (Ps. 34:14; see also 1 Pet. 3:11).

### **PEACE FROM GOD**

Since this peace is God’s own peace, that He is determined we should participate in, it is from God alone that this peace comes. Indeed, it is from God that all things come:

I form light and create darkness  
I make weal [*shalom*] and create woe  
I the LORD do all these things (Isa. 45:7).

God’s sovereignty commands peace not just on earth but throughout the whole of His creation, including the heavenly powers. Even Bildad the Shuhite, for all his diminished understanding, knew that:

Dominion and fear are with God;  
he makes peace in his high heaven (Job 25:2).

God does not resile from whatever warlike action it will take to command this peace. The God of peace is not one whose peace is mealy-mouthed or unwilling to face necessary conflict to bring peace about, as we hear in the striking words:

The God of peace will shortly crush Satan under your feet (Rom. 16:20).

It is to God, then, in all His actions in our lives, that we must look for the peace that is promised:

O LORD, you will ordain peace for us,  
for indeed, all that we have done, you have done for us (Isa. 26:12).

This peace will always be in a direct and fitting relationship with God. As God said of the true priest in Malachi 2:5–6:

My covenant with him was a covenant of life and well-being [*shalom*], which I gave him; this called for reverence, and he revered me and stood in awe of my name. True instruction was on his mouth,

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and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in integrity [*shalom*] and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity.

This is the priest whose responsibility it was to pronounce the blessing:

The Lord bless you and keep you;  
the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;  
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace (Num. 6:24–26).

In this way the priest was to ‘put my name’ on the people of Israel, in blessing them. God’s peace is given in a personal, face-to-face relationship with the Lord.

### **HE IS OUR PEACE**

All of this is background to the coming and peace-making of the Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6), Jesus the Messiah, which is treated in other studies in this School, such as 19: ‘Blessed Are the Peacemakers’.

This is the peace that Jesus brought in person when he said such things as, ‘your faith has saved you; go in peace’ (Mark 5:34), as he moved decisively against sin, evil and disease. Particularly after his resurrection, his repeated greeting, ‘Peace be with you’, spoke of the fullness of reconciliation that had been accomplished in his battle against the hatred of human and evil powers, his full bearing and taking away of the guilt and shame of sin, and the direct relationship with our heavenly Father that had been brought to us in the total forgiveness of sin achieved there. This is the peace that the disciples carried with them as they went in obedience to his commissioning of them, in the authority that he conveyed to them, to be able to say in more than a token way, ‘Peace to this house!’ (Luke 10:5). It is the greeting with which every epistle begins: ‘Grace to you, and peace’. This is the peace that he has left with us; the peace that the world cannot give us, from the one who, by virtue of his bearing in us and for us all that has troubled our peace, of our own and others’ making, is now able to say to us, ‘Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid’ (John 14:27; cf. 12:27).

## Study 11

# *Reconciliation and the Law in Ultimacy*

Geoffrey Bingham

### **INTRODUCTION: THE MEANING OF 'THE LAW IN ULTIMACY'**

Whenever we choose a theme for Schools such as ours and seek to deal with its various aspects we run the risk of being out of kilter. Here, for example, hardly anyone ever speaks of the law as it is envisaged in the ultimate—the *telos* of history. This would not matter except that we may wonder whether future creation will live by law and if so, then by what law? And so on. I am suggesting that law ever was, that it is and always will be the law of God Himself—subjective genitive. This may sound quite naive but I think the case is biblical, calling into question as it does: (i) what is the law for all creation; and (ii) what will be the law—if any—for the new (renewed) creation 'in which [only] righteousness dwells' (2 Pet. 3:13)? If we say that the eternal law of God is the law of love then the matter is made simple, provided we see this law not as static, but in the very constitution of the Divine Community—the Trinity—and that it is given by Him to be the very way of life of Man.

When God said, 'Let us make man in our own image and likeness', He did so by giving them lordship over the earth (Gen. 1:8) thus representing Him as King. Psalm 8 enlarges a little on this in verses 5–6, 'Yet thou hast made him little less than God, and dost crown him with glory and honour. Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet.' Psalm 115:16 supports this: 'The heavens are the LORD's heavens, but the earth he has given to the sons of men'. Man must image all of God even though he is none of God (1 Cor. 11:7). As at creation Man reflected God, so more fully does redeemed Man 'in Christ' who is 'the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being' (Heb. 1:3). In this image we include the reflection of God's moral glory which we will see is to do with His law.

## **THE LAW OF GOD IS FIRST THE VERY LAW OF GOD HIMSELF**

God, of course, is under no law but He acts in love because as the Divine Community He is love. Whatever terms we use for the being of God and the doing of God, He is and does as love. That is what we mean by the law of His Community of Three Persons being as One. This way of being and doing he has given to Man as the law of love. P. T. Forsyth wrote, 'The holy law . . . is not the creation of God but His nature, and it cannot be treated as less than inviolable and eternal, it cannot be denied or simply annulled unless He seems false to Himself . . . the self denial of Christ was there because God could not deny Himself.'<sup>1</sup>

Ernest F. Kevan wrote in his book *The Grace of Law* of the approach the Puritans had to the law of God:

(i) *A transcript of the holiness of God.* A Law emanating from the Divine reason, and given in so direct a manner by God Himself, and for so blessed an end, was held by the Puritans to be nothing less than the very transcript of the glory of God. Man has been made in God's image, and so the moral Law within him must be part of that very image itself. But it was not only because of this that the Puritans ascribed such glorious perfection to the Law. Their chief reason was the more theological one, that God could not be thought of as requiring from man anything less than that which accorded with the Divine character.

The evidence for this high view of the Law is abundant in the Puritan writings. The moral Law in man is a copy of the Divine nature, and what God wills in the moral Law is so 'consonant to that eternal justice and goodness in himself', that any supposed abrogation of that Law would mean that God would 'deny his own justice and goodness'. 'To find fault with the Law, were to find fault with God', for 'the original draft is in God himself'. It is 'the express idea, or representation of God's own image, even a beam of his own holiness'. God is the Being of essential perfection, 'and from that Perfection all Laws in the world, that are just and good, have their Original; that is, God's own Laws are the expressions of his holy perfect Will and Nature'. In the act by which the Law was conveyed to man, the Puritans perceived the ministry of Christ, and the Johannine concept of the [*logos*] seems to justify them in this. 'The hand of him who was the "Mighty Counsellor", did guide the pen that wrote it in Adam's heart at first', and 'himself is the substantial image of God, and the [*prototupon*: prototype] of the law'. Expressions of this kind may be found throughout the Puritan writings.

The Law is thus the glorious expression of the glory of God in so far as that glory is to be realized by the creatures whom He has made in His own image.<sup>2</sup>

Kevan himself writes of the law:

God is consistent with Himself. The law of God written in man at his constitution which requires his moral likeness to God, can have been no other than the transcript of God's perfections in the form of moral demands. Further, because man was made in God's image, the moral Law written within him must but be a part of that image.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Atonement in Modern Religious Thought*, p. 79. Quoted by Trevor Hart in an article, 'Morality, Atonement and the Death of Jesus' in *Justice the True and Only Mercy: Essays on the Life and Theology of Peter Taylor Forsyth*, ed. by Trevor Hart (T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1995), p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted from *The Grace of Law: A Study in Puritan Theology* by Ernest F. Kevan (Guardian Press, Grand Rapids, 1976), pp. 62-3. I have omitted the names and books quoted in this section by Kevan of the many Puritan authors.

<sup>3</sup> E. F. Kevan, *Keep His Commandments*, Tyndale Press, London, 1964, p. 9.

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He also quotes Robert Bolton regarding the moral law as, ‘Law eternall, resident in the pure, glorious, infinite minde of God, which is that order which God before all ages hath set downe with himselfe, for himselfe to doe all things by’.<sup>4</sup>

J. A. Motyer views the Law, God and Man, in a most telling way:

*Law in the Image of God.* Turning now to a very different genre of Scripture, we find in Lev. 19 that God has provided another image of himself on earth. Every aspect of human experience is gathered into this rich review of man’s life under God’s law: filial duty (vs. 3), religious commitment (vs. 4), ritual exactness (vs. 5), care of the needy (vs. 9), honesty in deed and word (vss. 11–12.), and many more, touching on relationships and even on dress, hygiene, and horticulture. Yet all this variety suspends from one central truth: ‘I am the Lord.’ Lord is the divine name, the ‘I am what I am’ (Exod. 3:14), so that the significance of the recurring claim is not ‘You must do what I tell you’ (i.e., ‘lord’ as an authority word) but ‘You must do this or that because I am what I am’; every precept of the law is a reflection of ‘what I am.’ Man is the living, personal image of God; the law is the written, preceptual image of God. The intention of Lev. 19 is declared at the outset: ‘You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy’ (vs. 2). The Lord longs for his people to live in his image, and to that end he has given them his law . . . When man in the image of God and law in the image of God come together in the fully obedient life, then man is indeed ‘being himself.’ His nature is the image of God, and the law is given both to activate and to direct that nature into a truly human life; any other life is subhuman. Of course, it is true that in a world of sinners the law, regrettably, has to give itself to the task of curbing and rebuking antisocial and degrading practices, but OT law has, to a far greater extent, the function of liberating man to live according to his true nature. For it is only when man finds the law of liberty that he becomes free. For this reason the OT asserts that the law has been given for our good, to bring us to a hitherto unrealized fullness of life (Deut. 4:1; 5:33; 8:1).<sup>5</sup>

The deepest level we must penetrate to understand that what is law in the Triune God at the Divine level is law in—and for—Man at the created level. We must see that whilst the law of love at the human level is:

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets (Matt. 22:37–40).

Contemporary Trinitarian theology has deeply explored the interpersonal, interdwelling, co-inherence, co-habitation and co-action of the Three Persons. One of the many contemporary Trinitarian theologians—Cornelius Plantinga—speaks of the elements which constitute the unity of the Persons. He says:

So much for Paul. Through John’s Gospel runs an even richer vein for the church’s doctrine of the Trinity—a wide, deep, and subtle account of divine distinction within unity. In John, Father, Son, and usually the Spirit or Paraclete are clearly distinct divine persons who play differentiated roles within the general divine enterprise of life-giving and life-disclosing. Yet they are primordially united—a claim typically made in the Fourth Gospel . . . Father and Son are said to be in each other.

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Bolton, *Assise Sermons*, 163, p. 7, quoted by Kevan, *The Grace of Law*, p. 67.

<sup>5</sup> J. A. Motyer in an article ‘Law, biblical concept of’ in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Baker, Grand Rapids, 1984), p. 624.

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*This is the base claim for the Greek Fathers' doctrine of perichōrēsis, a sort of intratrinitarian hospitality concept [emphasis mine]. According to this concept, each trinitarian person graciously makes room for the others in his own inner life and envelops or enfolds that person there. Each is in the other two.*

In John, Father and Son are also said to be one with each other. Though the relation of in-ness and oneness is not clearly set forth, it is close in context and apparently in concept. Perhaps in-ness is the main exhibition of oneness.

In any case, the primal unity of Father, Son, and Paraclete is revealed, exemplified, and maybe partly constituted by common will, work, word, and knowledge among them, and by their reciprocal love and glorifying. These same six phenomena both distinguish the three persons and also unite them, typically by a functional subordination relation that obtains among the three.<sup>6</sup>

This tells us that the Trinity is love. I believe we can talk about God loving Himself in Himself with all his Being and that we at last see the fullness and source of true neighbourly relationship in the Three Persons or 'Neighbours', so that the two commandments of love which are all 'the law and the prophets' can be understood, explored and practised. So a progressive or enlarging revelation of God comes to us through Christ who became God's man in the superb act of love. We do not have time to explore these insuperable dimensions although Ephesians 3:14–19 does express them. We now have to see this law of God in the history and experience of Man. One says, 'God has always been about the law of love'.

### **THE LAW OF GOD IN THE HISTORY OF MAN**

Law, as we should know it from Israel, is 'Torah' and is for instruction, guidance and unswerving obedience. It is not identical with the Roman *lex* or the Greek *nomos* which have most to do with the *polis*—city, state and public life. Many look on Israel's law as primarily religious and as outdated because of the progress of what is called 'civilisation'. It is obvious that Torah for Israel, though given by God, does not wholly cover all the law of God as we have described it above, though all its principles come from that law.

We have maintained that law was implanted in Man's heart at creation.<sup>7</sup> From Romans 1:32, where those who practice evil 'know God's decree [*dikaïoma*] that those who do such things deserve to die', we gather this has always been the case. One John 3:3–8 tells us of sin—that is, lawlessness, transgression of the law—and says the one who commits sin is of the devil, and includes Cain in such. Abel did works of righteousness, that is, obeyed the law. In what we call the 'pre-Abrahamic' era law, was present. From Romans 7 we conclude that sin always uses the law to incite sin and this was what happened in the pre-Flood period when on the one hand

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<sup>6</sup> Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr (eds), *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement: Philosophical & Theological Essays* (University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 1989), p. 25.

<sup>7</sup> Theologians speak of 'the natural law' meaning that law is known by all people, even though their variations are sometimes linked with cultural practices. It seems that law is generally known, but because of the Fall the clear view of it as the law of God has been considerably affected and this is dimly seen, if at all! One element is common to all human beings, namely the conscience, and this is always linked with law of every kind. We cannot pause to discuss these things in this short essay!

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there were persons of faith and on the other persons of flagrant violence and corruption. Between Noah and Abraham there are evidences of moral law recognised by many and in particular Pharaoh and Abimelech (cf. Gen. 12:15ff.; 20:1–6; 26:6–11). God also spoke of Abraham being a law-abiding man (Gen. 26:5), ‘because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws’.

Without doubt the law was a gift to Israel. In Romans 9:4–5 Paul says, ‘They are Israelites, and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ. God who is over all be blessed for ever.’ Notice the full-bodied situation. Law is given with the other essential blessings and they include ‘the Christ’ whose earthly origin is in Israel. The law is not apart from ‘the covenants’ which include the ones of Sinai, of David and the coming new covenant of Jeremiah 31:31–34 (cf. Ezek. 36:24–28; 37:1–4).<sup>8</sup>

Then comes the New Covenant which is really the Covenant which Christ speaks of in Matthew 26:26–28, which Paul speaks clearly of in 2 Corinthians 3, and Galatians 3, and the writer of Hebrews in chapters 8 to 10. John comments, ‘For the law was given by Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ’ (John 1:17). Christ’s coming was to do with the Kingdom of God in which the law of the King would be the true law—the law of the Father–King and the Son–King. It was ever to be the law of the Kingdom as it was by creation, but it would be the law coming to Man through the revelation of salvation: indeed through salvation. We are well aware of varying views on the law as Israel sought to practice it. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus taught in order to clarify the matter of the law. He stated unequivocally:

Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:17–20).

What Christ taught was not revolutionary and not even a radicalising of God’s law. It was the revelation of the essential nature of law and that law as being wholly love. This revelation could never have come had not Messiah come as a man, lived among humanity, and become obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Had this not happened God’s love could never have been truly known. The Incarnation always had in view the death of the Cross. It was always in Jesus’ mind, in his teaching and in his orientation. It was impossible for Man to grasp this law of love in which the Trinity participated but the New Testament tells us time and again that the important matters were ‘that Christ died in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he

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<sup>8</sup> It would take a larger essay to set out the Covenant of love which God made before time for the human race, and to show that this is ‘the everlasting covenant’ in which all other covenants of God are included. See W. J. Dumbrell’s *Covenant and Creation* (Paternoster, Exeter, 1984), and my *Love’s Most Glorious Covenant* (Redeemer Baptist Pr., Castle Hill, 1997).

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was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures' (1 Cor. 15:3–4). *The work of the Son coming to redeem humanity via the Cross and the Resurrection is the enactment of the love of God, the living out and working out of the great law of love, the law of God Himself!*

### **RECONCILIATION AND THE LAW IN ULTIMACY**

We come to our conclusion: all we are considering in this School regarding reconciliation is summed up in, 'that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation' (2 Cor. 5:19). Man is reconciled to God, his sins not being imputed to him, and now that message goes out to all the world. Paul can say, 'we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received our reconciliation'. What free people we are, free to love—impelled, in fact to love. On the Day of Pentecost when the gospel came with force through the Holy Spirit, the new community of the Father, of Christ and of the Holy Spirit was a company of people who loved one another, and it began to operate in the great law of the Triune God—the law of love. The evidence of this love is seen throughout the Book of the Acts, although the word 'love' is never mentioned in it. The emphasis of the book is on the 'great grace' which 'was upon them all—the grace which brings redeemed people to love.

When it comes to the Epistles the teaching and exhortation regarding love is often given and always very clear. The old commandment has become the new commandment in John's letters. 'He who says "I know him" but disobeys his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may be sure that we are in him' (1 John 2:4–5). 'No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us' (1 John 4:12). So it goes on in writer after writer—'Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere love of the brethren, love one another earnestly from the heart' (1 Pet. 1:22); 'Let all that you do be done in love' (1 Cor. 16:14), and then the great hymn of love (1 Cor. 13).

Of course and most of all God has been revealed as love. His kingdom is of love—'the kingdom of the Son of His love' (Col. 1:13)—but the work of love is going on as set out in 1 Corinthians 15:24–28 and in larger form in the whole of the Book of the Revelation. The law of God's love impels the people of God to go willingly to all the world, proclaiming the gospel of reconciliation, the word of reconciliation. All are taught that: (i) the reconciliation has been made, once for all, through the Cross; (ii) that they must be reconciled to God; (iii) that they must be reconciled to all others; and (iv) that the day of the unification of all things in Christ is coming (Eph. 1:10), which will also be the day of the reconciliation of all things (Col. 1:19–20) and the filling up of all things (Eph. 4:10), bringing all into harmony through all men putting on love 'which binds everything together in perfect harmony' (Col. 3:14).

Christ—the 'king . . . triumphant and victorious . . . humble'—rules in love. His law is called 'the law of Christ' (1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2) but he told the rich young ruler the law of love was to love God with all one's being, and one's neighbour as oneself.

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Paul likewise showed that the whole law which we call 'moral' is the law of love, and concluded that 'Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law' (Rom. 13:8–10). He also said, 'through love be servants of one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, "you shall love your neighbour as yourself"' (Gal. 5:13–14). Christ, too, was the one who taught so clearly that the law of the Kingdom was the law of love and that the way of God is the way of love. In clarity he taught the great principle of God's law in Matthew 23:23:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.

The principle is surely this, 'In the law God has ordained for you to operate in the weightier matters of the law', that is, 'justice and mercy and faith'. He meant by this that since he is the God of 'justice and mercy and faith[fullness]' (cf. Exod. 34:6–7) and that is His law, so they, living in His law, should be and do likewise.

The ultimacy as we all know is eternity—the new heaven and the new earth. All intimations of it are glorious. It is the sphere of all joy and freedom and peace. The creation, which appeared to be atomised by the serpent and sin, is one wonderful unity—all things unified and in harmony, the frustrated creation now sharing in the 'liberty of the glory of the children of God'. Of course, here, the law of God, the law of love, is the true order of all things. Man now shares in the divine nature, in the eternal *theosis*. The *perichoresis* of the Godhead has enveloped Man, and indeed all creation, in its embrace as it had ever intended. Now indeed is 'a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds' and works throughout eternity. It is no wonder that Man delights in the law of God after his inner being (Ps. 1).

## Study 12

# *The Matter of the Everlasting Covenant and Unity*

Noel Due

### **INTRODUCTION**

One cannot enter into any theological discussion or debate without finding that terms overlap and engage with one another on all fronts. Any discussion of reconciliation must, by the very nature of things, draw in many other biblical realities such as justification, redemption, the plan and purpose of God, ecclesiology, eschatology and, of course, covenant.

The unifying force in Israel's life was its experience of covenant. King, prophet, priest and pauper alike were all members of the covenant community, answerable for their conduct under terms of covenant obligation, and shaped as an entire people by the covenant promises and covenant faithfulness of God. Israel was 'baptised into Moses' as their covenant head, the leader of the nation at the time of the forging of the Sinai covenant, but their understanding of themselves as God's covenant people did not begin there. Israel did not look back to Moses as their father, but to Abraham. The covenants with Moses and David are both sub-sets of the Abrahamic covenant. Israel was delivered from Egypt and brought to Sinai because God remembered his covenant with Abraham (e.g. Exod. 2:24; 6:5). David received the enormous blessings of the covenant made with him and his posterity, which would govern the destiny of the nations, because he was already in Abraham's line, to whom God had promised that 'kings would come from him' (e.g. Gen. 17:6, 16; 35:11).

The calling of Abraham and the gift of God's covenant with him appear at a very significant time in the biblical narrative. The primeval prologue of Genesis 1 – 11 has described the creation of the heavens and the earth; the formation of men and women in the image of God; the fall; the destiny of the nations that emerge from the lines of godly and godless men; and the continual rebellion of the peoples of the earth against God. The flood judgment is an apt sentence on an earth flooded with human violence, and the scattering of the peoples at Babel is an apt judgment on rebellious attempts

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for the nations to find their unity apart from God and exclusive of obedience to his commands. The continual rebelliousness, violence, disunity and arrogance of humanity post-fall represent the unreconciled state of creation at every level. Humanity is shown to be estranged from God, from one another, and from the very creation itself, but united in its opposition against God.<sup>1</sup> The response to this desperate and deadly state, from God's view of salvation history, is the sovereign choice of Abraham and the establishment of a covenant with him.

This covenant is extremely significant, since the very nations that are shown to be in rebellion against God are in view here. The covenant is made *with* Abraham, but ultimately *for* the nations. It is little wonder, then, that Paul interprets the work of God in Christ through the framework of the Abrahamic covenant. This is especially evident when refuting the arguments of the Judaizing faction in Galatia, where he shows that the Gentiles receive the Spirit by faith, in accordance with the promise made to Abraham (so Gal. 3, especially vv. 10–14). The unified Church is thus the fulfilment of the patriarchal promises, so that 'there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3:28, *ESV*).

From whence does this great Abrahamic covenant come? It clearly comes 'from God', in that it is not a human invention, but are there any precedents for it and what do these mean?

### ***The Covenant with Noah Reiterates Creation***

The establishment of the Noahic covenant is recounted in Genesis 8:20 – 9:17. The setting is well known. Noah (whose name was given in prophetic hope of rest from the curse—Gen. 5:29) is appointed by God as both a preacher of righteousness leading up to the time of the flood judgment (2 Pet. 2:5) and a new Adam on the cleansed earth after it (see the language of Gen. 9:1, 7). Notably the covenant includes every element of the creation. The wider framework in which it is set is significant. Despite the

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<sup>1</sup> The theme of (false) unity is evident throughout the primeval prologue of Genesis amongst the line of the ungodly and the nations in general. It is shown always to be a unity sought in contrast to the will of God and one that always fails. The key aspects of this rebellious unity are city building (beginning with Cain) and the account of the tower of Babel. Given the strong polemical thread(s) running throughout this section of the Pentateuch, it is likely that the Babel incident is a comment on the futility of the nations' seeking for unity in idolatrous worship. It is commonly held that the tower represents a Babylonian worship centre, and throughout the Ancient Near East towers/ziggurats etc. were an attempt on the part of men to build artificial mountains, which could then serve as divine dwelling places. In the Babel incident, commentators note the repetition of the consonants *n*, *b*, *l*, evoking the Hebrew word *nebelah*, meaning 'folly' and representing part of an extended word play on 'Babel'. Whereas 'The Babylonians understood Babel to mean "the gate of the god", the Hebrews understood it to mean "mixed up, confused"' (Gordon Wenham, *Genesis*, WBC, vol. 1, Word, Waco, pp. 239–241). By contrast, the unity of Israel lay in its Tabernacle/Temple worship, which was made according to the pattern shown to Moses on God's mountain. It is given from above, not built from below. When Israel gave into idolatry, it suffered the shattering effects of disunity and judgment. In the New Testament the true Temple is the body of Christ in and through whom the nations are united. In contrast to the Babel tower builders, Christ does not set out to make a name for himself. Rather, he is content to bear the suffering and shame of being abandoned, exiled from the presence of God and man, in order to restore his people to the name that they had by creation. For his part, Christ is given the Name above all names, and the Church worships him in adoration on account of it.

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fact that Noah is still tainted with the sin that characterised the nations in their rebellion against God (so Gen. 8:21a), the promise of God includes the regular progression of the seasons so that the harvest may be secured (8:22). Given the context of the violence before the flood, murder is specifically mentioned as an offence against the dignity of humanity made in God's image (9:6). The creational mandate is reaffirmed (9:1, 7) and Noah and his descendants are given clear vice-regency over the creation (9:2f.), though with the implication that this vice-regal activity will be tinged with terror from the point of view of the other creatures of the earth.

The actual covenant itself is recorded in Genesis 9:8–17. A number of elements can be mentioned. This covenant is clearly given by the initiative of God, who speaks to Noah and his sons (9:8). First personal pronouns predominate, indicating that this is God's covenant, both in terms of its inception and its administration (see 9:9, 'I', 'myself' and 'my' and so on throughout the passage). In keeping with the wider framework of the covenant, it exists for the sake of the whole creation. Not only are Noah and his descendants named (9:9), but it is also stipulated that it is being made 'with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth' (9:10, *ESV*). This pan-creational aspect is reiterated in verses 11, 12, 15, 16 and 17. Indeed, in Genesis 9:13 the bow set in the cloud 'shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth' (*ESV*). The covenantal promises thus relate not simply to the preservation of the line of men and women on the earth, but to the whole earth itself and 'all flesh' that is on it (9:17). The sign of the covenant is the rainbow, set in the heavens as a sign that God's activity in the flood judgment is complete, and also as a sign of his faithfulness to the promises he has made concerning the preservation of the creation in all its fullness. He will see the bow and remember his covenant promises (9:16; cf. vv. 14f.) All in all, the covenant expounds the faithfulness of God to his creation, and the fact that he has bound himself to it in covenantal unity.<sup>2</sup>

William Dumbrell has argued that the vocabulary used in 'establishing' this covenant (9:9) demonstrates that this covenant is not a new one, but the perpetuation of an older, pre-existing covenant.<sup>3</sup> The points of Hebrew grammar and vocabulary may be debated, but the whole event is too redolent of the original creation accounts to come to any other conclusion. Even if one disagrees with Dumbrell on linguistic or grammatical grounds, the whole schema is too reminiscent of the original creation for this to be accidental. The reiteration of personal pronouns (cf. Gen. 1:26f.); the fact that God speaks to Noah and his descendants (cf. Gen. 1:28); the language of divine commissioning (cf. Gen. 1:28); the reaffirmation of humanity as being in the image of God (cf. Gen. 1:26, 27); and aspects of vice-regency built into the account (cf. Gen.

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<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah 33:20–25 makes the same point, but from a different angle. Significantly, it is God's covenantal bond with the whole of the creation that is identified as the guarantee of his covenant with the Davidic line. This is important given the context of judgment and exile into which Jeremiah is speaking. Though the whole of Israel seems to be dissolved (no land, king, temple or priesthood) the promises to David stand firm, as firm as God's 'covenant with the day and the night and the fixed order of the heavens and the earth' (Jer. 33:25).

<sup>3</sup> See his *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* (Paternoster, Exeter, 1984), especially chapter 2.

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1:29f.; 2:15) all emphasise the direct parallels between this post-flood creation and the initial creation. The whole paints a clear picture of Noah as the New Adam on the earth, and clearly implies the existence of a creational covenant before the flood was sent. Adam stood as the head of creation, as king–priest over it, to lead it in praise to God, particularly by bringing it to its full glory. He was to be a co-worker with God in the task of ‘Edenisation’. As he lived in covenantal obedience and conscious recognition of his dependence on the Father–Creator, both creation would be brought to its pitch and humanity would come to its full glory and maturity as sons of God.

This recognition of the creation’s utter dependence on God is fundamental to the biblical view of the world and the place of human beings within it. Job’s ‘comforter’, Elihu, gives voice to biblical orthodoxy when he says:

If He should gather to Himself His spirit and His breath,  
All flesh would perish together,  
And man would return to the dust (Job 34:14–15).

This statement alludes to a long line of Old Testament references (e.g. Gen. 3:19, 23; 18:27; Job 10:8, 9; cf. Ps. 119; 90:3; 103:14; etc.) that highlight both the origins and destiny of human beings (from the dust to the dust), and the sovereign hand of God in relationship to his creatures. God forms human beings from the dust, governs the time of their return to the dust, and he watches over them, mindful that they are but dust. God alone is the guarantee of their existence, and the shaper of human life and destinies.

This point is further emphasised in the apparent connection between the name given to human beings (*’adam*) and the ground from which human beings were taken (*’adama*) in Genesis 2:7.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, this action is linked with *yatsar*, ‘which on several occasions explicitly describes the vocation or work of a potter (2 Sam. 17:28; Isa. 29:16; Jer. 18:2, 3, 4, 11), especially when used in participial form’.<sup>5</sup> Human beings were formed by the careful craftsmanship of the Potter, to be raised up over the ground from which they were taken and function as the Potter–King’s image in the world. They were thus to share in the unique dignity of being made in his image, but they were always and inevitably ‘earthy’.<sup>6</sup> There could be no divine kingship in Israel where men were to be exalted to the status of the divine, as with Pharaoh or

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<sup>4</sup> Victor Hamilton (*The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17* in NICOT, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1990) comments, ‘It is hard to capture this play on sounds in English, but it is something like “God formed earthling from the earth”’ (p. 156). Compare with Long, who suggests that ‘the best English equivalent of *’adam* [except when clearly used as a proper noun, as in Gen. 4:35; 5:1] is “earthling” or “earth person”’. The Hebrew vocabulary relating to the earth is extensive (e.g. *’adama*, *erets*, *hebel*, *helqa*, *tebel*, *homer*, etc.) with consequent overlapping of semantic fields. The use of the first two of these terms is particularly nuanced, notably in relationship to the promised land and the surrounding nations in Deuteronomy. See, for example, Graisanti in NIDOTTE, vol. 1, pp. 269–74.

<sup>5</sup> Hamilton, *Genesis*, p. 156.

<sup>6</sup> This idea lies behind Paul’s language in 1 Corinthians 15:47, ‘the first man is from the earth, earthy’. Significantly, therefore, the man from heaven must become one substance with the earthy in order to redeem the earthy. He is indeed the Second (Last) *’adam* with all that this implies about his relationship to the created world. When the Word became flesh, taking Adam’s nature to himself, he was affirming in history the commitment of God to the created world in eternity.

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Nebuchadnezzar. The Creator/creature distinction is, at this level, absolute. Human beings share utter and complete dependence on the Creator, just as does the dust itself. They have no self-sustaining or self-perpetuating existence. However, such is the importance of humanity as God's image bearer that the destiny of the earth is bound up with the destiny of its covenant head. Thus, when Adam disobeyed the voice of his Maker, all the earth suffered the consequences. Likewise, when the Second Adam obeys the voice of the Father, the whole of created order is renewed. Of this we say a little more below.

From the above it seems clear that the covenant with Abraham, with its promise for the blessing and implied reconciliation of the nations, is itself built on the principles of God's dealings with the whole of the creation. The need for reconciliation is plain, since the sin of humanity has brought fracturing at every level. Primary to this universal dislocation is the fracturing of the relationship with God. As the Creator–Father, God is also Judge. His wrath is real, the curse is real, and the need for propitiation is biblically inescapable. The great action of grace, however, is that God, as the rightly offended party, takes the initiative to reconcile the world to himself. It is also completely clear, given the nature of God and the structure of his relationship to creation, any reconciliation must come about through God's initiative, and this in the context of covenant.

### **ROMANS 8 AND THE RENEWAL OF CREATION**

In Romans, Paul gives a detailed exposition of the action of God in justifying and reconciling sinners, and the personal, pastoral, ethical, and relational consequences of such reconciliation. In Romans 8 he draws a contrast between those who are in Christ Jesus and those who are not. He develops this contrast in terms of Flesh and Spirit throughout the early part of the chapter, but reins his focus in on the nature of the believers' sonship in particular.

Those who are being led by the Spirit (not the Flesh) are indeed sons of God, and thus heirs with Christ, the Son (Rom. 8:14–17). The sons of God now have their glory obscured, and they share in the sufferings of the Son as they await their full, glorious revelation. From Romans 8:18 onwards, Paul indicates that the revelation of the sons of God in the eschaton is the key to the full liberty of the creation. Both the creation and believers are thus shown to be captive to hope. The creation is waiting in hopeful expectation of its deliverance from futility (8:20) and corruption (8:21). Believers wait in hopeful expectation of the glory that is to be revealed to them (8:18), the freedom that their glory will bring (8:21), and their full adoption as sons of God (8:23).

Until such time as these things are fulfilled, believers and the whole of (non-rebellious) creation live in the climate of patient, hopeful perseverance. Paul presses childbirth imagery into service here (though this is not without Old Testament precedent, e.g. Isaiah 66:7ff.). Not only does the creation suffer the pains of childbirth (8:22), but also so do believers who, by definition, have (or are) the first fruits of the Spirit (8:23). The Spirit is the midwife, bringing the new creation to pass, helping

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believers in their weakness and interceding for them with God, from within their own hearts (8:26–27).

At the same time, the Church is assured that God (the Father) is superintending all things for the good of his people, and that they will all be conformed to the image of his Son in the end (8:28–29). Christ will thus be the first-born of many brothers, all of whom have been predestined, called, justified, and glorified for this purpose by the Father's gracious will (8:30). As if this were not enough, Paul then goes on to indicate that the Son is the Guarantee of all these things, through his death, resurrection, ascension and ongoing intercession at God's right hand (8:33–34).

While there are many things that could be said in relation to this magnificent passage, of greatest interest for this session is the close link between the glorification of the earth and the glorification of the sons of God. All of the comments above are given added significance when we consider the person and work of Jesus Christ, the Second (and Last) Adam. In his office as King–Priest, he not only offers acceptable sacrifice to God on our behalf, but also by his current ministry as Ascended Priest and reigning Lord he is at work to bring about the glorification of his people and, with them, the renewal of the whole creation (Rom. 8:18ff.), which he then offers as a gift to the Father so that 'God [the Father] might be all in all' (1 Cor. 15:24–28). Creation has been brought low through human sin, and so it will be brought to glory through the righteous action of the man, Christ Jesus. The entire front end of Romans has expounded how he has become the propitiation for our sins, and how this has led to justification and redemption for all who believe, 'for the Jew first and also for the Greek'. But what is so evident here is that the Last Adam's redemption also impinges on the *'adama* from which he was taken via Mary's womb (and to which he returned in death and from which he was taken again in the resurrection in a parallel to Gen. 2:7?).<sup>7</sup>

In contrast to the first Adam, Jesus resists the beguiling words of Satan, and casts him out of the earth through the Cross (John 12:31). In the end, the glorified, cleansed and 'exorcised' earth is co-terminal with the Temple, the earthly cleansing of which was a type of the renewal of the cosmos. The renewed heaven and earth is not only full of the glory of the Lord, it is full of the *knowledge* of the glory of the Lord. In the end, he is worshipped everywhere by all things, in every way. In this renewed, glorified and globalised Eden, Satan and his allies have no part. The new King–Priest has done that which the first one failed to do, by guarding the purity of the Edenic Temple and rejecting the false worship of the Serpent, and by bringing the enemies of God to their ultimate judgment.

Moreover, in his great work on our behalf he has established his Church as a 'kingdom of priests' to his God and Father. Terms such as 'priest nation', 'sons of God', 'servants' and so on, all ultimately indicate that this new humanity is the worshipping humanity, rescued from the power of the idols and given glory instead of shame. In this way, the creational mandate given to our first parent has been (and is being)

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<sup>7</sup> With acknowledgment to our dear friend Hector Morrison, who added this in the margin of the first draft.

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restored to the redeemed, who live to serve God (i.e. worship him) in every aspect of their lives. Thus, we can say with Luther:

Lo! my God, without merit on my part, of His pure and free mercy, has given to me, an unworthy, condemned, and contemptible creature all the riches of justification and salvation in Christ, so that I no longer am in want of anything, except of faith to believe that this is so. For such a Father, then, who has overwhelmed me with these inestimable riches of His, why should I not freely, cheerfully, and with my whole heart, and from voluntary zeal, do all that I know will be pleasing to Him and acceptable in His sight? I will therefore give myself as a sort of Christ, to my neighbour, as Christ has given Himself to me; and will do nothing in this life except what I see will be needful, advantageous, and wholesome for my neighbour, since by faith I abound in all good things in Christ.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> 'The Freedom of a Christian' in *Three Treatises* (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1970), p. 304.

## Study 13

# *The Ministry of Reconciliation*

Deane Meatheringham

*All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

*(2 Corinthians 5:18–21)*

The ambassador for Christ maintains the greatness and dignity of the one whom he represents. The ambassador is accountable to the one who sends him to be a servant of the Word entrusted to him. The servant himself is living and acting in accord with the Word he has received. He is not free to adjust or alter the message that is not his in the first place. The message is that God has established friendly relations between himself and the world by making a lasting peace with it.

As messengers of reconciliation we must define what we know and keep to it. We can only repeat what God has given to us. This does not mean that the preacher of the Word of reconciliation is detached or abstracted from the message declared because in Christ he is a new creation living in a new world. From go to whoa, ‘all this is from God’. Christ alone is the Lord; he is the authentic, direct and immediate speaker of the Word of God as he is also alone the doer of that Word.

At the outset I wish to assert that ministers of reconciliation are not mere conveyers of Christian orthodoxy or explainers of the Bible and that the Word of God cannot be reduced to Biblical exposition. The unique witness of the apostles and prophets in Holy Scripture governs the ambassador’s message. Holy Scripture must be interpreted and expounded through Jesus Christ who is the reconciler and subject of Scripture. ‘Ideas exist for the sake of life, not life for the sake of ideas’, Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote. ‘Where life itself is made into an idea, real life [created and redeemed life] is more thoroughly destroyed than by any other idea . . . Only the life from God is purposeful and fulfilling, overcoming the contradiction between what is and what ought to

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be'.<sup>1</sup> The servant of the Word of reconciliation is a being in that Word as he/she recalls God's story of reconciliation. In Christ that past event is effectual in the present by the preaching of Christ himself.

### **THE MESSENGER DECLARES GOD'S RECONCILIATION ACCOMPLISHED**

The messenger is given boldness to assert that in Christ reconciliation with God has taken place as an event in our history and in the context of division and estrangement (2 Cor. 5:18; Rom. 5:10). Making a declaration of what God has done is quite different from giving an invitation to people to make peace with God. If it is the latter then reconciliation will only be as sure as our power to respond and leaves us to battle the bigger issue of conscience and satisfaction. The messenger is not a negotiator sent to bring about an agreement of peace between two warring parties, but to announce the good news of peace that God has made with humanity.

Reconciliation takes place where there is estrangement between God and humankind. The preacher will need to deal with the nature of this grievance, which involves two parties, but the emphasis must not be on asking people who have a lot of complaints about God to relinquish their views. It is true that humanity does have hard or sentimental images of God and does react to those images. But it's not as if those who are lost are merely sheep that have drifted away and merely have to be called home. Rather it is that we are hostile to God and, if we were able, we would have stabbed God to death over and over. The primary matter is our offence against God. This is the incomparable obstacle that has to be overcome.

Neither should preachers convey the idea that God needs to be persuaded to be reconciled to us. It is because God is forgiving that he provides propitiation in Christ. God's love cannot be turned from us even though we are his hostile enemies; this is the startling thing. In the face of our offensive and viciousness the God of all grace takes our evil so seriously that he removes what has become the obstacle to him in his relations with us. To bring through the reconciliation of the race, God's condemnation of sin has to be removed. This cannot be allowed to be thought to be a speculative thing, for condemnation, penalty, conscience and the accompanying misery, despair, impotence and fear have to be dealt with. These things are not illusions. Giving people a good talking to about their crimes will not change the situation. The gospel is not good advice but good news. In fearful demonstration of his love, God has made peace by laying our sin upon Christ, for as real as our guilt is, so God's condemnation of sin is real, and such a real situation requires real propitiation.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Ray Anderson in an essay entitled, 'Christopraxis: Christ's Ministry for the World' in *Christ in Our Place: The Humanity of God in Christ for the Reconciliation of the World*, eds. T. Hart and D. Thimmell (Paternoster, Exeter, 1989), pp. 17f.

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### **THE WONDERFUL EXCHANGE**

Reconciliation and justification of sinners are bound together (Rom. 5:1, 8–10). ‘In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself’, and this ‘wonderful exchange’, (John Calvin), means that Christ takes our enmity, sin and condemnation and gives to us love, forgiveness, and righteousness in exchange. The key is found in 2 Corinthians 5:21 where the one who knew no sin is made to be sin by divine appointment. By a substitutionary sacrifice God removes sin from human beings. Sin is not removed by death alone, but in Christ the contact of the holy with the unholy is what kills. The sacrifice of one person cannot assume a transference of liability for sin, and divided humanity’s death. What is needed is for the divine creator to be present in the form of creation. Only God can make substitutionary atonement for the sins of the world. Only the divine creator can provide the righteousness of an undivided being to replace the wholeness we have lost. By the incarnation of the Son of God we find the holy God identified with the person of Jesus and with all humanity. It is this that gives him power to be a substitute for all. The only begotten Son of God is emphatically called the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:18, 14, 29). Before the foundation of the world he was recognised as being the Lamb without defect (1 Pet. 1:19f.). All humanity is integrated into Christ’s humanness so that we are all present in this one (2 Cor. 5:14; Rom. 5:12–21; Gal. 2:20). Through the death of Christ our offence has been judged and we participate in the righteousness and wholeness of the risen Christ (2 Cor. 5:21; Rom. 4:25). The incarnation of Christ was both an act of divine judgment and of grace in which God has reconciled himself to us, and in Christ our mediator we are reconciled to God.

In Christ reconciliation was completed universally once and for all (2 Cor. 5:14, 19; Col. 1:19–20; John 3:16):

He did not preach a gradual reconciliation which was to become the reconciliation of the world only piecemeal, as men were induced to accept it, or were affected by the gospel. He preached something done once for all—a reconciliation which is the base of every soul’s reconcilment, not an invitation only. What the church has to do is to appropriate the thing that has been finally and universally done. We have to enter upon the reconciled position, on the new creation. Individual men have to enter upon that reconciled position, that new covenant, that new relation, which already, in virtue of Christ’s Cross, belonged to the race as a whole . . . The first thing reconciliation does is to change man’s corporate relation to God. Then when it is taken home individually it changes our present attitude.<sup>2</sup>

### **PREACHERS OF PEACE**

‘So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God’ (2 Cor. 5:20). If we cannot say that God has made peace with us and through Christ brought us home to the Father there would be no reconciliation to receive and there would be no gospel at all. We are

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<sup>2</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1994, pp. 86f.

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calling men and women into a relationship with God who is not against them. We are not telling them that if they respond in peace to God that God will respond then in peace to them.

‘We entreat you on behalf of Christ’ means that the message is not given as a cold lecture, or a formal proposition, rather the fire that burned in Christ’s heart—the fire of God’s love—now burns in the heart of the messenger who brings peace.

James Denney in his exposition of 2 Corinthians 5:18–21 asserts very strongly that the preacher’s appeal is not primarily an appeal for his listeners to lay down their enmity with God but:

*Accept His offered friendship; enter into that peace which He has made for the world through the death of His Son; believe that He has at infinite cost put away all that on His part stood between you and peace; receive the reconciliation . . .*

*Nobody has any right to borrow the words ‘God is love’ from an apostle, and then to put them in circulation after carefully emptying them of their apostolic import. Still less has any one a right to use them as an argument against the very thing in which the Apostles placed their meaning. But this is what they do who appeal against propitiation. To take the condemnation out of the Cross is to take the nerve out of the Gospel; it will cease to hold men’s hearts with its original power when the reconciliation which is preached through it contains mercy, but not the judgment of God.<sup>3</sup>*

### **THE GOSPEL OF GOD’S RECONCILIATION HAS NO LOOSE ENDS**

I mean that there are no loose ends that the preacher or his listeners have to tie off to complete God’s fully sufficient, once for all reconciliation of the world. We would be derelict of our duty if we presented a message that said, ‘You will need to take a step of commitment from your side if you want God to be reconciled to you’. Or unless you make certain moral, pious, and experiential alterations in your life you cannot be a true participant in God’s reconciled family. We would be saying that God had not reconciled himself to the ungodly through the cross, that it is only partially done and we have to complete what God has only partially attempted. Besides being an affront to the grace of God, a message based on such grounds will always be hypothetical and lack assurance.

Following Paul we must resist such an impoverished perversion of the gospel (Gal. 2:4, 11–14, 21). We cannot add to what God has done. Humanistic pride will desire this, but the gospel says the totality of reconciliation is from God. It is this Word of Christ declared by the messenger that has the power to transform human life (2 Cor. 5:14–17).

The preacher is a servant of God who lives by faith and not by sight (2 Cor. 5:16, 7). Working by sight we not only want evidence to prove that we are OK, but we will also be in danger of setting up means to make it happen. So the preacher ceases to believe the power of God’s reconciling Word but he becomes a facilitator as well. However, whatever we set up or place between God and ourselves is an idolatry.

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<sup>3</sup> James Denney, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, *The Expositor’s Bible*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1894, pp. 217, 222.

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### **FAITH IN GOD'S RECONCILIATION**

'We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.' The message of reconciliation touches us at the centre of our being. The atoning sacrifice of Christ given for our reconciliation recognises God and God alone as actuator. In the person of his Son, God has exposed himself to condemnation and death. But God also acts in human beings in the Word of reconciliation. In the message of reconciliation the God who identified with Christ in the cross is the God identified in the risen Christ. The risen Christ is present in the message of the cross and he awakens faith. When God awakens faith he acts alone. Faith sees that every human being really died on the cross. Faith sees that since the reconciling death of Christ the old condemned and divided self has no future (2 Cor. 5:17). Reconciliation with God in Christ is the finish of the old. The old self is now hopelessly out of date, because it is a being of the past.

Faith hears the message of God's peace and has peace with God (Rom. 5:1). Faith in Christ as our peace lets the Word of reconciliation shape up the believer's life. Believers say 'Yes' to God's word; to his judgment on their past and also to their new life in Christ. Faith is our heartfelt affirmation of the death and resurrection of Christ for us (Rom. 10:9). This faith will be both a way of self-discovery and self-forgetfulness (2 Cor. 5:14–15; Gal. 2:20).

Not to believe the gospel is to contradict it and what God has done in reconciling the world to himself. Self-confidence in arranging our own lives before God is consistent with this contradiction. Such contradiction does not cancel or nullify God's reconciliation of the world to himself in Christ. Why anyone would turn away from God's reconciling love is impossible to fathom. The ministers of reconciliation cannot avoid the fearsome side of their message (2 Cor. 5:11). We are saved by the gospel and we are damned by the same gospel (2 Cor. 2:16):

It is at the final judgment that the dark side of the Cross, the unconditional judgment of God upon all sin and evil, will be unveiled, for people will be judged by what took place once and for all in the finished work of Christ on the Cross, when he was crucified as the Lamb of God to bear and bear away the sins of the world. Is that not what the New Testament speaks of as 'the wrath of the Lamb'? 'He who believes and is baptised will be saved, but he who does not believe will be condemned' (the longer ending to St Mark, 16.16).<sup>4</sup>

The warning gives earnestness to preaching God's reconciliation. But the thing that makes the preacher's heart warm, causing him to shout and leap for joy, is that he knows he and all whom he speaks with are included in God marvellous exchange—all have died, all have been condemned and the message of God's peace is for all.

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today*, Handsel Press, Carberry, 1994, p. 29.

## Study 14

# *The Holy Spirit and Reconciliation*

Rod James

### **A 'SECRET AND HIDDEN WISDOM' REVEALED TO US BY THE SPIRIT**

The wisdom of Christ crucified is hidden and foolish (1 Cor. 1:22–24) until it is revealed by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:6–13). It is the Holy Spirit who enables the apostolic community to 'understand the [things freely given] us by God' and to 'impart this in words not taught by human wisdom, but taught by the Spirit' (1 Cor. 2:12–13). Because there is 'jealousy and strife' among the Corinthian believers (1 Cor. 3:3) Paul tells them plainly that they are 'of the flesh' and not 'spiritual', that is, not of the Holy Spirit. Paul's point is that because there is little evidence of the divine reconciliation, that is indicative that these Christians are operating out of their carnal natures. Enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, and envy are works of the flesh (Gal. 5:20, 21). The Corinthians seem unaware that, as the body of Christ, they 'are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in [them]' (1 Cor. 3:16). It is the Holy Spirit who destroys their enmity and reconciles them to God and to one another.

Thus we may summarise:

- **The Holy Spirit** reveals **true wisdom** in **the Cross** which brings **reconciliation**.
- **The flesh** generates a **worldly wisdom** producing **pride** and leading to **division**.

### **THE HOLY SPIRIT IS THE SPIRIT OF HOLY RECONCILIATION**

Sin has brought enmity to the soul of every human being; enmity with God, others, and our own consciences. The sinner is in a state of inner, moral alienation:

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Man is more than a consciousness, he is a conscience. He is not only aware of himself, he is critical of himself. There is in the soul a bar, a tribunal; our thoughts and actions are ranged before it; judgment is passed there upon what we have been and done.<sup>1</sup>

But after all, the first, last, and supreme question of the soul, of religion when it is practical, is not, 'How am I to think of God?—He or It?' but it is, 'What does He think of me?' . . . More positively it is, 'How shall I be just with God? How shall I stand before my judge?' . . . That is the issue in all issues. That question of judgment is where all other questions end. It is the central question in religion, How shall I stand before my judge? . . . The question is not about our views; nor is it about our subjective state—how do I feel? but of our objective relation—how do I stand? . . . It is the question of the conscience and its Lord, of sin and righteousness, of the unholy and the holy.<sup>2</sup>

Conscience is a far greater thing than heaven and earth. If it did not exist, hell would have no fire or even pain. But this untamed creature lights and strengthens death and hell and arms the whole creation against us . . . Consequently hell will be nothing but a bad conscience. If the devil did not have a bad conscience, he would be in heaven. But a bad conscience, lights all the fire of hell and causes inwardly in the heart the terrible pain and the infernal work of the devil.<sup>3</sup>

Everyone knows that Man needs reconciliation. The goal of the new paganism that is sweeping the Western world is a false reconciliation. The neo-pagan prophets falsely proclaim that all things are part of a monistic whole—good and evil, creator and creature, god and man, heaven and hell—all are part of the one, unified and inclusive whole. Personal reconciliation is said to be found when we wake up to this gnosis or secret knowledge of monism (one-ism) and cease to make distinctions. The catch-cries of this false reconciliation are 'tolerance' and 'inclusiveness'.<sup>4</sup> Of this ancient remedy God has said, 'They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, "Peace, peace", when there is no peace' (Jer. 6:14; 8:11).

Neo-paganism uses words such as 'spirit', 'spiritual' and 'spirituality'. But, with an infinite, qualitative distinction the New Testament speaks (about 94 times) of the Holy Spirit, that is, of the Spirit of the Holy God (Exod. 15:11; Lev. 19:2; Isa. 6:3; Rev. 4:8). It was through the eternal (Holy) Spirit that Christ offered himself without blemish to God to purify our consciences (Heb. 9:14). So the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of reconciliation with the Holy God, and by 'the Spirit of our God' we are washed, sanctified and justified in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 6:11). No other understanding of reconciliation can be assumed to be of the same character as this divine and holy initiative.

The Spirit of truth (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13) witnesses to true reconciliation, that is, reconciliation between the holy God and unholy humanity. The Holy Spirit is 'the Spirit of [this] truth' (John 14:17), of whom Jesus said 'he will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and [make it known] to you' (John 16:14). True reconciliation does not come through pagan antinomianism (lawlessness) or religious legalism (Gal. 2:16;

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<sup>1</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1984, p. 127.

<sup>2</sup> Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross*, pp. 119, 121.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, reference unknown.

<sup>4</sup> For an account of this 'post modern' or 'new age' thrust see *Pagans in the Pews* (Regal Books, Venture, 2001) and *Gospel Truth/Pagan Lies* (Winepress Publications, Enumclaw, 1999) by Peter Jones. A summary of the latter is given in my leaflet 'Gospel Truth and Pagan Lies'.

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Rom. 3:20), but by moral atonement, which the holy God has made in the body of His Son (Eph. 2:16). This atonement is God's work and gift of grace for lost humanity. So Jesus is 'the way' to the holy God, 'the truth' of reconciliation with God, 'and the life' in the Holy Spirit (John 14:6). No one can come to the 'the Holy One of Israel' (Isa. 1:4; 41:14; 43:3) except by this 'new and living way' (Heb. 10:20).

To the unreconciled world, the Holy Spirit comes as counsel for the prosecution, convicting the world of 'sin and righteousness and judgment' (John 16:8). But in the cross of Christ the issues of 'sin and righteousness and judgment' have been justly resolved, and so to the one who believes God's good news the Spirit comes as 'the Spirit of truth', bearing witness to both the offence and the glory of the Cross. The world cannot receive the Spirit of truth, 'because it neither sees him nor knows him' (John 14:17). The Holy Spirit brings to the inner man true reconciliation and peace with God (Rom. 5:1). The three-fold dividing wall of hostility (i.e. from God, self and others) is broken down. The Holy Spirit thus comes as the witness of reconciliation with God, with whom the believer is wonderfully, totally and permanently reconciled. It is the Holy Spirit, then, who '[bears] witness with our spirit that we are children of God' (Rom. 2:15). In the Spirit of this holy reconciliation we cry out to the Holy One, 'Abba! Father!' (Rom. 8:14–16). In this cry not only is God the Father holy, but also we are made holy in the Son with our holy Father by the Holy Spirit.

Furthermore the Holy Spirit is God's promised gift to His people (Gal. 3:14), the indwelling presence of the holy God (John 14:23), making our bodies the very temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19). Now the Spirit of the Holy God comes to the aid of the believer as 'another Advocate', that is, counsel for the defence rather than counsel for the prosecution (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7). In the face of the relentless taunts of the accuser (*satanas*), the believer is 'sealed with the promised Holy Spirit [who] is the guarantee [*arrabon*] of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it' (Eph. 1:13–14). Truth, holiness and love now dwell where pollution, lies, and alienation once dwelt (1 Cor. 6:9–11). This is the *cura animarum*, the cure of souls. The cure of souls is the core business of our ministry, a ministry which is in the power of the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:49; 1 Cor. 2:4; Eph. 3:16; 1 Thess. 1:5).

## **PENTECOST AND THE RECONCILING WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**

At Pentecost and throughout the Book of Acts the Holy Spirit is sovereignly and relentlessly at work to bring to the nations the news of their reconciliation to God and to one another (Acts 1:8; 2:1–12, 33; 4:8–12, 31; 5:29–32; 6:8–10; 8:29, 39; 10:19, 44–47; 11:12, 15–18, 24; 13:2–4, 47, 52; 16:6; 19:21; 22:21; 26:17–18, 23). In Acts 2:1–11 the mission of reconciliation gets underway with 'a rushing mighty wind'. In Jerusalem at that time there were 'devout men, from every nation under heaven'. The apostles had been 'clothed with power from on high' (Luke 24:49), and astonished the multi-national company. These gathered representatives of the nations exclaimed, 'We hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God'. The 'mighty works of God' were the great and gracious actions of the holy God in reconciling the unholy nations to Himself in the body of His Son. We can see in Luke's account of this great

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day the reversal of the division that came to the nations at the tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1–9).

In his excellent book *Mission to Islam and Beyond*, Jens Christensen has an important chapter on mission which he simply entitles ‘Means’.<sup>5</sup> Christensen points out that it is God who is the sovereign Subject/Doer, initiating the mission at every stage, and empowering the work through the Holy Spirit:

- It was the Holy Spirit who brought about the events on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), and empowered Peter in his sermon to make known this ‘secret and hidden wisdom of God’ (1 Cor. 2:7).
- It was the Holy Spirit who planned and initiated the mission to Africa through Philip’s encounter with the Ethiopian (Acts 8:26–40).
- It was the Holy Spirit who broke through the early church’s hesitancy about preaching the gospel to the Gentiles by initiating Peter’s visit to the house of Cornelius, and by falling upon all who heard the word that day (Acts 10:1–18).
- It was the Holy Spirit who said to the prophets and teachers in Antioch, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them’. ‘So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 13:4) they undertook the first of three missionary journeys which took the gospel to Asia Minor, Macedonia and Greece.

Christensen laments that the church is inclined to see itself as the subject/doer of the gospel mission. Many congregations today, in making this mistake, hold mission planning meetings, with butcher’s paper and buzz groups, to establish a mission statement and mission goals, etc. They seem to forget that ‘It is not the church of God which has a mission, it’s the God of mission who has a church’.<sup>6</sup>

We can see that in the Book of Acts it is by worship, prayer and visions that the church becomes attuned to what the Holy Spirit is sovereignly doing in their day (Acts 1:14; 2:1, 42; 3:1; 4:23–31; 6:4; 9:10–16; 10:9; 12:5; 13:1–3; 14:23; 16:9, 10, 25; 18:9, 10; 20:36; 23:11; 27:23–24). So it was that, without any butcher’s paper or buzz groups, the reconciling Spirit of the holy God enabled the early church—though limited in resources and, at times, inclination—to take the gospel to the nations.

### **THE HARVEST OF THE SPIRIT IN RECONCILING LOVE**

The harvest of the gospel among the nations produces the fruitage of the Spirit in the reconciling community (Gal. 5:22–23). It is not enough for us to understand that the Holy Spirit and Christian love go together and that love is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). There is a tendency to think of the Holy Spirit as a sort of cosmic energy

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<sup>5</sup> Jens Christensen, *Mission to Islam and Beyond: A Practical Theology of Mission*, NCPI, Blackwood, 2001, pp. 13–25.

<sup>6</sup> Said by Dr Tim Dearbone, teacher of Theology at Aberdeen University, at the first World Council of Churches.

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that somehow infuses warm-fuzzy love into people as an amorphous unction. But there is content in the love that is ‘poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit [who] has been given to us’ (Rom. 5:5). The Holy Spirit bears witness to Christ and his cross, taking of what is his and making it known to us (John 16:14). The outpouring of the Holy Spirit is the outpouring of the love of the Father into our hearts, which has been revealed in His amazing reconciling grace in Christ (Rom. 5:5–11).

It is through Christ that we all ‘have access in one Spirit to the Father’ (Eph. 2:18), and in him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit (Eph. 2:22). God’s temple is being built up as a spiritual house made of living stones (1 Pet. 2:5). The fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22–23 are not ethical qualities to strive for. Rather they are the fruitage of the Cross of Christ, working its effects in the reconciled and reconciling community—Love! Joy! Peace! Patience! Kindness! Goodness! Faithfulness! Gentleness! And Self-control! The community is being shaped by the one, unifying Spirit, into whom all are baptised (1 Cor. 12:12–13). They all participate in ‘the fellowship of the Holy Spirit’ (2 Cor. 13:14; Phil. 2:1), and are urged to ‘maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace’:

I, therefore, a prisoner for the Lord urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (Eph. 4:1–6).

## Study 15

# *All One in Christ Jesus: The Unitive Community*

Grant Thorpe

### **WAITING FOR PENTECOST**

After the resurrection and ascension of Christ, one can imagine the unity of dependency and purpose and expectation known by the group who waited for the Holy Spirit to come (Acts 1:1). We could say that they were already one. However, it was the baptism in the Holy Spirit which united them forever with Jesus Christ, brought them to the Father as sons and heirs and joined them to each other as one body with one life and purpose.

### **THE UNITY OF THE NEW BORN CHURCH**

This is what happened at Pentecost. The Spirit came on all who waited and they declared the wonderful works of God. They were alive to God and what he had done in Christ. They were alive to the Scriptures and to the significance of the moment. They declared what they knew so that others would have fellowship with them—fellowship with the Father and Son (1 John 1:3). They were alive to one another and to those who believed through their word.

Their union was not merely the union of having a common cause or common enemy or common culture or even just a common Leader—in the simple sense of that word. Jesus Christ was their life and they were united to him. He was pouring himself out for them and to them by the Spirit (cf. John 16:14–15). They had come to the one Father. The pollutions of their previous lives were not a subject for gossip. The failures that had led them to this moment did not inhibit their confidence. The debates about who would sit next to Christ in his kingdom (Matt. 20:20–28) did not recur. The pretensions of who loved him most were irrelevant. They were in the kingdom of God, watching its conquests and anticipating its glories. Jews from ‘every nation under heaven’

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heard the same message simultaneously and with the same power and effect. We may say that ‘God made a statement’. He was gathering his people to himself without the intrusion of divisive intermediaries.

Therefore, all who were converted by this word, knowing they were one with God and his people, ‘were of one heart and soul’ (Acts 4:32) and did not consider their property to be merely for themselves.

### **THE CONTESTED UNITY**

We may well ask why anything should ever be otherwise, but we know that this unity was and is constantly contested. Within the account of *Acts*, hypocrisy arose over the matter of generosity (Acts 5:1–11), then prejudice affected the distribution of aid (Acts 6:1). As the gospel spread to Samaritans and Gentiles, the terms on which converts would be included among the people of God were questioned (Acts 15). What could be done to affirm the unity of the church in the midst of these events?

In the first instance, the Holy Spirit had been lied to, and put on trial. Peter knew this and knew God would move to preserve the holy love poured out on the church. Two people died. Great fear came on all who heard about this.

Paul recognised the same principle working when some people at Corinth died and others became sick (1 Cor. 11:17–34). The church was divided. Advantage was taken by the rich over the poor. Participants in the Lord’s Supper were not discerning that they who ate the Lord’s body were, themselves, the Lord’s body. Again, God acted to teach his people to fear him and to know who they were—the body of Christ.

I was interested to see what Charles Colson regarded as the ‘secrets’ of the church’s unity. He writes: ‘First, the church feared the Lord . . . And second, believers shared a core set of beliefs which they held to be far more important than any points upon which they might differ’.<sup>1</sup>

In the second instance, the first issue of ‘right’ that occurred to Peter was that it was not right for the apostles to be diverted from preaching the word of God to serve tables (Acts 6:2). There could be no church and no unity without the word of grace. Christ ruled by his word. However, the complaint touched not just the hunger of the widows but the core business of God’s free grace bestowed without regard to merit (however that was measured), and the matter was dealt with. The men needed to handle it were not just to be good managers but men filled with the Spirit. They would need more than a large wallet and some diplomacy to deal with this threat to the unity of the church. Men filled with the Spirit would distribute food without regard to race and would also witness to the full dignity of every believer in the body of Christ. They would be participating in the unitive life of Christ and be developing the qualities of patience and hope so necessary to human relationships.

In the third instance, two actions were taken. The first was to affirm that those who believed the word of Christ and received the Spirit did not need other credentials to

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Colson and Ellen Santilli Vaughan, *The Body: Being Light in Darkness*, Word, Dallas, p. 87.

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belong to the people of God. Previous Jew/Gentile distinctions no longer held sway. The second thing they did was to have regard for the culture and need of the times and prescribe a way to minimise misunderstandings. Everyone who was of love would immediately recognise that this was, in the situation, the way of love and an expression of the church's unity.

### **UNITY AFFIRMED IN THE GENTILE CHURCHES**

The church continued to find denials of its unity wherever there was a diminishing of the gospel or an adding to it. Paul contested the false teaching at **Galatia** because it made salvation depend on adopting Jewish practices. He recognised the problem in Peter's behaviour at Antioch, withdrawing from eating with Gentiles when certain Jews were present. This denied the new humanity that had been created in Christ.

Christ himself is the unity of the people of God. In him, we are all sons of God through faith and we have put on Christ. Therefore there is no Jew/Gentile distinction before God or as regards our essential humanity, nor any socio-economic or gender distinction either (Gal. 3:25–29). Paul does not raise these issues to preserve social equality but to preserve the gospel and preserve the church. Christ has created in himself a new humanity (Eph. 2:15) where each has justification, the Spirit and access to the Father and so, full fellowship with one another without distinctions needing to be made.

It is interesting that being 'in Christ' means we have 'put on Christ'. Paul seems to draw attention to something we have done. Elsewhere, Paul calls upon Christians to do just this: 'put on the Lord Jesus Christ' (Rom. 13:14). We should do this, he says, and abandon our quarrelling and jealousy. We should stop making provision for the flesh and its desires. All these things work against the unity God created by the Spirit.

The works of the *flesh* are listed in Galatians 5:19–21. Most if not all of them have to do with the breaking down of relationships, and so, disunity. Paul said a person who is constrained by the love of Christ does not look at anyone 'according to the *flesh*' (2 Cor. 5:16). Rather, they have been tutored to live for Christ rather than for themselves.

With the **Colossians**, Paul was again concerned with the unity of the church. He longed that their hearts would be knitted together in love, to reach a full understanding of God's mystery which is Christ (Col. 2:1–2). There could be no unity without the truth of Christ, nor any full appreciation of the riches of the gospel apart from living in love with one another.

N T. Wright says: "“united” properly governs not only “in love” but also the next phrase, which literally means “and unto all the wealth of conviction of understanding”. In other words, while the process of knitting together the church into a united body clearly includes the growth of love, it also includes the growth, on the part of the whole community, of that proper understanding of the gospel which leads to the rich blessings of a settled conviction and assurance. Living in a loving and forgiving community will assist growth in understanding, and vice versa, as truth is confirmed in practice and practice enables truth to be seen in action and so to be fully grasped."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, Tyndale NT Commentaries, IVP, London, 1986, pp. 94–5.

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Paul reaffirmed the truth that Christ had ‘disarmed the rulers and authorities’ by his death (Col. 2:15). He opposed ‘self-made religion’ (2:23) and called them to set their minds on Christ and to put to death what was earthly (3:1–5). He contrasted the old humanity, which we put off in turning to Christ and whose deeds we must now put off, to the new humanity which, remarkably, is being renewed in the image of its Creator. This is the humanity in which there are no distinctions based on ‘race, ancestral religion, class and caste’ which, N. T. Wright observes, ‘provide the best soil for that mutual suspicion and distrust which turn into the vices listed in verse 8’.<sup>3</sup>

The groupings of Greek, Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free, would all have been regarded as very significant in cultural terms by the Colossians. It is such distinctions which often give rise to rivalry and war, but they have all become irrelevant in the new humanity created in Christ. This is the humanity for which we were created. Anything less is a denial of our being made in God’s image and, certainly, a denial of the community for which we were made.

On the other hand, we are to set our minds on Christ where our life is now hidden. Then, what is essentially concealed can be exposed in the kindness and love which binds all things together in perfect harmony. The peace of Christ and the word of Christ rule.

Paul heard about divisions among the **Corinthians** (1 Cor. 1:10; 11:18). How could this be, he said, when the ‘body’ of the church is ‘Christ’ (1 Cor. 12:12), in whom there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free? We have all drunk of one Spirit. Any distinction which does not witness to life in Christ but, rather, confirms cultural prejudices, is to be rejected. Whether by word or by deed, the wholeness of humanity in Christ and the unity of that humanity in him must be affirmed.

### **SUMMARY**

The unity of the church in Christ is an item in our (*Nicene*) creed: ‘We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church’. It is necessary to believe this. It is incumbent upon us to maintain this. In regard to this we must be people of faith and believe what is proclaimed rather than what is seen. Well may we weep over the fracturing that happens, but always as those who believe in the power of Christ to ‘gather together into one all the children of God that are scattered abroad’ and to live in the delight of its being so.

The unity we have has come from a cross and by the Spirit. We should resolve to continue in what we have been given and to grow in the graces that arise through sharing in the life of Christ. All things are brought together in Christ who has been made head over all things, for the church. Unity happens as the church lives as his body and, so, is filled with all the fullness of him who fills everything everywhere with his fullness (Eph. 1:22–23).

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<sup>3</sup> N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 139.

## Study 16

# *Reconciliation, God's Righteousness and the Final Defeat of Divisive Evil*

Geoffrey Bingham

### **INTRODUCTION: THE FINAL DEFEAT OF ALL EVIL AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF PEACE**

To this point of our School we have established the cause and nature of creation's divided state and have spoken of God's ultimate intention for it, and His present reconciling work in it. What we will seek to do in this study is to reiterate the work of Christ in becoming the Reconciler of all things up until the *telos*. We will have to take into account the matter of the Kingdom of God and opposition and conflict from the kingdom of darkness, so that Christ will come into view as opposing that kingdom from the time of 'the days of his flesh' and of course even before them. This is seen in the apostle John's words, 'The reason why the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil'. This action was no less than that told to the Serpent in Eden, 'I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel' (Gen. 3:15). Those works of the Serpent we have seen were to turn Man away from becoming God's king over the earth (Gen. 1:28; cf. Ps. 8:5–8; 115:16). This was the kingdom the Serpent desired for himself. We have capitalised the Serpent because of the description of Revelation 12:9, 'And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world'.

### **CHRIST AND THE WORK OF THE CROSS**

We go straight to the heart of the definitive defeat of all evil. We know from Matthew 2:2 that the Magi asked Herod, 'Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?' This meant the King of the Kingdom was already in the world! In Revelation 12:4–5, the Red Dragon was seeking to devour the child of the woman at the moment of his

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birth but he was caught up to God and his throne—‘he is to rule the nations with a rod of iron’ (Ps. 2:6–9). The destiny of the child was not only to destroy the works of the Devil but also to set the captives free from the bondage of misery and inner and outer division of spirit. That this child of Mary was born for what seemed a tragic end is not in doubt. Mary had been told of this, ‘and Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, “Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed”’ (Luke 2:34–35).

Jesus himself was continually aware of his death which was coming and that is why we see he was always looking to that end or goal. On three occasions in Mark’s Gospel he did mention this fact. The first occasion was when he and the disciples were on the road to Caesarea Philippi and Peter came out with the remarkable revelation, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!’ Mark 8:31 records, ‘And he began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again’. He told them the fact plainly and Peter reacted powerfully and was rebuked, ‘Get behind me Satan! For you are not on the side of God but of men.’ The second occasion was after the transfiguration of Christ on the mountain. In Mark 9:30–32 he took his disciples apart, ‘The Son of man will be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him; and when he is killed, after three days he will rise’. But they did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to ask him.’ The third occasion was on the road they were going on to Jerusalem and he told them what was going to happen. ‘Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and deliver him to the Gentiles; and they will mock him, and spit upon him, and scourge him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise’ (Mark 10:33–34). These occasions can be detected in Matthew and Luke.

In Luke 12:49–50, Jesus tells of the constrained spirit which was his, ‘I came to cast fire upon the earth; and would that it were already kindled! I have a baptism to be baptised with; and how I am constrained until it is accomplished!’ In Matthew 20:20–23 and Mark 10:38–39 Jesus asks James and John whether they are able to drink the cup he is to drink or be baptised with the baptism which will be his. They think they understand but they do not. Only he knows the dreadful thing that is coming towards him. We do not, here, spend time on the description of it all—Gethsemane, the false trial, the being before the Jewish leaders, before Herod and Pilate, the lashing, the crown of thorns, the crucifixion, the maniacal crowd, the bitter recriminations, the blood and spittle, the jeering and blasphemy, the words cried out from him and against him, the suffering, the darkness and the death—for if this is all we know then we know little and may think we know much. All the powers of darkness and human rebellion stood there against the King and sought to destroy him, but he out-countenanced them in his love, humility and refusal to revile those who reviled him in the actual bearing of their sin, guilt and judgment. In order to understand the Cross it is best for us to write down the words which describe the event and then read them with holy awe and respect:

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**1 Peter 2:24:** 'He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.'

**1 Peter 3:18:** 'For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit.'

**1 Peter 1:18–19:** 'You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.'

**Matthew 26:27:** 'And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."'

**John 3:14–15:** 'And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.'

**John 12:31–33:** "'Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself. Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself'. He said this to show by what death he was to die.'

**John 6:51:** 'I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.'

**Mark 10:45:** 'For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'

**1 Corinthians 15:3:** 'For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures.'

**2 Corinthians 5:21:** 'For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.'

**Romans 3:21–26:** 'But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus.'

**Romans 5:6–11:** 'While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Why, one will hardly die for a righteous man—though perhaps for a good man one will dare even to die. But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we are now justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. Not only so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received our reconciliation.'

**Galatians 1:4:** 'who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father.'

**Galatians 2:20:** 'I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.'

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**Galatians 3:13:** 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree."'

**1 John 4:10:** 'In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins.'

**Hebrews 2:9–10:** 'But we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for every one. For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering.'

**Hebrews 9:26–28:** 'for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.'

**Hebrews 10:10, 12, 14:** 'And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all . . . But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God . . . For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.'

**Revelation 1:5:** 'and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood.'

**Revelation 12:11:** 'And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.'

The setting forth of so much text relating to the Cross may seem to be a piling up of evidence that the cross as in Jesus' mind and thought and was efficacious. The texts, given their contexts, do this and much more. It seems a strange phenomenon in history that a large number of readers, students and scholars—mostly Christian—seem determined never to let the texts be taken at their face value, for in this case they add up to a wonderful result. This outcome is that the human race—fallen in Adam; being sinners; plagued by guilt and an accusing conscience; uneasy before God to the point of seeing Him as the supreme enemy; caught in the curse of the law they have transgressed; incited by sin through the same law; 'being hateful and hating one another'; filled with wars and dissensions; being nations which seek to rule other nations; filled with pride at achievement; primarily concerned with self-endeavour, self-attainment, self-magnification; never realising the degrees of depravity in which they live; and boasting of religious endeavours and self-justifying acts; 'without God and alone in the world'—has been visited humbly by the promised King of the prophecies and has been forgiven all sins, purified from the loathsome stain and pollution of sin, cleansed from an evil conscience, accounted righteous before the law and the God of the law, has been loosed from the power of sin, no longer has its sins imputed to it but the righteousness of God in Christ accounted to it, has been regenerated so that it is a new creation and through the Cross has also been sanctified, given the gift of life, and has its telos as that of eternal glory! *What is more is that this has all been accomplished irreversibly by Christ on the cross, Christ buried in the tomb and Christ resurrected, ascended and now reigning.* The fallen human race was itself an enemy of God and of

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others but is now—because it has come to faith, repented of its evil and received the saving gift of love through grace—reconciled to God and has joined the ranks of the peacemakers. It has had the enemies of sin, of Satan, of evil principalities and powers, their world system, the incorrigible ‘flesh’ or ego, the fear of death, the accusing conscience, the curse of the law and the wrath of God forever working away at it to crush and demean it. Now this is over. Love, peace and joy and the highest hope of ultimate glory has come to those who believe the love of God and His great work effected in Christ and revealed to Man by the holy Spirit. Their trust is in the great Community of the Three Persons. These have come to know their God whom to know is life eternal.

In history we have had earnest persons of faith who have grasped the heart of the matter of God's salvation, who themselves have been great sinners in their own eyes and who have sought to grapple with the message of human redemption. We could remember them by name, the books they wrote, the truth they preached, and the particular endeavours they made to share what they have seen, each in his or her own manner. To do so today is to rouse the ire of countless critics who would think of themselves as Christians. No one of these fine spiritual leaders ever did it the way he or she should have done it, according to their lights. Some whose sense of sin has been thin, who set nominal value on the holiness and righteousness of God, and who would have Him undisturbed by human sin and human enmity and would thus have Him temper His reaction to human evil, have taken away the wrath of love and the high cost of human salvation. They have missed the powerful holiness of God! The power of the gospel (Rom. 1:16–17), the power of the Cross (1 Cor. 1:18) and the power of Christ's resurrection (Phil. 3:10) are seen in terms of human moral response to a loving deed of God rather than the irresistible power wrought by the defamed King and his Father of glory, brought at every point of Man's history by the Spirit of the living God. So the blood and sweat of lovers of God are depreciated, and all must be political correctness in regard to God and Man in a world which plays out its horrors of greed, extended ego and ruthless cruelty every day.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> James Denney in his *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation* (James Clarke, London, 1959) on pages 26–120 reviews reconciliation in the Christian thought of the past and evaluates the work of men such as the early church fathers, the Greek fathers of the Eastern church—men such as Athanasius and the Cappadocian fathers, then Augustine, Tertullian, Abalard, Aquinas—the Reformers such as Luther, Calvin, Hooker, the Westminster divines, Jonathan Edwards and the later Horace Bushnell and McLeod Campbell. His evaluation is positive, gleaning what is helpful, appreciating the context of these teachers in time and environment, disagreeing where abstractions deviate from biblical teaching, and not afraid to speak against Eastern and Western thinking on this score. He respects the minds of writers and theologians down through the centuries for the contribution they have made without discounting them ruthlessly as do many impatient moderns who think truth has awaited their day and hermeneutic for authentic treatment of the truth, and especially of the Atonement. In his book *The Atonement and the Modern Mind* (Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1910, see pp. 82–4) Denney treats his subject wholly from within the Scriptures and yet can speak of Athanasius's and Anselm's contributions as profound—‘It is Anselm's profound grasp of this truth which, in spite of all its inadequacy in form, and of all the criticism to which its inadequacy has exposed it, makes *Cur Deus Homo* the truest and greatest book on the Atonement that has ever been written’. Denney speaks against certain moderns of his day. One criticism is, ‘This is our old enemy, the false abstraction, once more and that in the most aggressive form’ (*The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, p. 110).

**'PEACE! PEACE! WHERE THERE IS TRULY PEACE!'<sup>2</sup>**

The remainder of our paper must be to cover the truth of the Kingdom of God and its crowned King, Jesus, appointed by the Father King so that the kingdom of this world will have become the Kingdom of the Lord and His Christ, and he shall reign forever! In emphasising reconciliation as God's soteriological work we do well but all Christ's work is in the light of the Kingdom of God. We preach no ecclesiastical gospel. It is the gospel of the Kingdom which is preached. It is for the Kingdom we suffer (1 Thess. 1:5; Matt. 5:11–12). Ultimate reconciliation will be of a Kingdom and not only of the members of the church. The Kingdom is the whole of creation with all its orders. When all things are unified, filled, reconciled and harmonised then will the Kingdom be in its eternal order. Above we have said that Christ's cross, Christ's resurrection and Christ's reigning has defeated the entire system of Satan and his world-system. The Serpent set about to make a cosmic change in God's plan and the counsel of His will, planning himself to set up his own kingdom and make it victorious. I find it distressing in these days that so little is made of this Satanic kingdom and the clash of the two kingdoms (Col. 1:13; Rev. 11:15; 16:10–11) in biblical and theological studies. It even seems theologians turn aside from this whole 'scene' in favour of another scenario. When John said, 'He who commits sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. No one born of God commits sin; for God's nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God' (1 John 3:8–9), then it seems clear enough that the Cross was to destroy 'the fear of death' by which the Devil held men and women in lifelong bondage (Heb. 2:14–15). It is clear that 'the great dragon . . . that ancient serpent who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world' set out to destroy Christ the King at birth (Rev. 12:5), to tempt him from his Kingdom in the temptations in the wilderness and to see himself forth as The Strong Man, to rouse up vicious enmity against him and to defeat him for ever at the Cross. He is behind the nations raging 'against God and His anointed' and the kingdoms of this world have been of his ilk, that is, self-magnification regimes, supported by the vast Babylonish empire of the 'mother of harlots', the evil counterpart of the Holy City.

Then we have the support of the King—'ruler of kings of the earth; King of kings and Lord of lords'—who made an open show of fallen principalities and powers in the cross (Col. 2:14–15) so that the Lion of the tribe of Judah who is the Lamb of God as once slain, opens the seven-sealed book of history, especially of the judgments of God so that as seven (complete) seals are opened, seven trumpets are sounded, and seven bowls of wrath are poured out. This is the power of the Kingdom of God set against the kingdom of darkness. The imitation or counterfeit trinity of dragon, first beast, and second beast exist as 'father', 'son [of perdition]' and 'unholy spirit' or 'false prophet', and as Babylon, the unholy city and mother of harlots, ape the Father, Son, Spirit and

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<sup>2</sup> We recognise that this title is against the prophecies in Jeremiah 6:13–15 and 8:11, 'They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying "Peace, peace," when there is no peace'. It is also linked with Isaiah 57:19–21 in which restlessness—no peace—is for the wicked, but peace to the humbled in heart.

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the Holy City, so they are unmasked and the unholy conspiracy is destroyed by him who is seated on the white horse, smiting the nations with the Sword of the Spirit, destroying the enemy with fire and encapsulating all evil in the fiery lake.

Fantastic as all this sounds to those outside the realm of apocalyptic and the occult yet the battle of the two kingdoms is history long, and we must recognise that we are part of 'the armies of heaven' (Rev. 19:14; 14:1–5; 15:2–4) and that the battle goes on daily (Eph. 6:10–18; 2 Cor. 10:4–6; 2: Thess. 2:1–12) and that it is not primarily against flesh and blood but principalities and powers, spiritual wickedness in the heavenlies where we are presently involved with Christ and the throne of power. One John 2:12–14 show us that the young men of the church have overcome the evil one. Peter and James tell us to stand up in faith and the evil will flee from us. Paul tells us that the weapons of our warfare are not worldly but 'mighty through God, to the pulling down of strongholds', that is, we are now ravaging the kingdom of darkness. When we look at the weapons in Ephesians 6:10–18 and 1 Thessalonians 5:8 we find they are not frightening like human war *materiels*. They are such things as truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, hope, salvation and the word of God—the sword of the Spirit. With these we are taking initiatives, even against many antichrists and unclean spirits and they are slain by such simple weapons!

Reconciliation is not simply restoration of good relationships between God and Man, and all human and angelic creatures—good as that must be. It is the power of the love of the Divine Community making its perichoretic way through all creatures and the whole human and angelic race. It is the God of love regnant in love, triumphant for ever over all evil. It is the triumph of true humility. Henceforth all is a glorious unity!

## Study 17

# *Revival Today and the Renewal of Active Inter-personal Reconciliation*

Trevor Faggotter

### **‘REVIVAL’—TODAY?**

Usage of the term ‘revival’ certainly breeds a mixed reaction. Many today consider the word ‘revival’ a quaint, homely term, best limited to *describe* the extraordinary eras, now past, of John Wesley, George Whitfield and the like.<sup>1</sup> The term is sometimes employed to *explain* the expansion of Christianity in various parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Progressive theologians and church-committee types often raise an eyebrow, fearful of any well-meaning but misguided disruption. Others of a conservative ilk might go all misty-eyed as glorious *ideas* and *images* are evoked of the old pews full once again. *Notions* of a fresh kick-start for the 1980s charismatic movement may inspire the faithful. And ‘Revival-seeking’ of a certain type often manufactures some ‘goings-on’—but seldom does it produce the long-term reality.

The matter of revival is, nevertheless, a highly practical one. Whenever authentic expressions of church and community life have depleted or expired, then the coming of revival is not merely an academic or historical notion, but a dire necessity! In the notes guiding the preparation of these studies Geoffrey Bingham said:

There seems to be a malaise across many churches and our society. If we fight a fight it is not to be deluded by untruth so assiduously in our midst by the Deceiver and his cohorts.<sup>2</sup>

The battle for truth is unrelenting. Ministry workers can be duped, and so begin the frantic search for a power—other than the *Gospel* and the *Spirit*. We must recognise that, in Christ, we *are* participants engaged in a titanic struggle *against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the*

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<sup>1</sup> One comment on my own ‘Study Series on Revival’ was: ‘we don’t need revival, we need revitalization’.

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey C. Bingham, *Speakers’ Notes: The Ministry and Message of Reconciliation*, NCTM, 2003, p. 5.

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*spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places*. We are to continually *rekindle the gift of God* (2 Tim. 1:6–7), to see with new eyes the new life already given to us in Christ. Revival remains a Sovereign gift of God. Yet the Day of Pentecost and the New Testament letters beckon us to wake up (Eph. 5:14, 18; Rev. 3:2) today.

### **COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATION**

Congregational apathy, dreary denominationalism, a distortion or dearth of community life, and personal *accidie*<sup>3</sup> are frequently the setting for our work. Reading accounts of revival can goad the unimaginative.<sup>4</sup> Entire communities *can* be deeply transformed at the core by revival<sup>5</sup>. Consider one lesser-known report from Germany, in 1688:

1. Catechetical exercises have been set up in a great many places, and carried on in a plain and more practical method.
5. The education of youth has been more seriously laid to heart than formerly.
18. Many false prophets and greedy intruders have been discovered and exposed.
20. The logical, metaphysical, and homiletical schools have been less frequented, and more time spent on the Bible and exegetical conferences of theology, to a visible improvement of divinity scholars. [*n.b.: less 'how-to' conferences!*]
22. Funeral sermons, which used to be stuffed with I know not what vain praises and flatteries, begin to be rectified, and the names of happy, blessed, dear brother, &c. more sparingly, and with due regard bestowed on the deceased.
32. The distinction betwixt the essential and accessory points of religion has been revived, and the former more preached up by some than the latter.
33. Likewise has the distinction betwixt mere morality and true spiritual Christianity been set up again. The idol of an heathenish morality has been turned out of some Churches, and the pure Spirit of Christ, as the only restoring principle of fallen nature, suffered to come in again, for rightly framing a Christian's life and conversation.
45. Many stolen goods have been returned to the right owner.
52. Many layman (so called) have, by publishing books on practical subjects of divinity, highly promoted the interest of religion.
59. Several wits of the age have bowed to the Gospel, and are become fools for Christ's sake.
63. The unhappy names of distinction into Lutheranism, Calvinism, and into other human parties, begin to lose their credit with some; and Christ begins to be more preached up, as the great and only restorer of fallen nature.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> 'Accidie is an inner sourness that makes a person scornful of other people who—as he thinks—naively invest themselves 100 percent in work which has begun to disillusion him'. James I. Packer, 'Accidie Will Happen', pp. 159–60 in *Pastoral Renewal*, May 1986.

<sup>4</sup> See Oswald J. Smith, *The Revival We Need* (Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1946), p. 1. Similarly, during a sudden revival in Wales in 1904, some 20,000 people joined the churches in five weeks. How encouraging! The downside there being that 'the mules in the coalmines refused to work, being unused to kindness'.

<sup>5</sup> Trevor Faggotter, 'Revival Fire at Wudinna', in *Renewal Journal*, no. 4, 1994, p. 43–52. A local story from South Australia. See also: <http://www.pastornet.net.au/renewal/journal4/faggotte.html>

<sup>6</sup> John Gillies (ed.), *Historical Collections of Accounts of Revival*, Banner of Truth, Kelso (1845) 1981, pp. 240–2. (These 11 points, listed above, are from some 63 in the report.)

## **THE DYNAMICS OF REVIVAL**

The best way to comprehend revival is undoubtedly to have one! Personally. However, those of us who observe great revivals—from afar—and ponder, prepare and pray for them in our own day, will greatly benefit from a clear Scriptural overview of revival.

In *Dry Bones Dancing!* Geoffrey Bingham provides us with a biblical and historical framework in which to comprehend the dynamics of revival, especially as it relates to our churches today—in various states of what can be called *deival*.<sup>7</sup> His outline is:

1. *Vival*. In Eden, Adam and Eve—created in Christ—had life (John 1:4)—*vival*!
2. *Death* entered the world through sin, and spread to all (Rom. 5:12; Gen. 2:17). The whole human race in Adam is dead (Eph. 2:1) and needs *re-vival*.
3. *Revival*. The Old Testament has numerous instances of the restoration of life — life that has been lost (2 Kings 4:34; Ezek. 37:1ff.). It comes as an act of grace, as people, by faith, are restored to life—*vival*. Many instances illustrate where this has occurred personally, and corporately (Gen. 4:25f.; Ps. 30:3; Ezra 9:8–9). Living daily in this *vival*—with God—has ever been by faith. The New Testament reports how, at the word of Jesus, a ‘dead man sat up’ during a funeral at Nain (Luke 7:15), and Lazarus was recalled to life after four days of death (John 11:44). God’s life-giving Word makes alive those once dead in sin (Col. 2:13).
4. *Deival*. This term has been invented (by Geoffrey) to describe a state of spiritual recession.<sup>8</sup> Some churches appear very dead. They seem to lack any genuine enthusiasm for their own gospel. Others—such as the one mentioned in Revelation 3:1—*have a name of being alive, but [you] are dead*. Were local churches to respond to the strong word given in places such as Revelation 2 – 3 then *revival* would come once again. *Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death* (Rev. 3:2a).
5. *Vival*. This is really participation in the Trinitarian life of God (2 Pet. 1:4). It means sharing ‘in Christ’, ‘in the Father’ and ‘in the Spirit’—as awakened new creatures. This continues to be the most crucial matter for churches today.

Some churches try to set in place certain practices designed to prevent *deival*. For example, churches which came into revival during the 1950s in East Africa coined the term ‘continuous revival’. Their aim was to allow God to search their hearts daily, publicly repent, and seek God for forgiveness, thereby keeping fresh in the renewing

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<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey C. Bingham, *Dry Bones Dancing!* NCPI, Blackwood, 1983, p. 85 Note: the terms *vival* and *deival* are not found in the *Collins English Dictionary* (as yet), but Geoffrey has invented them, in order to clarify this topic. The closest we have is possibly the word ‘vivify’—from the Latin *vivificare*: to bring to life.

<sup>8</sup> Bingham, *Dry Bones Dancing!* p. 85. See also Geoffrey C. Bingham, *The Day of the Spirit*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1985, p. 236.

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power of the Spirit. Technically, this is *vival!* A healthy devotional life, fellowship, the exercise of humility and the constant use of the means of grace are the norm for Christians. We are to *go on being filled with the Spirit* (Eph. 5:18b).

Most churches probably tend to *ebb* and *flow*. This pattern is visible in the early church, with the corrupting deeds of Ananias and Sapphira, and the subsequent burst of new life, following judgment (Acts 5:1–14). The life-giving Spirit can be quenched (1 Thess. 5:19). However, it is vital to recognize that ‘the thrust to *flow* is stronger than the tug to *ebb*’ since, in believers, the Spirit is always present. Such states could be avoided by churches were they to keep hearing and respond.

### ***The Greatest Revival on Earth***

*The Greatest Revival on Earth* was the day of Pentecost.<sup>9</sup> This point demands our attention. Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost reveals that the cosmos is—historically—in a new epoch. The Holy Spirit is now poured out upon *all flesh* (Acts 2:17). In particular, the Christian community has entered this new era—receiving *vival* and *reconciliation* through faith (Rom. 5:11) in Christ.

*Pentecost is with a view to Calvary* (and not the other way around). As the riches of Calvary are opened up to a community, sins are forgiven, the guilt of failure and church *devival* is removed, the community opens up once again to the Father, and to one another, and to the world—and reconciliation is a reality present by faith.

Revival—of various communities in history—are undoubtedly a wonderful matter and a fascinating topic. But revival is not well understood, nor—I believe—is its dynamic fully appreciated by those of us who are most in need of it. The Australian historian Stuart Piggin urges us to pray earnestly for the Lord to transform the church and the nations. He calls us to have both a **theological** understanding of revival (1<sup>st</sup> paragraph below) and an appreciation of the six major accompanying characteristics of **historical** revivals (2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph below):

Revival is a sovereign work of God the Father, consisting of a powerful intensification by Jesus of the Holy Spirit’s normal activity of testifying to the Saviour, accentuating the doctrines of grace, and convicting, converting, regenerating, sanctifying and empowering large numbers of people at the same time, and is therefore a community experience.

It is occasionally preceded by an expectation that God is about to do something exceptional; it is usually preceded by an extraordinary unity and prayerfulness among Christians; and it is always accompanied by the revitalization of the church, the conversion of large numbers of unbelievers and the diminution of sinful practices in the community.<sup>10</sup>

The extraordinary happenings which often accompany revival are surpassed only by the tremendous love that abounds, as a result. Geoff Bingham says: ‘*since revival is*

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<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, *Dry Bones Dancing!* p. 64. See also the NCTM tape, by Geoffrey Bingham, entitled: ‘The Greatest of All Revivals’.

<sup>10</sup> Stuart Piggin, *Firestorm of the Lord: The History of and Prospects for Revival in the Church and the World*, Paternoster Press, Carlisle, 2000, p. 11.

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*simply the church living at its true pitch—that is, in full life—then we should never be satisfied when it is not in full life’.*<sup>11</sup>

### **ACTIVE INTER-PERSONAL RECONCILIATION RENEWED**

The renewal of active inter-personal reconciliation must mean the church is wholly engaged in the plan and mission of God, for humanity and all of creation. Renewed church and community life, service, love and proclamation are readily apparent in many Third World countries, where they often stand in stark contrast to situations of pre-existing enmity, or amidst persecution. In the Western world, revival today is surely with a view to participating more fully in this mission of God to all the nations. Whilst we may be dismayed by our present dryness (Ezek. 37), and revival may seem afar off, yet the genesis of a thrilling renewal is ever-present, even now.

*Active inter-personal reconciliation* includes the New Testament meaning of the word *koinonia* (fellowship). In churches today, the term ‘fellowship’ has been emptied greatly of its original meaning. Prior to Jesus’ birth, Greek philosophers had once used the term to denote the *close union and brotherly bond* which was an *ideal to be sought* (always in the future!). It had also been used when *looking back* to some previous *golden age* (always in the past!). Following the day of Pentecost, this term was employed in Acts 2:42—not to look back, but rising out of their present experience of the new age. They lived, without delay, in joyful anticipation, as the eschaton was breaking in upon them (1 Cor. 10:11). From Luke’s account of the fellowship of the new church in Acts ‘*the educated reader would have got the impression that here the Greek ideal of society had been realized*’.<sup>12</sup>

### ***The Fellowship Proclaiming Christ***

Active inter-personal reconciliation is symptomatic of a community revived by the gospel, and living in *vival*. Perfect love casts out fear. In churches, locals have fears of all kinds, as do newcomers. The primary fear is of punishment (1 John 4:18) due to guilt. Some of which is surely, for not having proclaimed the good news (2 Kings 7:9).

This fear is displaced as the revived community knows and proclaims that their sins and the sins of the whole world, have been propitiated by Jesus Christ—the righteous (1 John 2:1–2). Once again they long to keep themselves in the love of God (Jude 1:21). This is a perichoretic love, the church together abiding ‘in the Father’ (1 Thess. 1:1), ‘in Christ’ (1 Tim. 1:14) and ‘in the Spirit’ (Phil 2:1).

Revival today is that great bursting fulfilled love, which issues from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere devotion to the One who has given us all things in his reconciling work and person. As such love under the hand of God awakens a community—amidst certain opposition—revival becomes a present reality.

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<sup>11</sup> Geoffrey C. Bingham, *Twice-Conquering Love*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1993, p. 150. This book describes the reviving work of God in Pakistan in essays: ‘Lovefest One’, ‘Lovefest Two’ and ‘Lovefest Three’.

<sup>12</sup> Johannes Schattenmann, ‘Fellowship’, in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1, ed. Colin Brown, Paternoster Press, Exeter, 1971, p. 642.

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John Piper keeps saying: ‘*God is most glorified in us, when we are most satisfied in him*’.<sup>13</sup> When working amidst difficult circumstances (church and other), any lack of satisfaction in Christ, in the Spirit, and in the Father will mean that our proclamation will be deficient of authentic love. This will hinder the work of God, and in one sense delay the real coming of revival. Conversely—abiding in that love within the Triune God and seeking awakening in our own daily relationships, and in all of humanity, is surely at the heart of all that we are called to be about. Stuart Piggin writes:

It is precisely because revival is a sovereign work of God that we can pray most confidently that it will come.<sup>14</sup>

### **Prayer:**

Will you not revive us again, so that your people may rejoice in you? (Ps. 85:6).

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<sup>13</sup> John Piper, *Future Grace*, Multnomah Books, Sisters, 1995, p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> Stuart Piggin, *Firestorm of the Lord*, p. 191.

## Study 18

# *The True Health of Salvation: The State of the Rebel*

Robin Mitchell

### **THE STATE OF THE REBEL**

The scriptures paint a vivid and horrifying picture of rebellious humanity. Isaiah says:

*But the wicked are like the tossing sea; for it cannot rest, and its waters toss up mire and dirt. There is no peace, says my God, for the wicked (Isa. 57:20f.).*

When the Pharisees criticised the disciples for eating without washing their hands Jesus said to them:

*‘Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?’ . . . And he said, ‘It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person’ (Mark 7:18–23).*

Jesus pointed out that even the worship of these Pharisees was polluted. They worshiped with their lips but not with their hearts, they taught human precepts rather than the commandments of God. They made ‘void the word of God’ by their tradition, even to the extent of dishonouring their own parents for personal gain (Mark 7:10–13).

According to Paul, Adamic humanity is deeply perverse and evil. After speaking of the Gentiles he addressed his own people saying:

*What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all; for I have already charged that all men, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, as it is written:*

*‘None is righteous, no, not one;  
no one understands, no one seeks for God.  
All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong;  
no one does good, not even one.’  
‘Their throat is an open grave,*

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they use their tongues to deceive.’  
‘The venom of asps is under their lips.’  
‘Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.’  
‘Their feet are swift to shed blood,  
in their paths are ruin and misery,  
and the way of peace they do not know.’  
‘There is no fear of God before their eyes’ (Rom. 3:9–18).

In Romans chapter 1, Paul points out that this sad state is the consequence, not the cause, of humanity coming under the wrath of God. He speaks of two powerful revelations: the revelation of the righteousness of God in the Gospel and the revelation of the wrath of God upon all who suppress the truth by unrighteousness/wickedness (ἀδικία) (Rom. 1:17–18). Both of these revelations are occurring simultaneously and constantly (ἀποκαλύπτεται) throughout history. To reject the revelation of the righteousness of God is to drink from the cup of the wrath of God.

This wrath of God of which Paul speaks and which is now operating in the world takes effect when we refuse to acknowledge God who has plainly revealed himself in creation and in the gospel (Rom. 1:17, 19f.). Our failure to give thanks and worship God results in a darkening of the mind and in futile/senseless (ματαιόνομοι) thinking. In turning away from God we become fools (vv. 21f.).

In our darkness of mind we reject ‘the glory of the immortal God’ and then we create and worship idols. We think that our idols are wonderful, they serve us, we don’t have to serve them, or so we think. We fashion them to feed our desires but we soon find that we are enslaved to both our idols and to our illicit passions as well as to the demonic forces of evil that lurk behind the idols waiting to further ensnare us in our idolatry (1 Cor. 10:19–21). Our existential anguish creeps up on us as we find ourselves fatherless, bereft and without help or hope. We soon become like our idols, unable to hear or speak the truth, and we find that we are impotent to save ourselves or to live in God’s reality as whole persons (Jer. 2:26–28; Ps. 115:3–7).

Idolatry is but the beginning of the journey into futility and a living hell. As we reach out to our idols God acts in holy wrath. Paul writes:

*Therefore God gave them up* in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. For this reason *God gave them up* to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, *God gave them up* to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. *They were filled* with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. They know God’s decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them (Rom. 1:24–32).

The wrath of God is a judicial action of God. His wrath is not passive but active. His judgment is precisely that he gives us up to our unrighteous ways and to the

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consequences of our iniquity. Like Israel of old we find ourselves exiled from the promised land and from the blessing of God; we are abandoned in Babylon where every iniquity and abomination abounds.

We can begin to see what it means to ‘suppress the truth in unrighteousness’ (Rom. 1:18). The truth is not simply a dictum to hold in our head but a reality in which we must live. Truth (ἀληθεία) is life lived in God’s reality (ἐν ἀληθείᾳ: pertaining to being real).<sup>1</sup> To live in the truth is to live in covenant relationship with God. The unrighteousness (ἀδικία) by which we suppress the truth is the delusion of life lived in breach of, or outside of, a covenant relationship with God. In rejecting God and suppressing the truth, we deny the reality of our own being as children of God who are created in the image of God. We thus pervert our own natures. As we distort the reality of our being we become all that God is not, and all that we are never meant to be. We are filled with every form of evil.

In this state we experience alienation, we ever long to belong to someone or something but cannot love or know true community. We feel worthless, empty and ashamed and are ever searching to find out who we are. Our attempts at self-justification and worship never hide the evil of our hearts and are quite futile. We have no ultimate identity, purpose or hope beyond our own being. We are trapped in our own mess and surrounded by terror on every side. We fear Judgment. Our idols prove to be mute and powerless and other people to whom we look for help and love are no different to us. Abandoned by God, we are wretched, pitiful and helpless. With the Psalmist we cry:

O LORD, why do you cast me off?  
Why do you hide your face from me?  
Wretched and close to death from my youth up,  
I suffer your terrors; I am desperate.  
Your wrath has swept over me;  
your dread assaults destroy me.  
They surround me like a flood all day long;  
from all sides they close in on me.  
You have caused friend and neighbor to shun me;  
my companions are in darkness (Ps. 88:14–18).

### **THE TRUE HEALTH OF SALVATION**

The true health of Salvation is found in the heart of God:

But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we are now justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. Not only so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received our reconciliation (Rom. 5:8–11).

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<sup>1</sup> Low & Nida, *Greek–English Lexicon of the N.T. based on Semantic Domain*, United Bible Soc., 2nd edn, 1989, n.p. (Loizerux Bros. Inc., Bible Companion, Electronic edn, v. 1.0), p. 70:4.

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The reconciliation of sinful humanity took place at Golgotha 2000 years ago. In Christ we have been reconciled to God, in Christ we have been justified and in Christ we shall be saved from the wrath of God. We need no longer live in alienation from God in the pain and anguish of unrighteousness (ἀδικία):

*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, who reconciled us to himself through Christ (2 Cor. 5:17–18).*

We must understand however that the wrath of God is being revealed against all who suppress the truth in unrighteousness—even Christians (the clear implication in Eph. 5:6; Col. 3:6). We should not be surprised then to find some of the evil, anguish and turmoil that we have described above in our churches and in our own hearts.

Righteousness (δικαιοσύνη) is a status given to us in Christ but it is at the same time a daily walk in covenant relationship with God. We may choose at any moment to abandon the truth/reality of God and practice unrighteousness (ἀδικία). This does not mean that we cease to be the children of God but it means that as God's children we are continuing to live as we did before we received our reconciliation. If we persist in this then we again taste the present action of God's wrath and know the pain and alienation of our sin.

As Christian leaders it is important to understand that while reconciliation has been effected by God in Christ it is no magic infusion that makes a person instantly perfect and angelic. We are at the one time both sinner and saint. This is not to excuse our sin, but it is a reminder that we constantly need to be directed back to the cross and to the reality of our reconciliation so that we might live in truth:

*What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? (Rom. 6:1f.).*

When confronted by persons or congregations that are less than perfect our temptation is to try and 'fix it up' or 'sort people out'. (We even try to do the same thing with our own lives; surely a longer quiet time, more prayer, more Bible reading, more discipline or greater accountability will keep us on track.) In our attempts to 'fix it up' we deny the very gospel which we claim to preach. We play God and try and accomplish that which God has already done in Christ. We cannot and do not have to reconcile ourselves or other people to God, that has been done, and God has entrusted us with the message of reconciliation. Our task is not to reconcile but to proclaim the reconciliation already set in place by God through Christ (2 Cor. 5:19).

While the term 'reconcile' (καταλλάσσω) is only used once in 1 Corinthians (7:11) Paul's letter provides an excellent example of the ministry of reconciliation as it works out in the life of a congregation.

Paul did not turn a blind eye to the problems at Corinth. He acknowledged the presence of idolatry, immorality, disharmony and divisions in the Church and he wrote to address the saints concerning these issues. Note how Paul begins his letter:

*To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both*

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their Lord and ours: *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to God always for you because of the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him with all speech and all knowledge—even as the testimony to Christ was confirmed among you—so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ; who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord (1 Cor. 1:2–9).*

He then immediately addresses the matter of dissensions in the Church:

*I appeal to you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no dissensions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment (v. 10)*

At this point we might expect Paul to recommend a congregational meeting to bring about reconciliation. Perhaps some anger management would also be helpful. The leaders could all demonstrate their unity by hugging each other.

In the introduction of his letter Paul has already begun to address the issues at Corinth in the only way possible. He reminds the Corinthians of who they are. They are the church of God; they are saints, sanctified in Jesus. He speaks the word of peace to them from the Father and the Son. He encourages them to recall that Christ is at work in them, sustaining them, and that they will be found blameless in the day of the Lord Jesus Christ. He reminds them of the faithfulness of God who has called them in the fellowship of his Son.

Paul understands that the party spirit evident among the Corinthians is testimony that they are still ‘of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations’ (3:3). He writes to remind them of the primary matters of Christian faith:

*For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there is quarreling among you, my brethren. What I mean is that each one of you says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ or ‘I belong to Apollos’, or ‘I belong to Cephas,’ or ‘I belong to Christ.’ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? (1 Cor. 1:11–13).*

You have each been baptised into Christ. In Christ you find life, wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption (1 Cor. 1:30). Such a salvation cannot be found in Paul, Apollos or Cephas.

This gospel of Jesus Christ and our common incorporation into him invalidates all party spirit while proclaiming our unity in Jesus. In Christ we have been reconciled to God. In Christ we have been united to each other:

*For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13).*

Intertwined with the issue of party spirit Paul addresses the matter of the sophists and their wisdom teaching. His strategy (if we may call it that) is the same. He points the Corinthians to Christ who is ‘our wisdom’. He also helps them to see themselves as they now are in Christ. Contrasting the wisdom of God and the wisdom of the world, Paul reminds them that they have received the Spirit of God who comprehends the thoughts of God and now teaches them spiritual truths so that they have the mind of Christ.

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They have no need of human wisdom teaching. Paul's gospel is not anti-sophism, it is Jesus Christ the wisdom of God. While he warns them in the strongest terms of the destructive nature of their behavior and of their danger of Judgment, his primary appeal is in the form of a reminder of who they are now that they are in Christ.

Regarding their dissensions and divisions he has this to say:

**Do you not know** that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple (1 Cor. 3:16–17).

Paul continues to address each issue in the same way. In chapter 5 he confronts a situation of gross immorality in the Church. A man is living with his father's wife and it seems that the Church is boasting at its liberality in accepting the people involved. Paul writes:

Your boasting is not a good thing. **Do you not know** that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. *For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed.* Therefore, let us celebrate the festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth (1 Cor. 5:6–8).

Then there is the matter of Christians going to court against each other:

**Do you not know** that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? **Do you not know** that we are to judge angels—to say nothing of ordinary matters? (1 Cor. 6:2–3).

In addressing unrighteousness behavior and wickedness in the Church Paul says:

**Do you not know** that *wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God?* Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. And this is what some of you used to be. *But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God . . .* **Do you not know** that *your bodies are members of Christ?* Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! . . . Or **do you not know** that *your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body* (1 Cor. 6:9–11, 15, 19–20).

Paul knows of only one way to deal with such complex issues. How are Christians to live in a pagan, idolatrous society? Is it permissible to eat food offered to idols? What of special days and festivals? Perhaps the elders can draw up a set of Church rules so that we all know what to do about these things? Paul simply points out that they know all that they need to in order to work their way through these matters:

Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, **we know that** *'no idol in the world really exists,'* and that *'there is no God but one.'* Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—*yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.* It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have

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become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. 'Food will not bring us close to God.' We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak (1 Cor. 8:4–9).

As the people of God we enjoy the true health of Salvation as we know and live in the reconciliation that we have received.

You are the Church of God, saints made holy in Christ. He has enriched you in speech and knowledge. He will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Go and live.

## Study 19

# *'Blessed Are the Peacemakers'*

Hendrik Schoemaker

*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God (Matt. 5:9)*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Beatitudes are not concepts to master by our own efforts. They indicate a state or attitude for those who live under the Kingship of the Father. The whole of the Sermon on the Mount testifies to a lifestyle suitable for peacemakers. They are as the fruit of the Spirit and are practiced in one. They are the harvest of the Gospel of peace. Among them the term 'peacemaker', however, seems to be the most assertive. The phrases 'making peace' and 'peacemakers' occur only three times in the *NRSV* in the New Testament (Eph. 2:15; Col. 1:20; Matt. 5:9). The whole of the Scriptures, however, proclaim that the God of Peace<sup>1</sup> is about the battle for peace, culminating by making peace through Christ's blood of his cross. It is the Lord of peace himself who now gives peace to his people at all times and in all ways (2 Thess. 3:16).

### **THE PRINCE OF PEACE AND HIS PEACEMAKERS**

He is the Prince of Peace whose reign is of 'endless peace' (Isa. 9:6–7). He would guide our feet into the way of peace (Luke 1:78–79). The angels at Jesus' birth also declare peace to those on whom God's favour rests. In the River Jordan the Spirit of Peace descended upon the Beloved Son of the Father. Immediately he set out on the battle for peace, defeating the arch peace-destroyer from the beginning—the havoc-maker of nations and human beings. How wonderful the stories of the Prince of Peace coming to people in deep trouble, so deep that no human ability or religious ritual seemed adequate to heal them. He would tenderly minister to them and blessed them with his peace saying, 'your faith [in God] has made you well; go in peace', and they

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 16:20; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; Hebrews 13:20.

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always did. When confronted by demonic forces whipping up a storm on the lake, apparently to destroy him and his disciples, he was blissfully unaware of his surroundings, sleeping on a cushion. When woken up he simply said, 'Peace! Be still!' and there was dead calm (Mark 4:35–41). When they arrived at the other side of the lake Jesus was confronted by a raging bull of a man, totally out of control, who was possessed by a legion of demons. But now watch him sitting at the feet of Jesus after a short, sharp command for them to come out of him. The great calm that had come over the sea is matched by the great peace that now governs this man. Jesus has liberated him into the kingdom of peace. Immediately Jesus tells him to join him as a peacemaker, but in Gentile territory: 'Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you'. And he did and told everyone what Jesus had done for him, and they were amazed. That's what peacemakers do, they tell family, friends, and neighbours of God's mercy and great grace and how much Jesus has done for them. It is as simple as that.

His powerful invitation was, 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls' (Matt. 11:28–30). This echoes the statement in the Old Testament, 'The beloved of the LORD rests in safety—the High God surrounds him all day long—the beloved rests between his shoulders' (Deut. 33:12). Just observe the beloved of the Lord distributing bread and wine in utter serenity on the night of his betrayal, saying, 'this is my body' and 'my blood of the [new] covenant'. He is at rest, he knows he is not alone because 'the Father is with me'. The ultimate battle for peace was just about upon him; to destroy 'the ruler of this world', this evil God-hater and peace-wrecker. Amazingly he comforts his fearful band of disciples with these extraordinary words, 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.' And again, 'in me you may have peace' (John 14:27; 16:31–33; 1 John 3:8). Peace was wrought at a great price, from the 'beginning of sorrows' to its triumphant 'It is finished' and the peaceful handing over of his spirit to the Father. Then, when Jesus appeared after his resurrection before his full-of-fear disciples, his first words to them were, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' And he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained' (John 20:19–23). Peace-breakers have become peacemakers and are filled with the Holy Spirit, are sent by the Son, who was sent by the Father. They themselves have Christ's peace in the deepest parts of their hearts and know the battle for peace has been won. They have nothing of themselves to give, but have only God's healing balm that truly heals the wounds that come from rebellion and its judgments. It is the peace that is wrought by the blood on the Cross. The children of the Father are called to participate as peacemakers in the ministry of Christ Jesus, the true Peace-Maker. It is Christ who made peace and his cry is their cry, 'Peace, peace, to the far and the near' (Isa. 57:19). They are also aware that there will be those who deliberately turn their backs to God and for them there is no peace (Isa. 57:21, 23; Eph. 2:15; Col. 1:20).

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A few days before, Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem as its Messiah–King. He was fulfilling Zechariah's prophecy: 'your king comes to you, triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey . . . and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea' (Zech. 9:9–10). Just listen to the crowd's tumultuous praise: 'Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!' (Luke 19:38). But in only a matter of days he would be crucified by his rebel subjects. As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it and said: 'If you, even you, had only recognised on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.' Judgment would come, because she did not recognise the time of her visitation from God, that is, by her Messiah–King (Luke 19:41–44). She did not recognise 'the things that make for peace'. A king about to be conquered by a superior force would send a delegation to negotiate 'terms of peace', so the parable in Luke 14:31–32. King Jesus had been willing to make peace, but only on his own terms. These terms of peace had been proclaimed again and again in Israel's history (Luke 13:34), likewise the very presence of her King among them (Luke 17:20). They knew they had been visited and they knew the terms of peace. Hear the Father's cry from His heart: 'How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you, desolate' (Matt. 23:37–38). God has forsaken Israel; she is irreparably blind to the things that make for peace. The Prince of Peace wept not so much because Israel had rejected him but of the terrible judgment that would come upon them. This tells us something very deep about his heart and consequently about the heart of the Father. He wept and cried out, 'O that you knew the things that make for peace!' God is not willing that any perish (John 3:17), He does not delight in the death of the wicked (Ezek. 18:23). He was grieved at Jerusalem's enslavement to sin and their bondage to the evil one and now her rebellion would bring her into severe judgment. Luke did not write this text just to inform us about Jerusalem's doom. Luke in his second volume makes it abundantly clear that the Lord Jesus Christ is always eager and willing to make peace with anyone who will accept the terms of peace that he offers. His sacrifice (Heb. *selamim*) made true peace (Heb. *salom*) once and for all for everyone.<sup>2</sup>

Luke writes:

Then Peter began to speak to them: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all . . . how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses . . . He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that

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<sup>2</sup> The Hebrew name for the sacrifice *selamim* had traditionally been linked to the concept of peace (cf. Heb. *salom*). Since 'peace' in Hebrew thought implied well-being in general it is likely that an important element of the peace offering was the acknowledgment of God as the source of true peace. Alexander, T. Desmond, *From Paradise to the Promised Land*, Paternoster Press, Carlisle, 1995, p. 128.

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he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name (Acts 10:34–42).

The message of the God of peace was 'preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all'. And then Peter said, 'he commanded us to preach to the people'. The children of the Father are now the ones who have the enormous privilege to preach peace, they are the peacemakers under the Prince of Peace; to them has been entrusted the message of reconciliation; they are ambassadors of Christ, God making His appeal through them (2 Cor. 5:19–20). The cry of the one ordained by God as judge of the living and dead still echoes through His servants today, 'O that you would accept God's terms of peace!' May the Father give us the gift of weeping for the lost around us and may He give tears when harmony is shattered among the brethren in the church.

### **THE PEACEMAKERS—THE CHILDREN OF GOD**

To be a lover of and worker after peace is one of the distinguishing marks of the followers of the Prince of Peace. They are called children of God. They not only are so, but also they shall be recognised as children of the Father. What kind of peace then is made by the peacemakers? Nothing that is outside of Christ. Christ is himself their peace (Eph. 2:14). 'Peace is because Christ is.'<sup>3</sup> The shoes they wear are not the trampling boots of military might to enforce peace, instead as part of the armour of God they have put on sandals to proclaim the gospel of peace (Eph. 6:15). They are messengers who bring the announcement, 'Your God reigns' (Isa. 52:7) and where God reigns there is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17). In the community of believers every effort needs to be made to live at peace with everybody. It just will not do to claim to have peace with God and at the same time be disagreeable with everyone else. Christ's command to his disciples 'to be at peace with one another' (Mark 9:50) is echoed by Paul to all believers 'to be at peace among yourselves' and 'to live in peace' (2 Cor. 13:11; 1 Thess. 5:13). Believers not only pursue peace, but also holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14). In total there are 11 imperatives in the New Testament 'to seek' or 'to pursue' peace or its equivalent<sup>4</sup> and several more to live at peace with all people. The cumulative effect of these texts is that for the early Church the pursuit of peace with all people and in every way was one of the highest priorities of Christian conduct. Not only in the communities of believers, but also peace between husband and wife is a major objective as it is their calling (1 Cor. 7:15). Pursuing peace involves numerous actions like blessing persecutors, rejoicing or weeping with others, associating with the lowly, and refusing to take vengeance (Rom. 12:14–21). It will also involve refusing to become divisive over minor issues, which are really irrelevant to the kingdom of God. What matters is to set our minds on the things of the Spirit which is life and peace (Rom. 8:6);

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<sup>3</sup> Grant Thorpe, *Truth: The True Peacemaker*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1983, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Mark 9:50; Romans 14:19; 1 Corinthians 7:15; Ephesians 4:13; Colossians 3:15; 1 Thessalonians 5:13; 2 Timothy 2:22; Hebrews 12:14; James 3:18; 1 Peter 3:11; 2 Peter 3:14.

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to pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, together with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart (2 Tim. 2:22); and to be filled with all joy and peace so that we may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 15:13). It will involve authority and order in the church's meetings, 'for God is a God not of disorder but of peace'. All things will be done for building up, 'so that all may learn and all be encouraged' (1 Cor. 14:26, 31, 33). It will involve caring for the poor, blessing them with, 'Go in peace' while at the same time supplying their bodily needs (James 2:16).

### **MAINTAINING THE UNITY OF THE SPIRIT**

Peacemakers are not to make unity in the Church; they are urged to make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3). The seeds of peace do not reside in any human being other than our Lord; the harvest of the Spirit includes peace. It is the Lord who makes peace, and it is his Spirit who conveys the reality of that peace to the church. The church can only have peace, therefore, to the extent that its members derive their life from that one Spirit. This means a common recognition of all those men and women whom the Spirit of God has engifted to lead the church in the truth (Eph. 4:1–6; 1 Thess. 5:12–13). It is the Spirit himself who authenticates the ministry of his apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers. There is therefore no competition with one another, nor jealousy. Once that has been done, the church cannot be selective about the ministries which have been given to it. It cannot just accept the one which it finds least disruptive to its status quo, and hide from part of the truth behind the safety of a human teacher. Paul believed in the authority given to him, yet wanted people to hear what was said by Apollos (1 Cor. 2:12 – 3:23). The same was true of Peter concerning Paul (cf. Gal. 2:11–14; 2 Pet. 3:15–16).<sup>5</sup>

But peacemakers do not pursue peace at any price. They are not peace-achievers. There may be times when peace is not accomplished. Romans 12:18 is important, 'If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all'. That is the goal of a peacemaker. Don't let the rupture in the relationship be your fault. But there are times when to take a stand on the Truth of the Gospel may cause divisions. Does that mean then that we have ceased to be peacemakers? Paul writes, 'If it is possible . . . live at peace' (*NIV*). He admits there will be times when standing for the Truth of the Gospel will make it impossible. He writes in 1 Corinthians 11:18–19:

For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine.

He would not have written that if genuine believers should have compromised the Truth in order to prevent divisions at all cost. It was precisely because some Corinthian believers were genuine peacemakers that some divisions existed. Grant Thorpe writes:

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<sup>5</sup> Thorpe, *Truth*, pp. 16–17.

## *'Blessed are The Peacemakers'*

Truth [of the Gospel] is the true peacemaker, because those who know the truth live in the peace of an established kingdom whose sure, ultimate triumph extends its aura back into the present (2 Peter 3:14). Those who know that Christ has taken them out of reach of judgement, and into the Father's family, need have no anxiety for themselves, and so are the world's true peacemakers. Because they are beyond the pale of threats, their truth is their peace, which they bring to any with whom they associate. It is by such means that the peace of Christ is revealed amidst the judgements that come to all who trust a false peace.<sup>6</sup>

Jesus said in Matthew 10:34:

Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's foes will be those of his own household.

In other words, they must love peace and work for peace. They must pray for their enemies, and do good to them, and greet them, and long for the obstacles between them to be overcome. But peacemakers must never abandon their allegiance to Christ and his word, no matter how much animosity it brings down on their heads. They are not in the wrong if their life of obedience and their message of love and truth evoke hostility from some and affirmation from others. John Piper said:

Perhaps it's just this warning that Jesus wants to sound when the very next beatitude says, 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake'. In other words, righteousness must not be compromised in order to make peace with your persecutors. When Jesus pronounces a blessing on you for being persecuted for the sake of righteousness, he clearly subordinates the goal of peace to the goal of righteousness.<sup>7</sup>

James writes, 'the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable' (James 3:17). The sequence in the Beatitudes is the same. First, 'Blessed are the pure in heart', then, 'Blessed are the peacemakers'. Purity may not be compromised in order to make peace.

But how are leaders in the church to handle false peacemakers (Jer. 6:14; 1 Thess. 5:3), dissension, criticisms, gossip and especially sin in the church? What should a peacemaker's attitude be to a peace-breaker? In Matthew 18:15–18 Jesus shows us how. But note first that immediately preceding this pericope is a revelation of the Father's heart, that is, that none should be lost. The Prince of Peace came to 'save his people from their sins' (Matt. 1:21). So we have a deep concern for one who sins. We do not forget that this person is a fellow-believer (cf. Gal. 6:1–2). There is therefore no need to dread confrontation. After all, we are all accepted by God. We act on the firm conviction that there is such a gift as repentance and forgiveness of sins. We do not ignore the problem, hoping it will go away; we do not ostracise that person; we do not tell all and sundry about it. But we do go in love; we do go alone and with a background of prayer (Matt. 18:19). It is done, 'when the two of you are alone' (v. 15). Four times the verb 'listen' is used. One of the aims should be that he or she 'listens'. It is a time to be bold, but not yet the time for a bold rebuke to make peace (Prov. 10:10). 'If the member listens to you', full reconciliation ensues. If not, it is now

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<sup>6</sup> Thorpe, *Truth*, pp. 14.

<sup>7</sup> John Piper, 'Blessed Are the Peacemakers', 1986, downloaded from [www.desiringGod.org/](http://www.desiringGod.org/)

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the time to involve others. The purpose of having these witnesses is for the sake of the offender; after all, the first person may have been wrong. If the offence is real, further evidence may cause this person to repent and be restored to God and men. If the member still refuses to listen the matter needs to be opened up to the whole church. If 'the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you' like an outsider. This may sound harsh on the lips of Jesus. But there is realism and hope in that phrase 'a Gentile and a tax collector'. The realism is that at present there is an impenetrable barrier separating us from him or her and the hope of forgiveness and a new start. The person will not listen, we are told four times. It takes two parties to make peace; and therefore exclusion must follow and the barrier must stand. But what did Jesus do with tax collectors and sinners? He loved them into repentance and new hope. Matthew had good reason to remember that. He had been one himself. Jesus' instruction to the Church tells us that love and patient caring for one who has strayed into sin should always accompany Christian discipline. Paul wrote, 'hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh [the self-centred life], so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord' (1 Cor. 5:5). The aim of Godly discipline should always be restoration.<sup>8</sup>

Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen (Heb. 13:20–21).

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew*, BST, IVP, Leicester, 2000, pp. 194–6.

## Study 20

# *The Climax of Reconciliation*

Ian Pennicook

Paul wrote:

He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness [of God<sup>1</sup>] was pleased to dwell, and through him [God was pleased] to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him—provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven (Col. 1:18–23).

Prior to this, Paul has described God's beloved Son as the image of God and the first-born of all creation (vv. 15–17). His point is that the incarnate Son is the 'Adam' for whom and by whom all creation has been brought into being and through whom the whole creation is held together. But now, in this part of the paragraph (which began in verse 15<sup>2</sup>), Paul moves from Christ as head of the creation to him as head of the body.

The *church* is his body and he is the 'beginning' (ἀρχή, *archē*, beginning, origin, first cause<sup>3</sup>). The picture is dynamic: all creation issues from *him* and now the church does too. It owes its existence and identity to him alone. The creation may well seem to be in the thrall of 'rulers and authorities' (2:15) and to 'the elemental spirits of the uni-verse' (2:20), as if somehow Christ had lost his place in the creation, but that is not the case at all. He remains 'firstborn of all creation' because he is 'firstborn from the dead'.

'Firstborn' (πρωτότοκος, *prōtotokos*) does mean first to be born in time, but it also carries the consequent implication of first in status or rank. The first to be born 'possessed definite privileges which were denied to other members of the family. The Law forbade the disinheriting of the first-born (Deut. 21:15–17)'.<sup>4</sup> If the creation

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<sup>1</sup> Added by the translators; see also v. 20.

<sup>2</sup> The Greek has vv. 9–17 as one sentence, so v. 18 actually returns to the substance of vv. 13–14.

<sup>3</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (NIGTC) Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1996, p. 97. The word is used in the plural in v. 16 and in 2:15 as 'rulers'.

<sup>4</sup> T. Lewis, 'First-born; Firstling', *I.S.B.E.* vol. 2, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1982, p. 308. 'He must acknowledge as firstborn the son of the one who is disliked, giving him a double portion of all that he has; since he is the first issue

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belongs to Christ as the birthright of the firstborn, that possession is reinforced by him being the ‘firstborn out of the dead’. All those once ‘dead in trespasses and sins’ (Eph. 2:1) but who have now ‘been raised with Christ’ (Col. 3:1) are now his body and he rules as the source and sustainer of their new life.

All this has a further purpose: in order that he might be pre-eminent in *all things*. This is seen in the fact that ‘the fulness’ was pleased to dwell in him. ‘Fullness’ (πλήρωμα, *plēroma*) also means ‘completeness’<sup>5</sup> and perhaps we could say that the completeness of all things is found in him. Of course this is ‘the fulness of deity’ (Col. 2:9<sup>6</sup>), but here the reference would be to the final goal of the fractured creation, including hostile humanity. It is by Christ, the second man, the last Adam, who has the completion in himself, that God reconciles all things to himself. He made peace<sup>7</sup> through the blood of Christ’s cross. The reconciliation has been accomplished!

Colossians 1:21–22 reinforce this. We were, equally with the rest of humanity, estranged from God, and from each other (see Eph. 2:12; Titus 3:3) and, literally, ‘hostile in mind in evil deeds’ (cf. Rom. 1:18). But we were reconciled,<sup>8</sup> in *his* body of flesh through death. This reconciliation was essentially redemption through forgiveness (Col. 1:14) so that the legal demands which condemned us were the charge against Christ on his cross (Col. 2:14). We, therefore, died with him (Col. 2:20) and were raised with him (Col. 3:1).

However, the goal of this reconciliation is yet to be reached. We were reconciled to present us before him ‘holy and blameless and irreproachable’. And there is a condition placed upon that in Colossians 1:23. The climax will be reached as those<sup>9</sup> reconciled remain in the faith, established and firm and not shifting from the hope of the gospel which they heard. This requires positive action (Col. 3:1ff.). But it must be noted that because Christ is ‘the firstborn of *all creation*’ (Col. 1:15) the gospel ‘was proclaimed in *all creation* under heaven’ (Col. 1:23). Given the goal, the scope could hardly be any less.

### **MOVING TOWARDS THE CLIMAX**

The climax of reconciliation is multi-faceted. But one fact is certain: the goal will be a people who are ‘holy and blameless and irreproachable’. We are that now, but only faith can recognise it.

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of his virility, the right of the firstborn is his’ (Deut. 21:17). This is negatively illustrated in the account of Esau selling his birthright in Genesis 25:29–34.

<sup>5</sup> Dunn, *Colossians*, p. 99.

<sup>6</sup> cf. Ps. 24:1, *AV*. The LXX (Ps. 23:1) has του κυρίου ή γη και τὸ πλήρωμα αὐτης. ‘Of the Lord is the earth and its fulness.’

<sup>7</sup> The participle, ‘having made’, is Aorist tense. See *AV, NASB*.

<sup>8</sup> There is no certainty as to whether the verb is ‘you were reconciled’ (ἀποκατηλλάγητε, *apokatēllagēte*) or ‘he has reconciled’ (ἀποκατήλλαξεν, *apokatēllaxen*). But both are Aorists, so the conclusion remains the same.

<sup>9</sup> The construction εἰ γε, *ei ge*, translated as ‘provided that’ need not imply any doubt that it will take place; see Col. 2:5: ‘I rejoice to see your morale and the firmness of your faith in Christ’.

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The phrase ‘holy and blameless and irreproachable’ is partially repeated in Ephesians 1:4:

... he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.

The whole spiritual blessing, promised beforehand through the covenant with Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3), has been made ours in God’s choosing us to be holy and blameless and setting our destiny in sonship (Eph. 1:3–5) and it has come to us through the forgiveness of our trespasses (Eph. 1:7). Now if we have been chosen in Christ for that goal, then we can see ‘the mystery of his will . . . set forth in Christ’ being unfolded. God’s plan for the fulness of time is to gather up all things, earthly and heavenly, in Christ (Eph. 1:10). ‘To gather up’ (ἀνακεφαλαιώσασθαι, *anakephalaiōsasthai*) means to ‘present as a whole’.<sup>10</sup> The fragmentation and the hostility will be totally removed.

This restoration of the blessing to all the nations, promised to Abraham, is seen in the reconciliation of the nations in ‘the new man’ of Ephesians 2:15–16. The new man is Christ and his body is the church:

And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all (Eph. 1:22–23).

Much has been written about the meaning of ‘fulness’ here,<sup>11</sup> but we can at least say that Christ, as *the* man with ‘all things under his feet’ (Ps. 8:6), will be the one to ‘fill the earth and subdue it’ (Gen. 1:28) and that he will not do it alone. He will do it with his bride. And, unlike the first bride who worked outside of the purpose of God, this bride, of which Genesis 2 is an anticipation (Eph. 5:31–32), will be presented<sup>12</sup> by Christ to himself in splendour; she will be radiant, glorious, without anything to mar her beauty; she will be ‘holy and blameless’<sup>13</sup> (Eph. 5:27). The purpose of her reconciliation will be achieved.

The climactic nature of this is especially clear in the light of Ezekiel chapter 16. There, Jerusalem, representing God’s bride, Israel, is described as an unwanted baby girl, thrown out at birth and left to die. She was left with the blood of her birth still on her (Ezek. 16:1–5). At God’s word she lived and grew but God then gave her great dignity by covering her nakedness with the edge of his own cloak (cf. Ruth 3:9) thus entering into a marriage covenant with her, making her his own (Ezek. 16:8). Next he does for her what was not done at her birth, he washes her and anoints her with oil (Ezek. 16:9).<sup>14</sup> The language of Paul, ‘cleansing her with the washing of water by the word’ (Eph. 5:26), seems to be based on this rather than on, say, ideas of baptism with

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<sup>10</sup> G. Abbott-Smith, *Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1937, p. 30.

<sup>11</sup> See especially, Markus Barth, *Ephesians 1–3* (AB 34), Doubleday, Garden City, 1974, pp. 200ff.

<sup>12</sup> The same verb, *παρίστημι*, *paristēmi*, is used in Col. 1:22, and in the same context, of the church being presented holy and blameless.

<sup>13</sup> Some translations (e.g. *AV*, *NRSV*) have ‘without blemish’, but the words are identical with those in Eph. 1:4 and Col. 1:22.

<sup>14</sup> See John B. Taylor, *Ezekiel*, TOTC, Tyndale Press, London, 1969, p. 134, for a description of the usual washing and anointing procedures associated with birth.

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water. But the great difference is that Israel, with all her benefits, could not be a pure bride but, instead, prostituted herself. All she could look forward to was the promise of restoration:

. . . yet I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish with you an everlasting covenant . . . I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall know that I am the LORD, in order that you may remember and be confounded, and never open your mouth again because of your shame, when I forgive you all that you have done, says the Lord GOD (Ezek. 16:60, 62–63).

Now, however, there is a bride and she is blameless and pure. What she looks forward to is the *appearing* of her husband, for:

When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory (Col. 3:4).

The Book of the Revelation fills out this picture:

Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me (Rev. 3:20).

What meal could possibly be in view? The answer is surely ‘the marriage supper of the Lamb’ (Rev. 19:9). Instead of the moral laxity of the Laodicean church, which looks somewhat like the girl in Ezekiel 16,<sup>15</sup> now:

‘Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and *his bride has made herself ready*; to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure’—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints (Rev. 19:7–8).

John soon sees the bride in her true context, the new heavens and the new earth (Rev. 21:1–2), but not before he sees all impediments to righteousness removed into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:11–15). Far from dreading the final judgment, we must surely long for it. The bride is ready, her wedding garment has been given to her, so there is nothing to hinder her from the sweet consummation of her union with Christ.

When John was offered a vision of ‘the bride, the wife of the Lamb’ (Rev. 21:9) he was then shown ‘the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God’ (Rev. 21:10, cf. v. 2) and the bride ‘has the glory of God’ and she is radiant (v. 11). This is the fulfilment of the promise of Numbers 14:21 (cf. Isa. 11:9; Hab. 2:14), which was given in the context of the LORD’s refusal to allow those who had been freed from Egypt to ‘see the land that I swore to give to their ancestors’ (Num. 14:23). Now, however, humanity once more has the glory that was given at creation (Ps. 8:5; contrast Rom. 3:23).

A similar progression is seen in Revelation 1:5–6:

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

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<sup>15</sup> See Rev. 3:17, ‘For you say, “I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.” You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.’

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The language of Jesus Christ making us a ‘kingdom, priests serving his God and Father’, while obviously reflecting Exodus 19:5–6, goes back to the command to Adam to be the priest of the Edenic sanctuary (Gen. 2:15).<sup>16</sup> When this declaration is repeated in Revelation 5:9–10, there is a notable advance on Israel’s particular role:

You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth.

Now it is not only Israel but saints from every tribe and language and people and nation who are engaged in the priestly activity. Here are the nations united in worship (see Isa. 19:23–25; Acts 17:26–27), the fulfilment of the promise to Abraham (see also Rev. 7:9). This is the restoration of the blessing and the reversal of Babel. Reconciled nations are together:

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. *The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it.* Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. *People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations.* But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; *and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations* (Rev. 21:22 – 22:2).

Here is humanity reconciled to God to the fullest extent. God himself dwells fully with them:

See, the home of God is among men. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his *peoples*,<sup>17</sup> and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away (Rev. 21:3–4).

All the consequences of enmity will be totally removed. Here is the longing of Romans 8:18–24 realised. I suspect that a significant part of the ‘sufferings of this present time’ (Rom. 8:18) are involved with the struggle against the presence of sin:<sup>18</sup>

Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin (Rom. 7:24–25).

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<sup>16</sup> The Hebrew words ‘till’ (עַבַּר *‘bd*) and ‘keep’ (שָׁמַר *shmr*) occur together only here and in Num. 3:7–8; 8:26 and 18:5–6 where they refer to service in the sanctuary. See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, WBC, vol. 1, Word, Milton Keynes, 1991, p. 67.

<sup>17</sup> Some manuscripts have the singular. See Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, United Bible Societies, London, 1971, p. 765, who says: ‘It is extremely difficult to decide between the reading[s]’.

<sup>18</sup> Obviously there is more, see Rom. 8:35.

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Paul knows full well the forgiveness of sins, that ‘there is . . . no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus’ (Rom. 8:1); but ‘the important thing for Paul is release from *sinning*, release from the power of sin’.<sup>19</sup> He wants to do good! This is his longing for ‘new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home’ (2 Pet. 3:13). Furthermore, it is longing for the communion of sight, exceeding the communion of faith:

For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known (1 Cor. 13:12).

All that we presently see calls the truth into question (‘I *see* in my members’, Rom. 7:23), and who hopes for what is seen (Rom. 8:24)? We do not presently reign in life; on the contrary, whatever I may know with my mind, ‘with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin [and death]’ (Rom. 7:25). The phrase ‘reign in life’ or ‘exercise dominion in life’ (Rom. 5:17) and ‘reign on earth’ (Rev. 5:10) are both expressed in the future tense. We *will* reign. At present the only victory we know is that given to us in Christ Jesus our Lord. Statements such as, ‘Do not let sin reign in your mortal bodies’, and so forth, carry the implication that the believer is yet in a battle. ‘I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord’ (Phil. 4:2) and ‘making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace’ (Eph. 4:3) are clear reminders that fragmentation and disunity are a continual tendency among us.

But such statements are also reconciled man longing for the fullness of all that lies ahead. We have the precious and very great promises, but not yet the complete participation in the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4). Small wonder, then, that we long ‘for his appearing’ (2 Tim. 4:8).

### **THE ANTICIPATING COMMUNITY**

If there is the anticipated community, there is also the anticipating community and that is itself a matter of wonder. Peter wrote:

His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness (2 Pet. 1:3).

It would be wrong to leave this study at this point, because if there is ‘the hope promised by the gospel’ (Col. 1:23), there is also the present power of God at work in us. Ephesians 1:19 speaks of ‘the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe’; Philippians 1:6 says that ‘the one who began a good work in you will bring it to completion [on] the day of Jesus Christ’; and 2:12–13:

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<sup>19</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 1, SCM, London, 1952, p. 287. See also the words of William Cowper (NCTM Hymn Book, no. 196):

Dear dying Lamb, Thy precious Blood  
Shall never lose its power,  
Till all the ransomed church of God  
Be saved to sin no more.

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Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

The fear and trembling are not fear of failure, but healthy reverence for God and moral seriousness about his commands. But the church, the bride, lacks no spiritual gift as she waits for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:7). Reconciliation already received, peace with God, has brought us to the place where we can and must know the reality of all that we anticipate. There is a certain provisionality about this, such as in 1 John 2:1, ‘. . . so that you may *not* sin. But if anyone *does* sin . . .’, but, nonetheless, if salvation is with a view to being the reconciled community then it is also about being the reconciled community now:

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds (Titus 2:11–14).

This accords with Ephesians 2:10, ‘. . . created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life’. These good works are the works of the new creation: they are the way it will be in eternity, as we and the whole creation obtain ‘the freedom of the glory of the children of God’ (Rom. 8:21). But if that is so, then they are also the good works of the new creation now. Passages such as Ephesians 4:17ff., are demeaned if they are only ‘Rules for the New Life’.<sup>20</sup> To ‘grieve the Holy Spirit of God’ (Eph. 4:30) is to effectively deny the very purpose of him being given to us: ‘with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption’.

The Holy Spirit works the fruit of reconciliation in us; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Of course, none of these can be known in isolation. They are communal fruit, which will be the essence of the life of the eternal community as they are the life of the Triune Godhead. So, if we live by the Spirit, we should also walk by the Spirit (Gal. 5:25).

### **SAVED IN HOPE**

Paul wrote: ‘For through the Spirit, by faith, we wait for the hope of righteousness’ (Gal. 5:5). Peter spoke of being ‘given . . . a new birth into a living hope’ (1 Pet. 1:3). This ‘living hope’ is such that it works powerfully in us, to the point where we may be required to make a defence concerning the hope that is within us (1 Pet. 3:15).

The picture of a reconciled person or community is that they now desire the full dimensions of their reconciliation. Paul wrote of those who long for<sup>21</sup> Christ’s appearing.

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<sup>20</sup> The heading for Eph. 4:25ff. in the UBS Greek New Testament.

<sup>21</sup> He uses a perfect participle, ἠγαπηκόσι, *ēgapēkosi*, ‘to all those *having loved* his appearing’.

## *The Climax of Reconciliation*

These are not rhetorical devices: consistently the Scriptures define our reconciliation, our justification, as a dynamic encounter that leaves us hungering for more:

O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water (Ps. 63:1).

Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever (Ps. 73:25–26).

My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God (Ps. 84:2).

Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy (1 Pet. 1:8).

For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be *with the Lord* forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words (1 Thess. 4:16–18).

. . . my desire is to depart and be *with Christ*, for that is far better (Phil. 1:21).

Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home *with the Lord* (2 Cor. 5:8).

To be 'with the Lord'! On that day it will all make sense. For now, we struggle to understand the Scriptures and to respond to what is revealed (or perhaps, sadly, some struggle to avoid that sort of effort, choosing the easy, less morally demanding way). But over it all there is the declaration: 'Surely, I am coming soon', to which reconciled men and women, who are alive in faith to what Christ is doing, respond, 'Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!' (Rev. 22:20).

Knowing as I am known,  
How shall I love that word,  
And oft repeat before the throne,  
For ever with the Lord!  
That resurrection word,  
That shout of victory,  
Once more, For ever with the Lord!  
Amen; so let it be.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> James Montgomery (1771–1854), 'Forever with the Lord', Hymn 856 in *The Methodist Hymn Book*, London, 1904.

*Additional Studies*  
*for*  
*Ministry School*  
*in*  
*Western Australia*



## Study 5 (WA)

# *Unity 'Fails' in All the Earth*

Rod James

### **THE COSMIC CONSPIRACY**

There is no exact account in Scripture of the origins of evil. Evil, however, is pervasively present in the entire historical drama, and Satan is the would-be usurper of God and the self-appointed adversary and accuser of Man:

In Isaiah 14:12–14 it is ambition which expresses the evil of Lucifer. He desires to set his throne above the stars of God, i.e. above the angels of God, and to sit on the mount of the assembly, that is in the heavenly court as a great one. In short he wishes to be as—or like—the Most High. He will equal—if not surpass—God himself!

The fact that none of this is difficult for us to understand tells us it is the very heart of all evil. That which was created by God, chose to go against God, and to establish its own rule, its own kingdom, and its autonomy over against the rule of God. This is as close as we can come to speaking of the origin of Satan and evil.<sup>1</sup>

Satan is the ‘father’ of all conspiracy against God (John 8:44), and as conspirator he is necessarily ‘murderer’ and ‘a liar and the father of lies’. As the cosmic terrorist he ‘comes only to steal and kill and destroy’ (John 10:10) in his attempts to undermine God’s rightful reign as Creator and Father. Deception is his method of operation, and beginning with the couple in the Garden he deceives God’s image creatures away from a pure trust and straightforward obedience towards the Holy One, who alone is truly God (Gen. 3:13). By deception he leads the human race away from trusting ‘the Father of lights’ for ‘every good gift and perfect gift’ (James 1:17). He deceives them into idolatry (Deut. 11:16) and the mocking of God (Gal. 6:7). Masquerading as ‘an angel of light’ (2 Cor. 11:14) he sets himself up as ‘the ruler of this world’ (John 14:30), and ‘the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience’ (Eph. 2:2).

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, *The Clash of the Kingdoms*. NCPI, Blackwood, 1989, pp. 22–3.

## *Unity 'Fails' in All the Earth*

### **THE SPREADING REBELLION**

Rebellion must spread or die, and the usurper of God goes 'out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth' (Rev. 20:3, 8, 10). Consequently we see the same Satanic aspirations in a treacherous humanity as it seeks 'to establish its own rule, its own kingdom, and its own autonomy over against the rule of God'.<sup>2</sup>

Exchanging the truth of God for a lie they suppress the truth under that lie and refuse to honour God or give thanks to Him (Rom. 1:18–25). Among those who bought the lie and elevated themselves against the rule of God were Cain (Gen. 4:8, 9), Lamech (Gen. 4:23, 24), the people at the tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1–9), Pharaoh (Exod. 5 – 14), Ahab and Jezebel (1 Kings 16–22), the king of Babylon (Isa. 14:12–14), Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 4), and the Jews who contended with Jesus (John 8:44). In each case the characteristics of defiance, murder, deception, lawlessness, and self-promotion emerge as they live in and live out the lie. All are deceived into thinking that they are autonomous, but each is a pawn in the hand of the master usurper and a slave to his bidding. While we have illustrated the conspiracy with notorious examples, we need to be clear that it is the whole human race that has been 'sucked in' to this cosmic rebellion:

Why do the nations rage  
and the peoples plot in vain?  
The kings of the earth set themselves,  
and the rulers take counsel together,  
against the LORD and against his anointed, saying,  
'Let us burst their bonds apart  
and cast away their cords from us' (Ps. 2:1–3).

None is righteous, no, not one;  
No one understands; no one seeks for God.  
All have turned aside . . . (Rom 3:10–12).

### **IDOLATRY—THE FALSE WORSHIP OF THE REBELLION**

To those who, like me, find it difficult to have a clear understanding of idolatry, particularly in the modern era, the following explanations from Geoffrey Bingham's books *Creation and Reconciliation*, and *Dear, Darling Idols: Lords & Gods Piffing & Appalling* are very helpful. I quote them at length because they clarify the immediate and imperative relationship between rebellion against God and idolatrous worship:

. . . to be 'as God' is surely to reject the elements of contingency which attach to 'creature, son, and servant', and be autonomous entities independent (i.e. uncontingent ) of God . . . Man now has to build a new rationalization of God, creation and man, and since these innately cannot change he must 'exchange the truth of God for a lie' which is why he 'worships the creature [creation] rather than the Creator'. Part of his false rationalization is that the creation is wonderful, but requires no Creator, as such!

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<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, *The Clash of the Kingdoms*, pp. 22–3.

## *Unity 'Fails' in All the Earth*

Man does not forsake his role as lord of creation, but in no sense will he accept that he is the underlord, i.e. under God.<sup>3</sup>

Why then do they repress the action of truth, and why do they reject the nature and knowledge of God? The answer is that sinful man dare not be confronted by God, that is not in His acts or His Being, for such moral confrontation is too painful, too morally demanding, too traumatic.

We will see that there are no gods or idols *essentially* in creation, for God could not have creation that way. Man, then, has to make them. He has to formulate his objects of worship so that he will not be traumatically confronted. Moral demands must not be beyond his scope or willingness.

What is not always appreciated is the fact that idolatrous and atheistic man has always to attack true godliness and righteousness as it essentially is, and as it actionally is. He is forced to attack. If he does not then the truth will be out, the reality will confront, the demand will be present. He must fight it, and his way is either idolatry or atheism. He must be critical of God and His creation or he must reshape that creation or both.

. . . The True God (Biblically) demands true worship, and man is not prepared to give that kind of worship, for worship is his actual life-style, rightly understood. Hence he will have only a god (or gods) befitting his life-style, his service and his worship.

What we do know from Romans 1 and Acts 17 is that man's life-style forms his gods, and is formed by them. It is other than the life-style God has given man which must conform with the true knowledge of God. Hence true morality resides in, and is expressed by true worship, and likewise immorality belongs to the life-style which accords with idolatry. If what we have just said is true then almost certainly idolatry is the greatest powerful factor in man for evil. Romans 1:18–32 must then be read as being the one piece, and having no breaks anywhere. Sexual immorality, sexual perversity, a reprobate mind, and the life of shattered relationships and deliberate evil must all accord with, and indeed spring from, man's idolatry.

. . . The genius of evil, then, is idolatry. It gives a god but not *the* God. It gives a system of worship and service, but not *the* creational system. It even provides the other elements which belong to God, and channels them through idolatry. We will look at these needs, but even without seeing them in full we can realise that idolatry is man's way of rationalising his universe. To worship the creature (the creation) and to serve and worship it rather than the Creator lets man out of his creational, and so, functional responsibilities. Man is free to go the way he has structured rather than the way God has commanded and designed him to go. Idolatry therefore is man's substitute for everything.<sup>4</sup>

Initially it is hard to understand why, when Moses was up on the mountain, the people should ask Aaron, 'Up, make us gods, who shall go before us' (Exod. 32:1). In the absence of their leader they, no doubt, experienced fear and uncertainty about their situation in the midst of the nations. The gods they were asking to be made were a political and cultural link with the nations around them. If push came to shove, an idolatry in common with the other nations could be politically expedient should they have to retrace their steps to Egypt or negotiate for themselves a place in the midst of the other nations. And so the golden calf that Aaron made was in the likeness of the idols they had known in Egypt.

The link between politics and idolatry re-emerges when Israel split into two kingdoms (1 Kings 12:25–33). Jeroboam, having torn the northern part of the kingdom away from the house of David, created two golden calves for the people to worship so

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<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, *Creation & Reconciliation*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1987, pp. 30f.

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, *Dear Darling Idols: Lords & Gods Piffing & Appalling*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1981, pp. 7–9.

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that they did not have to go to Jerusalem. He built temples, appointed priests who were not Levites, and instituted feasts independent of those celebrated in Jerusalem. In all of this the idolatrous cultus served the political objectives of a self-styled kingdom which no longer worshipped and served the one true God.

### **THE FALSE 'RECONCILIATION' AND 'UNITY' OF POLITICAL COLLABORATION**

Integral to the politics of those who are no longer submitted to the one true God is the use of alliances that give the appearance of reconciliation and unity, but which are false in their self-interested motives. One such was the alliance of convenience between Moab, Ammon and some of the Meunites, who formed a military compact to destroy Judah (2 Chron. 20:1–30). But having no genuine substance it came unstuck under the pressure of impending conflict. When Ahaz, king of Judah, was feeling vulnerable to outside aggression, instead of calling upon the Lord as his predecessor Jehoshaphat had done, he sought a political alliance with the king of Assyria, and adjusted the worship cultus in Jerusalem to bring it into line with what he had seen in Damascus (2 Kings 16). In Revelation 17 the expedient collaboration of the beast, the ten horns and the great prostitute ends when the beast and the ten horns turn on the prostitute and 'make her desolate and naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire'. Far from being true reconciliation and genuine unity, political alliances are made up of mutual convenience which, in the end, turns out to be individual convenience—'I'll go along with you because it suits me'. Martin Bleby's delightful song perceptively exposes the falsity of political motives:

*Fred's all right, and Jane's true blue,  
I'm O.K., and so are you.  
Thick as thieves in the mulga scrub,  
If you win our approval you can join the club.*

*I'll pat your back, you pat mine,  
And we'll all be together and we'll be just fine.<sup>5</sup>*

So man is forever trying to heal the wound of the people lightly, proclaiming 'Peace, peace', when there is no peace (Jer. 6:14).

### **PROPHECIES OF THE RECONCILING AND UNIFYING MESSIAH**

When we see the pervasive extent of this cancer of cosmic conspiracy it seems, to the human mind, to be irreversible. How can God redeem, reconcile and unify His corrupted creation? How can He overcome such willful rebellion and insistent autonomy on the part of His creatures? God's response to humanity's false attempts at idolatrous autonomy and political unity is two-fold.

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<sup>5</sup> The first verse and chorus of a song by Martin Bleby, *New Creation Hymn Book*, no. 283.

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**First**, He brings all false 'reconciliation' and 'unity' to naught. "There is no peace," says the LORD, "for the wicked" (Isa. 48:22). God confounded the unity of the company building the tower of Babel so that their project was never completed. He 'set an ambush against the men of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir, who had come against Judah, so that they were routed' (2 Chron. 20:22). Concerning even the division of Israel into two opposing kingdoms God said, 'this thing is from me' (1 Kings 12:24). Perhaps there are some 'coalitions of the willing' today which will not achieve what had been hoped for politically.

**Secondly**, in the face of the conspiracy of the nations against the Lord, God laughs and 'holds them in derision'. He announces 'As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill' (Ps. 2:4–6). God had revealed to David, the author of this Psalm, that He was going to establish the Davidic kingship forever as a 'charter' for humanity (2 Sam. 7:19). He would make the nations the inheritance of His Messiah/King, and the ends of the earth his possession. This king would rule the nations with a rod of iron (Ps. 2:8, 9). God would seat the Messiah King at his right hand and make his enemies his footstool (Ps. 110:1). Therefore, although the devil had been sinning from the beginning, the Son of God would appear in order to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8).

But how would the Messiah/King do this? Would he fight fire with fire, and match political intrigue with even smarter politics? Would he have to engage in lies, deception, murder, and sheer brute force? These questions are at the heart of the historic human dilemma. All prophetic indications of God's chosen King showed that he would be of an entirely different moral quality than the kings of this world. In contrast to the bullyboys of the military and the string-pullers of politics, he would come 'righteous and having salvation', 'humble and riding on a donkey' (Zech. 9:9). Of him the Lord foretold:

Behold my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;  
I have put my Spirit upon him;  
he will bring forth justice to the nations.  
He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice in the street;  
a bruised reed he will not break,  
and a faintly burning wick he will not quench;  
he will faithfully bring forth justice in the earth;  
and the coastlands wait for his law (Isa. 42:1–4).

This 'branch' from the stump of Jesse would establish the reign of God, in which all of God's creatures would live in reconciled harmony, and 'the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea' (Isa. 11:1–10). But how will he effect his reign over evil? How can the Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6) prevail over the violence and intrigue of the rebellion? God's servant 'will act wisely'. He will be 'despised and rejected by men' (i.e. the people of the rebellion), but he will bear our griefs and carry our sorrows, and upon him will be the chastisement that brings us peace (i.e. reconciliation with God). And so the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand, and God will highly exalt him and prolong his days (Isa. 52:13 – 53:12). In the temple of his own body, by the holy filter of the cross and the tomb, and by the

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vindicating power of the resurrection and ascension, God's Messiah/King will defeat the usurper (1 John 3:8), destroy the rebellion (Rev. 19:11–21), purify a people (Titus 2:14), reconcile all things in heaven and on earth to God (Col. 1:20), and so bring peace to the creation (Eph. 2:17):

He shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,  
And with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.  
Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist,  
And faithfulness the belt of his loins (Isa. 11:4–5).

Therefore:

Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling.  
Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way,  
for his wrath will be quickly kindled.  
Blessed are all who take refuge in him (Ps. 2:11–12).

## Study 9 (WA)

# *The Reconciling of the Nations: An Exposition of the Nations and the Unity of 'One New Man' as in Ephesians 2:11 – 3:6<sup>1</sup>*

Siew Kiong Tham

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul's purpose is to show the distinctiveness of the redemption that is in the eternal plan of God. This plan of redemption is brought about in the person of Christ. All the blessings in this redemption are ours only in so far as we are partakers in Christ. Therefore, Paul opens his address to the Ephesians with the glorious statement of the blessings in Christ Jesus. He then prays for the Ephesians that they may be given 'a spirit of wisdom and revelation' (Eph. 1:17), so that they may know 'what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe' (Eph. 1:18–19). 'God put this power to work in Christ' (Eph. 1:20) and the fulfilment of His plan will be realised in Christ in the present period and in the age to come (Eph. 1:22–23). This prayer of Paul for the Ephesians in essence repeats the preamble in the first half of the chapter.

This opening of the letter sets the framework from which Paul develops what has been revealed to him regarding the restoration or bringing together in Jesus Christ of all that God has created. In this, he maintains the theme of the incarnation of the Son of God. The melodious refrain of this single theme of the humanity of Jesus Christ keeps repeating itself with dazzling variety in the orchestral score of the letter. This is the 'mystery of Christ' to which Paul refers later in the letter (Eph. 3:4).

He then goes on to speak of the moral and spiritual condition of the Ephesians in the past. They had followed 'the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air' (Eph. 2:2). This is the 'passion of the flesh and senses' (Eph. 2:3), which so dominates our lives. Theology has for so long been so subordinated to the

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<sup>1</sup> All Bible references are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version* (1989) unless stated otherwise.

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culture of the times that it has failed to see that humankind can only find its liberation in the man, Jesus Christ. With this setting, we can now launch into the section of Ephesians under consideration.

### **‘THE GENTILES IN THE FLESH’—BY BIRTH—AND THEIR FRIGHTENING ENVIRONMENT**

*(Neptune<sup>2</sup>—the distant sound of estrangement in the flesh)*

The Ephesian Christians had come into the blessing of God through faith in Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:2). They had experienced the bountiful blessing of Christ. In this section, Paul continues to remind them of their estrangement from and enmity with God in their natural state in the past. He refers to them as ‘Gentiles in the flesh’ in times past. This is not a common expression used with reference to the Gentiles. Its special emphasis ‘in the flesh’ may have a bearing later in reference to what has been accomplished in the flesh of Jesus Christ. Here it is used with reference to their natural state in the past when they were uncircumcised and the people outside the covenant of Israel. They were ‘cut off’ from the promise of God and had no part in the glorious inheritance that belongs to Israel. Now that the Ephesian Christians had been brought into the fold of God, they were asked to be mindful of the deplorable state from which they came. To be brought from such depth of estrangement into so glorious an inheritance in Jesus Christ must surely bring a profound appreciation of the grace that has been given to them.

### **THE ENMITY BETWEEN GOD AND THEM**

*(Mars—the sound of war in the old flesh)*

The Ephesian Christians needed to remember that at some time in the past they were ‘without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world’ (Eph. 2:12). The expressions, ‘without Christ’ and ‘without God’, may not raise much emotion in many people today. However, Calvin commented that this is ‘the height of all evil’.<sup>3</sup> To be estranged from the Creator and His covenant of promise must be the most terrible thing to happen to the creation which God brought into being. It is analogous to a deep-sea diver sent to the bottom of the ocean and who then cut off his own air hose. One simply cannot continue in that state unless one re-surfaces or is reconnected in some way. What is so evil about this estrangement is the arrogance to think that one can continue in that state. The harsh sounds of enmity and war are evident here in the descriptions made of their natural state (‘in the flesh’)—aliens, strangers, no hope, without Christ, without God and far off.

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<sup>2</sup> G. Holst, *The Planets*. The characteristic music of each of the planets in this composition seem to fit the subheadings in the paper by my interpretation.

<sup>3</sup> J. Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, Banner of Truth, Edinburgh, 1973, p. 173.

## *The Reconciling of the Nations*

The double reference to their state ‘without Christ’ and ‘without God’ follows from what Paul refers to earlier, ‘God put this power to work in Christ’ (Eph. 1:20). It also pre-empts the explanation of what God is doing in Christ in the sections following. The treatment by Paul in this letter is truly Trinitarian as the theme of reconciliation cannot be expounded in any other way.

### **THE ENMITY BETWEEN JEW AND GENTILE**

*(Uranus – the sound of conflict in the flesh)*

Israel is the bearer of the promise of God and they are also referred to as the people of the circumcision. They are the covenant people of God and this is expressed in the circumcision of the flesh. Yet Paul is well aware that the mere rite of circumcision ‘made in the flesh by hands’ (Eph. 2:11) is of no avail. He is insinuating that here though he is not saying it overtly. He has mentioned in Romans that the ‘real circumcision is a matter of the heart’ (Rom. 2:29). We can make this inference because Paul says later that both groups, Jew and Gentiles, need to be reconciled to each other and to God (Eph. 2:14–16). Therefore, it must be concluded that the circumcision made in the flesh by hands did not bring about the needed reconciliation.

So while referring to the Gentiles as the people outside of the promise of God, Paul is making subtle reference to the Jews that they are also in the same state if they had relied solely on what they think they can achieve in their flesh. Here one cannot but surmise that the constant reference to the ‘flesh’ is building up to what has been achieved in the One who has appeared in the flesh.

### **THE ‘NEW MAN’ AND JEW AND GENTILE ONE IN HIM**

*(Venus – the sound of peace in His flesh)*

In this subsection, Paul now elaborates on the restoration that is so needed and the way God has brought this about through the man Jesus Christ. He highlights again the fact of the hostility between the Jews and the Gentiles (Eph. 2:14). The dividing wall between the two has been broken down by Jesus Christ. The world which has been divided between the Jews and the Gentiles has now been blended into one in Christ Jesus. Those ‘far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ’ (Eph. 2:13). This healing and the breaking down of hostility is not brought about through a remote force guided by God. It takes place ‘in his flesh’, that is, in the incarnate Christ (Eph. 2:14). The incarnation is an essential part of the work of God in this reconciliation. ‘A new humanity’ is created in the person of Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:15). Yet it is not simply the incarnation that achieves the reconciliation, but Christ in the flesh needs to embrace the hostility and deal with it through the cross (Eph. 2:16). This requires the shedding of ‘the blood of Christ’ (Eph. 2:13). This much Paul has been given to understand and the rest remains ‘the mystery of Christ’ (Eph. 3:4).

However, Paul gives to us yet one more important aspect in our appreciation of the reconciliation that has been achieved in Christ. Our access in this process is ‘through

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him [i.e. Christ] . . . in one Spirit to the Father' (Eph. 2:18). The work of reconciliation is the work of the Triune God. There is definitely no mention of the contribution from fallen humanity in this process. Our participation in this process is by being taken in the one and same Spirit into this 'new humanity' in Jesus Christ.

Therefore, the 'new humanity', that is, the new *anthropos* (man), God incarnate, remains the key to our understanding of the process of reconciliation. It takes place within the Godhead: 'in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself' (2 Cor. 5:19). The incarnate Christ is acting on behalf of fallen humanity. 'In His flesh', He made the only possible response on behalf of fallen humanity to God and this involves the cross and the shedding of His blood. In so doing, He brought about the new humanity in His own person. We experience this reconciliation when we become incorporated into this new humanity in Christ. That is why Paul begins his letter to the Ephesians with the enumeration of the glorious blessings that we have only in Christ and not outside of Him. Furthermore, this incorporation is again not something that we decide on, but is something that happens to us 'in the Spirit'. This is because 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Rom. 5:5). Unless this response on our part comes through the Holy Spirit, then any unilateral response on our part is futile.

This breaking down of hostility brought about peace. However, the peace that is spoken of here is not an abstract concept. This peace is in the person of Christ. Apart from the peace that is spoken of in the person of Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:14), Christ also made peace (Eph. 2:15) and He proclaimed peace (Eph. 2:17). While this may have been spoken of here in three contexts, this is the peace that Christ made in His own person. He has made the peace and He has proclaimed it:

For he is our *peace*; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making *peace* . . . So he came and proclaimed *peace* to you who were far off and *peace* to those who were near (Eph. 2:14–15, 17).

This peace is no cease-fire. It is not a matter of give and take, or putting up with. It is not the reshaping of the old structure that will foster a peaceful co-existence. It is more radical than that. It is the creation of a new humanity in Christ. That is why it needs to start off with the incarnation and then the cross of Christ. The creation of the new humanity comes about that way. This is where the reconciliation, the wonderful exchange takes place.

He is our peace. This peace is in the man Jesus Christ. We can now hear the orchestra moving into an irenic mood while playing this refrain of Jesus' humanity after trumpeting the harsher sounds of war and the breaking down of the dividing wall of hostility and the abolishing of the law of the commandments (*expressed*) in ordinances<sup>4</sup> (τὸν νόμον τῶν ἐντολῶν ἐν δόγμασιν). This is a difficult expression and is often taken to mean that the law (moral) has been abolished. This cannot be so. Calvin

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<sup>4</sup> S. D. F. Salmond, 'The Epistle to the Ephesians' in W. R. Nicoll, ed., *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, vol. 3, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1951, p. 295.

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translated the phrase this way. What was abolished was ‘the law of the commandments, which were contained in ordinances’.<sup>5</sup> G. Bingham pointed out that this ‘means that the Mosaic law, given particularly to the Jewish people was fulfilled by Christ in its *moral, ceremonial, and judicial* elements’.<sup>6</sup> The law of God reflects the nature of God and this must be inviolable. We need to be careful in the way we interpret this.<sup>7</sup>

### **THE COMMUNITY OF THE RECONCILED—THE NEW TEMPLE, LIVING**

*(Mercury—the sound of activity in the new humanity)*

Now that there is peace between those who ‘were far off and . . . those who were near’ (Eph. 2:17), Paul then turns his attention to the community of the reconciled. This is the new ‘household of God’ (Eph. 2:19). The dazzling refrain of the humanity of Jesus Christ takes on a new variation. It is no longer His flesh or His blood that is the predominant consideration now. God in Jesus Christ has effected the reconciliation and now the attention is turned to the continuing expression of this achievement in the community of the reconciled. The humanity of Jesus is now one with the human community of the reconciled. There is renewed activity and life within the community. There is a tremendous amount of building work carried out, but it must not be assumed that this is mere human activity. The sound of the bustling human activity is not the activity in the old flesh, but the activity of the new humanity in Christ.

In the building activity of this new community, Jesus is the cornerstone. In other words, everything in this new community hinges on Him and is dependent on Him. ‘In him the whole structure is joined together’ (Eph. 2:21), and ‘in whom [Christ] you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God’ (Eph. 2:22). The ‘in Him’ of the ‘spiritual blessing in the heavenly places’ (Eph. 1:3) is now turned into the ‘in Him’ of the seeming ‘earthly’ structures. This is the distinctive of the humanity of Jesus Christ. He is the ‘God who is for man’ and the ‘man who is for God’. There is a distinctiveness in the two aspects of His person, but in the work of reconciliation we cannot separate these two aspects. In His incarnation and ministry, He has ministered to the Father from the side of humanity. He continues to do so from the side of humanity in the Spirit now that He has created in Himself the new humanity (Eph. 2:15). This ‘earthly’ structure referred to as the temple, the dwelling place of God, is now given a new spiritual understanding.

While we may loosely refer to our bodies as the temple of God and thus the dwelling place of God, this is not strictly so in the singular or individual sense. We have followed ‘the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air’ (Eph. 2:2) in this interpretation. God does not dwell in fallen humanity. He exists as

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<sup>5</sup> J. Calvin, *Sermons on Ephesians*, Banner of Truth, Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1973, p. 185.

<sup>6</sup> G. Bingham, *Ephesians*, NCPI, Blackwood, n.d., p. 30.

<sup>7</sup> For further treatment on the theme of ‘The Law of God’, refer to the recorded messages at the recent NCTM Winter School, June 2003.

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the Triune Father, Son and Spirit, and in no other. The earthly community of the reconciled is the temple and the dwelling place of God in so far as it is joined together in this structure with Christ as the cornerstone. God is in Christ and it is only as we are in Christ that we are brought into this communion with God and in no other way.

Paul is ever mindful to point out that this is not a process that we can forge on our own. While the role of Christ in bringing about this new humanity has been emphasised, he needs to point out that this is not simply Christological but Trinitarian. The *RSV* translation is more accurate here when it says, ‘in whom [Christ] you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit’ (Eph. 2:22, *RSV*).

### **IN 3:1–6, THE TOTAL UNITY—‘NONE AFORE, NONE BEHIND THE OTHER’**

*(Jupiter—the sound of the joy of triumph in His body)*

The logic of this work of reconciliation is not readily discernible. The work of Christ remains a mystery though Paul was given some understanding of it through revelation. It was not a revelation made known to him individually, but was given to the ‘apostles and the prophets by the Spirit’ (Eph. 3:5). This is the foundation on which the community is built (Eph. 2:20). The refrain of the sound of the joy of triumph in His body has now reached a crescendo.

The revelation is this: ‘the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel’ (Eph. 3:6). Those who have been far off and without hope have now been brought near and included in the promise and covenant of God. What had started as Jews and Gentiles is now one in Jesus Christ. In Him, a new humanity has been created. This is not a new entity outside of Christ, but a new humanity anchored in Christ. The reconciliation has taken place. The promise that was once given to the Jews is now extended to all in the created order.

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## Study 12 (WA)

# *The Ministry of Reconciliation*

Geoffrey Bingham

### **INTRODUCTION: THE MEANING OF THE WORD 'MINISTRY'**

In the passage of 2 Corinthians 5:16–21, Paul uses the term in verse 18 ‘the ministry of reconciliation [*ten diakonian tes katallages*]’, and in verse 19 he uses the term ‘the message of reconciliation [*ton logon tes katallages*]’. In this same Epistle he uses the term ‘the ministry [*diakonia*] of the Spirit’ (3:8), ‘the ministry of righteousness’ (3:9) which he contrasts with ‘the ministry of death’ (3:7) and ‘the ministry of condemnation’ (3:9). In 3:6 the members of the apostolic band are ‘ministers [*diakonous*] of a new covenant’, and in 4:1 Paul speaks of ‘this ministry [*diakonian*]’ and seems to talk from 4:7 to 5:16 of ‘we’ as the ministers whilst in 5:18 ‘gave us’ seems to refer to ‘us Christians’ so that all those reconciled have the ministry of reconciliation and in particular have the *logos* (message, word) of reconciliation to bring to the world of human beings, that is, ‘Be [you] reconciled to God.’ The ministry, then, is the serving of humanity with the *logos* or message of reconciliation. It is a message in the face of a fracture or split which came between Man and God. This leads us to consider that the great object facing God was the enmity of Man in concert with all powers and persons of evil and that what was required was a *re*-conciling in the face of seated enmity of Man against God, aided as Man was by all the deceit of Satan and his minions. We might almost personalise it as a force in itself and call it ‘the enmity’. In this passage we realise that Paul is the speaker for us all, but that it seems he was one of the fiercest enemies of Christ and the gospel of those days—one, of course, who was to be followed by countless enemies in the centuries to come. We need to see then that *re*-conciliation cannot be considered without first understanding the drive for enmity in Man and the powers of darkness and their intentional separation from their Creator.

### **THE WHOLE MATTER OF ENMITY**

This enmity has been dealt with previously (Study 2: ‘The Matter of the Fracture of the Unity Inbuilt in History’) under the rubric of ‘separation’. Isaiah 59:2 says truly,

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‘your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you so that he does not hear’. Adam was shocked with the impact of the guilt of his sin and the dread of a situation where he wished to cover himself from his own nakedness. Man is never the victim of sin since it is he, himself, who perpetrates sin. He does not catch sin as one does a disease. He wills to sin. He wills to exist apart from God. The wrath of God comes rightly upon him, but the sinner does not see this wrath as ‘right’. To the contrary: to him God’s wrath is unwarranted. That is why we need to understand the principles of blessing and cursing which are found throughout Scripture since they are the background to what we know as true human community and divided human existence. In Genesis 1:20–22 God blessed the birds and the sea creatures and gave them their place and function in creation. The blessing was so that they could swarm in water and sky, a basic blessing for all time to enable them to fulfil their creational operations and destiny in community. The same purpose is repeated in Genesis 1:28f., when God blesses Man in order that he fulfil the commission given to him. It is natural and proper for Man to bless God in return for the blessing/s received. *All of this was the state of peace*; conciliation was not needed to ‘keep the peace’. Reconciliation is only necessary where there is relational cleavage. When Man sinned he caused the ground to be cursed for his sake. Cain lost the blessing of the earth, being ‘cursed from the ground’. When Man sins, the cleavage comes between him and God, and community comes into a grievous disarray. So Adam felt the cleavage in the garden. Cain’s loss of community showed in homicidal action. If we carefully study Romans 1:18–32 we see that Man’s rejection of God brought idolatry which is the practice of ‘community’ under one head, but which constitutes immorality so that all relationships are ego-centred and not other-person-centred. Relational mutuality and inter-subjectivity dies with idolatry since the idol cannot possess or reproduce the true Community of the Trinity. So follows the passage to homosexuality as an un-ontological or anti-ontological ‘community’ in which are all the dreadful forms of homicide, enmity and relational evil. Thus Romans 1:26–32 names all the divisive elements which further fragment community as initially created by God. So come into being all the curses committed by sinful Man which destroy community and vie against the law of love. Of course God’s law has clear prescriptions for living out life in love as community.

In Job 1:5 we have the statement, ‘And when the days of the feast had run their course, Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all; for Job said, “It may be that my sons have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts.” Thus Job did continually.’ The principle is shown that when a person sins the result is cursing God in one’s heart. This is a deep insight into the power of sin. We know Satan hoped Job would fall into this very sin (1:11; 2:5) and Job dreaded doing so, and resisted his wife’s injunction for him to do so (2:9). Undoubtedly Satan is sure of the principle, ‘Sin and you will curse God’, and that is the divisive nature of sin. Genesis 8:20–22 shows that the Flood was God’s cursing the ground ‘because of man, for the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth’. It is worth noting here that Moses also believed the fact that sin brought cursing, for in Deuteronomy 27:11ff. he directed the leaders of certain tribes to stand upon Mount Gerizim to bless the people—the norm for true community—

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and leaders of other tribes to stand on Mount Ebal to pronounce the curses which would come upon the disobedient. Indeed, the history of Israel—if not that of the whole of humanity—can be said to be one of blessings and cursings. Moses powerfully extrapolates the matters of blessing and cursing in the chapters 27 to 30. The priests, Levites and prophets constantly teach, exhort, and warn the community of Israel according to the same principles of blessing and cursing.

The principle of sinning, cursing God and coming under the curse is no less present in the New Testament. In Colossians 1:19–22 we have, ‘For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. And you, who once were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him.’ ‘And you, who once were estranged and hostile *in* mind, doing evil deeds’ is in the *AV*, ‘enemies in your mind *by* wicked works’, and is translated in the *NIV* ‘were enemies in your mind *because* of evil behaviour’. There is something to be said for the translation which makes wicked works causal of enmity rather than only a result of enmity, but perhaps both are present. Our main point is, of course, that Man is at enmity with God, hence Paul’s statement in Romans 5:10, ‘we were enemies [*echthroi*]’. In Ephesians 2:13–17 there is hostility (enmity: *echthran*) between Jew and Gentile, Gentile and Jew, and the blood (death) of Christ dissolves this enmity, bringing reconciliation in the race of one new humanity. The *Jewish* laws and commandments as dividers were brought to nothing, and both enemies are made one body through the cross. The law itself was never to be abolished as Matthew 5:17–21 reminds us, but what was *Jewish* for Israel in the Torah was abolished.

The principle we adduce is that God by creation blesses Man to the full. He never curses Man unless there is disobedience. Man cannot sin without cursing God. Cursing God brings the curse of God or, we can say, the wrath of God. As we have seen, God’s wrath is in one way linked with His distributive righteousness, but because He is essentially love His wrath is intended to set up that movement in Man which we call law and guilt to give him the knowledge of sin which he could not have by any other means, and drive him to see that God’s righteousness is intended to deliver sinners from destruction and justify them before God and His law. Whilst this principle is clearly pronounced it will not mean much more to us than an escape route from present wrath and the wrath to come if we are not aware of the vast cleavage between the holy Creator and the unholy sinner who curses God in his heart and who is under the curse of God.

Some theologians, biblical exegetes and expositors almost tumble over themselves on the one hand to say that God is endeavouring to assure sinners that He needs no propitiation for the division they have made and that His wrath is quite amenable, and so much so that it can scarcely be called wrath in the light of the fact that God is love. They fail to see that neither of these reassurances is true. Propitiation in the cultus of Israel was indispensable and was provided by God since no human could do that, and Leviticus 17:11–14 states the principle of the atonement offering, ‘For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and *I have given it for you upon the altar* to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement, by reason of the life’. Every

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provision was made in the Torah for the forgiveness of sins by the sacrificial cultus, for this meant that community could subsist by reason of God's love in providing that forgiveness, and so interpersonal relationships could obtain and persist.

Let us, then, sum up the matter of blessing and cursing, that is, the state of Man under blessing or love, and his state under cursing or wrath. Unless we can grasp the nature of these states we cannot grasp the wonder, reality and totality of reconciliation. Man's created state was peace, and his relationship with God brought him all the blessings of the Godhead, that is, as we now know it, the Trinitarian Godhead. It would take many words to describe this state of union and communion with God when innocent Man shone brightly as the image of God. The *perichoresis* of God flowed into him—Man—and outward to all creation. So all the social joys and fellowship of being truly Man, ecclesial Man, were present.<sup>1</sup>

The state of Man who separated himself from God and was in enmity with Him and his fellow human-creatures was, and is, a sad one. His act was rejection of a creation which was at peace, and the law of God which prescribed the conditions for peaceful living as well as warning against human autonomy and personal evil. There is continual ontological pain at not being what one was created to be. This existential guilt<sup>2</sup> as Karl Heim puts it, is a sad burden:

Guilt alone is the absolute evil, the absolutely terrible and unbearable, the simply irrevocable loss. Compared to guilt all else that may be terrible in the world is very slight indeed. If one weighs guilt against all other suffering in the world, unhappy love which makes life a hell, life-long hard labour in the mines of Siberia, continuous suffering from cancer without any hope but the prospect of a painful death, softening of the brain leading to madness, epilepsy with increasing stupefaction —the guilt will easily outweigh all the other evils in the scale.

The dysfunctional nature of life, the awryness, confusion and irrationality that sin brings, the loneliness, emptiness and futility, the aimlessness, sense of coming death, the limits of human relationships and the pain of some of them—all of these combine to make human existence a burden.

I would readily agree with an objector who thought this description of sinful Man is laying it on a bit too thick. Of course God loves those who constitute themselves His enemies and does not lay about them savagely. He sends his rain and sunshine upon all (Matt. 5:43–48), He loves those who hate Him, and withholds nothing that is essential to human living, but He does not condone sin and does not withhold His judgments forever (cf. Rom. 3:25–26; Acts 17:30–31). Most sinners would claim they live a reasonable life, and that most of it is enjoyable. Indeed humanity, though excluded from Eden, sets about making life as pleasurable and secure as possible. The idols seemingly offer security against chaos, humans easily move to form or join

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<sup>1</sup> A book which has been of immense help and blessing to me is *Ecclesial Man* subtitled 'A Social Phenomenology of Faith and Reality' by Edward Farley (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1975). The very suggestion that Man is, by creation, ecclesial is stunning and revelatory. If that is the case—and it is—then it explains Man's dreadful misery when he goes against his own ontology as community and denies his inter-subjectivity and isolates himself as an ego, and starves himself—and others—of community in God and in the *ecclesial* human race.

<sup>2</sup> See the full, powerful quote of Karl Heim on the matter of guilt in Study 6, p. 39.

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communities and gain social satisfaction. Religions and cultures substitute for God's community, families give a sense of belonging, foods and stimulants and pacifying drugs make life seem tolerable, and the beauty of the arts compensates for a loss of the supernatural by their seeming transcendence. The way of the transgressor often seems reasonably pleasant! He wonders why God doesn't relax. The thinking may be shallow. Painful events and sudden crises easily shatter this fragile peace. Made to reflect God in all things he only reflects his own ego and so appears as banal or simply self-magnifying.

### **THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION**

We were told by Paul that the work of the Cross by Christ was for all—'one has died for all; therefore all have died', and because of this 'those who live might live no longer for themselves [separation lives] but for him who for their sakes died and was raised' (2 Cor. 5:15). 'So', concluded Paul:

all this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:18–21).

Conciliation is the work of keeping peace where it is. *Re*-conciliation is restoring peace where once it had been, but was lost. It is making peace for the second time. It is establishing peace for ever. The message (*logos*) of reconciliation has two parts: (i) the good news that God has made peace by the blood of the Cross. Nothing remains to be done. All is in place; and (ii) that listeners must believe this and receive the reconciliation (Rom. 5:11) and become reconciled to God. The ministry of reconciliation has been committed to the peacemakers who proclaim the gospel in all its elements to all of the world.

All the work of the Cross has been sufficient to reconcile Man to God. That work of the Cross has been brought to Man by the word (*logos*) of the Cross (1 Cor. 1:18). The vast cleavage has been closed, tightly closed. The separation is finished. The believing person is justified, for his sins are no longer accounted to him. This can only be because the very righteousness of God is accounted to him so that he is justified before the law, for God has made him righteous *in* God with the righteousness *of* God in Christ (2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Cor. 1:30; Phil. 3:9). All of this is the message of reconciliation.

Then, since Christ's resurrection and reigning, the reconciliation has *happened* in time! In history it came into view on the day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit brought the joyful message through God's servants when they were immersed in that Spirit and understanding came to them as Jesus had said it would. People were reconciled with God and in the very same moment with one another. The true Community of believers became one before, and with, the Holy Community of God. Man filled out in his

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ecclesial nature, loving God, loving all neighbours. The community was of one heart, one soul and one mind, and sharing possessions with those that had need became the true order of life. What above we called 'the curse' and 'the wrath of God' vanished, never to return as such. The flash flood of Pentecost was in reality the pouring out of the Spirit from on high, flooding the hearts of believers, and then flowing through them to the world. The new way of life was called 'the fruit of the Spirit' which is 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control' and 'against such there is no law' because this is the form of the law which is love.

This, then, is the message and ministry of love. The demands it makes upon the messengers—those ambassadors of the triumphant and victorious King who is humble and who offers amnesty to sinners—are such that they continue to believe this message in the face of what seem to be insuperable difficulties and unremitting opposition. 'Blessed are the peacemakers' is not for those who would conciliate in uneasy situations or try to 'keep the peace' where there is no real peace (cf. Jer. 6:13–14; 8:11; Ezek. 13:10). It is not for those who refuse to believe there is a wrath of God which needs to be met by God in the propitiation He has set forth in His own Son. Proclaimers must believe in 'the wrath of love' which brings true peace to the conscience and the sure knowledge that they are justified so that for them there is no condemnation in Christ Jesus.

Even so, the message does not end with the reconciliation of sinners by a holy God. Love, joy and peace were the elements introduced at creation as part of living for all creatures. In our School we have to refer, time and again, to the ultimate unifying of all things under Christ the head (Eph. 1:10). The reconciling of all things (Col. 1:19–21) through the blood of Christ, as indeed the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile (Eph. 2:11–22; cf. Rom. chs. 9 – 11) have in sight the regeneration of the world (Matt. 19:28) and the liberation of creation from the bondage of corruption. The fullness of the kingdom of God will come when 'the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and Christ'—'a Kingdom, priests to his God and Father'. How then shall we be messengers of the word of reconciliation? Part of the answer must be, 'In and through the ministry of the Holy Spirit'.

It is perhaps remarkable that none other of Paul's letters is as filled with the work of the Holy Spirit as are the Corinthians Epistles. They reveal a full pneumatology when surveyed. Our Ministry School passage of 2 Corinthians 5:14–21 really has its full background in chapters 3 and 4. In chapter 3 the Holy Spirit is mentioned in the term 'the ministry [*diakonia*: 'dispensation', *RSV*] of the Spirit' (3:8), 'the ministry of righteousness' (3:9) which Paul contrasts with 'the ministry of death' (3:7) and 'the ministry of condemnation' (3:9). In 3:6 the members of the apostolic band are 'ministers [*diakonous*] of a new covenant'. 'God', says Paul, 'has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not in a written code but in the Spirit; for the written code kills, but *the Spirit gives life*'.

The passage of 1 Corinthians 2:6–16 tells us that we can make no communication to the 'natural man' (*psuchikos de anthropos*) of the truth. Only the Spirit can do that. The Book of Acts is testimony to that. In an age of information technology the communication is no easier. We might see 2 Corinthians 5:14–21 as ideal to explain to

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unconverted persons, but certain points such as ‘the love of Christ’, ‘died for all’, ‘not imputing their trespasses’ and the exhortation to be reconciled to God leave the natural man cold. After all he is the enemy of God. We are baffled, and if we think techniques of communication will work we are vastly mistaken. Pentecost and subsequent infillings of the Holy Spirit alone are the way to touch the mind and heart of sinners. Paul’s statement of Romans 15:29 of his coming to Rome ‘in the fullness of the blessing of Christ’ is the same as ‘by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Holy Spirit’, hence his exhortation in Ephesians to ‘go on being filled *with* [or, *by*] the Holy Spirit’ so that we are filled ‘unto all the fullness of God’. Apart from the Spirit we are helpless. In the power of the Holy Spirit the miracle of reconciliation will happen. We are strangely moved at the shrinkage of dynamic evangelical Christianity in the West—we with the plethora of our brilliant theological literature and competent theological colleges, and they of the Third World countries with their naiveté and simplicity of gospel belief and their eager looking to Jesus to whom they testify as they, so many, ‘[love] not their lives even unto death’.

## Study 15 (WA)

# *‘All One in Christ Jesus’: The Unitive Community*

Rod James

### **‘ACCORDING TO FLESH’ OR ‘THROUGH PROMISE’**

Praise be to God who has used the conflicts and difficulties of the early church to create clear, written expressions of the truth of His kingdom. One such written expression is Paul’s Letter to the Galatians. In it Paul is led by the Holy Spirit to exclaim:

. . . for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise (Gal. 3:26–29).

Later in the Epistle, Paul expounds and clarifies the distinction between the religion that is ‘according to the flesh’ and that which is ‘through promise’ (4:21–31). He uses Hagar and Sarah and their respective sons as an analogy of two covenants, one which works for justification by human effort but ends in slavery, and the other which depends upon God’s gracious promise and brings freedom. His analogy is as follows:

<b>Hagar</b> slave woman	<b>Ishmael</b> born according to flesh justified by works of the law	<b>Mt Sinai</b> mother of all who seek to be
<b>Sarah</b> free woman	<b>Isaac</b> ‘through promise’	<b>the Jerusalem above</b> mother of all who believe God’s promise

Religion that is ‘according to flesh’ produces moral competitiveness, self-righteous pride and individuality (at the heart of the word ‘individual’ is the word ‘divide’). Those Paul is opposing desire to have the Galatians circumcised that they may boast in their flesh (6:13). We find the same spirit to be at work in Corinth where Paul

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accuses the congregation of being 'of the flesh' which is indicated by their rivalries and divisions (1 Cor. 3:1–4). In Galatians 5:19–21 he lists the 'works of the flesh' and nine of the fifteen have to do with relational disunity—idolatry, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions and envy.

### **THE RECONCILING WORK OF CHRIST IN 2 CORINTHIANS 5:14–21**

In contrast to the way of the flesh, Paul expounds just how it is that we who were formerly carnal, individualistic, competitive, self-righteous and divided, are so powerfully and effectively changed:

*The love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died.*

It is the righteousness of Christ's love for 'all' which grips our interpersonal selves and so governs our relating. He has loved us all by putting us all to death in his own body. Our individuality, egotistical competitiveness and moral self-righteousness have met their just desserts in God's merciful execution of us in the crucified body of His own beloved Son. Paul speaks for all believers when he confesses, 'I have been crucified with Christ' (Gal. 2:20). Geoffrey Bingham has expressed the personal significance of Christ's death for each of us in his hymn 'Out of my nothing I was all':

*One day I found the weakened God  
Whose arteries dripped my deadly blood.  
I saw Him groaning on a Tree  
And I was Him and He was me.  
All brilliance mine from Him had fled  
Within the city of the dead.*

*I saw myself as wan and pale,  
A skeleton, a dreary corpse.  
I hung within His blessed bones,  
He thought my prideful, crassful thoughts.  
I bled to nought within His Tree,  
And by His death He captured me.*

*You are my Lord, and I love Thee  
Who bled me out upon Your Tree  
(New Creation Hymn Book, no. 301, vv. 5, 6 and final refrain).*

The reason why Jesus died for 'all' was 'that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised'. That is, instead of being trapped in the service of our autonomous egos, and therefore facing eternal condemnation, we might live for the One who died and now lives for us. And so in Him we can be 'born of God' (1 John 4:7), can be 'partakers of the divine nature' (2 Pet. 1:4), and can share in the mutuality, perichoresis and 'perfect love' (1 John 4:18) of God's eternal family.

'From now on, therefore', because of what Christ has done, 'we regard no one according to the flesh', that is, as a moral performer and so a rival in the contest for

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'best human being'. Likewise we do not regard Christ according to the flesh as 'the Saviour of the Jews in a sense which gave them an advantage over the Gentiles.'<sup>1</sup> No, we regard him as the One who died for 'all', that is, all who were created in the image of God, and were therefore created for perichoretic union with God and with one another. He died for all, that they might die and live anew for Him who died and lives for them. Therefore, 'if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation', and a participant in the 'new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells' (2 Cor. 5:17; 2 Pet. 3:13). The old life of autonomous, competitive ego has gone (crucified), and the new life 'in Christ' the Reconciler has come by participation in Christ's resurrection glory. Each believer is to be viewed as they are—'not having a righteousness of [his/her] own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith' (Phil. 3:9). In Christ they have become 'the righteousness of God'.

Paul moves almost imperceptibly to a corporate focus by speaking of 'us' and 'we'. He thus indicates that this reconciliation, which is all from God, results immediately in a reconciled and reconciling community:

All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled *us* to himself and gave *us* the ministry of reconciliation . . . entrusting to *us* the message of reconciliation'. Therefore, *we* are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through *us*. *We* implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:18–21).

### **THE BODY OF CHRIST**

The New Testament revelation of 'the body of Christ' powerfully conveys the reality and extent of our reconciliation. 'This body of death', that is, our old sinful nature (Rom. 7:24), has been put to death in Christ's physical body (Rom. 7:4). Christ has reconciled us 'to God in one body through the cross' (Eph. 2:16). 'The cup of blessing' and 'the bread that we break' are a participation in the body and blood of the Lord (1 Cor. 10:16–17). It is 'in one Spirit [that] we were all baptized into one body—Jews and Greeks, slaves or free—all were made to drink of one Spirit' (1 Cor. 12:13). The physical bodies of the saints are members of Christ's body (1 Cor. 6:15–20).<sup>2</sup> Believers are to discern the body of the Lord (1 Cor. 11:29), 'not neglecting to meet together . . . but encouraging one another' (Heb. 10:25).

The members 'have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us' (Rom. 12:6), but these do not work for division, for 'we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another' (v. 5). There is no superiority or inferiority of

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<sup>1</sup> James Denney, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1904. Denney offers an extensive comment on what Paul meant by regarding Christ according to the flesh.

<sup>2</sup> Paul S. Minear, in his *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Westminster, 1960, p. 182), has a comprehensive chapter on 'The Body of Christ'. He comments:

Perhaps this is the place for a footnote regarding the Pauline idea of members. In our day the term has lost its figurative force, even in our thought about the church. The church is a membership organization; i.e., persons become members of it. In Paul's thought, Christ (as body) has members, i.e., men and women whom he has incorporated within himself as belonging to him. Only as a corollary of this basic image could they be visualized as members of the church, although this corollary was never used during the New Testament period.

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gifts or members (1 Cor. 12:15–26), even though there is order and authority in the body (1 Cor. 12:27, 28; Heb. 13:17)) Gifts, far from being a source of division, competition and strife, have been given by Christ ‘for the building up of the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ’ (Eph. 4:12). In the Spirit of ‘great grace’ the believers have been delivered from fleshly self-promotion, and are free to think of themselves with sober judgment (Rom. 12:3) and can ‘in humility count others more significant than [themselves]’ (Phil. 2:3).

Christ is ‘the head of the body, the church’ (Col. 1:18), and the members are ‘to grow up in every way into him who is the head’ (Eph. 4:15). God’s ‘plan for the fullness of time’ is to head up (*anakephalaïosasthai*) all things in Christ (Eph. 1:10), and so ‘he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all’ (Eph. 1:22–23). The body is given the authority of the truthfulness of God’s word, and lives within the power of that word by ‘holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God’ (Col. 2:19).

### **THE UNITIVE COMMUNITY BEGUN**

It is wonderful to see the signs and expressions of Christ’s reconciling work in the Book of Acts. The believers were ‘all together’ (Acts 2:1, 42; 4:24) in prayer, in the apostles’ teaching, in fellowship, and in the breaking of bread. They held ‘all things in common’ (Acts 2:44–45, 4:32–37), and those with financial means made it available to their brothers and sisters so ‘There was not a needy person among them’. A multiplicity of races were brought together in the hearing and receiving of God’s good news which was (and is) for ‘all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself’ (Acts 2:5–11, 39).

‘Great grace was upon them all’ (Acts 4:33), and that grace enabled them to overcome challenges that threatened to divide them and to destroy the work of reconciliation. Deeds of deception were exposed (Acts 5:1–11). Persecutions only served to spread the gospel as ‘those who were scattered went about preaching the word’ (Acts 8:4). Issues between different ethnic groups were resolved so that ‘the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly’ (Acts 6:1–7). The Holy Spirit overcame any reticence about proclaiming the gospel to the Gentiles and about fellowshiping with them (Acts 10:1 – 11:18; Gal. 2:11–21). And the cultural and practical issues relating to Jewish and Gentile believers were able to be dealt with as an expression of the unity that was theirs in the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:1–35). The account in the Book of Acts is not idealistic. Nor is it free of situations that threaten enmity and division. But despite all contingencies the following description of the community of reconciliation held true:

... you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all (Col. 3:9–11).

## **THE ULTIMATE UNIFICATION OF ALL THINGS IN CHRIST**

If the community of reconciliation fails to live in the fullness of its being, as stated above, that failure in no way reduces the reality of what God has done in Christ. God is exercising His sovereign authority and power to move history (i.e. His story) on to its certain goal:

Remember this and stand firm,  
recall it to mind, you transgressors,  
remember the former things of old;  
for I am God, and there is no other;  
I am God and there is none like me,  
declaring the end from the beginning,  
and from ancient times things not yet done,  
saying, 'My counsel shall stand,  
and I will accomplish all my purpose' (Isa. 46:8–10).

Satan strategically attacks the reconciled and reconciling community. He seeks to destroy Christ's unifying work by bewitching believers (Gal. 3:1) and luring them back into 'the works of the flesh' (Gal. 5:19–23). His object is to create 'jealousy and strife' (1 Cor. 3:3), and so to 'defeat' the believers (1 Cor. 6:7). He 'disguises himself as an angel of light' (2 Cor. 11:14), and 'prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour' (1 Pet. 5:8). He seeks to take the believers 'captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ' (Col. 2:8). But Christ has triumphed over the usurper in the Cross (Col. 2:14–15), and so God's grace is sufficient for them, and comes to its full power in their weakness (2 Cor. 12:9). Therefore Satan's strategy against the reconciled and reconciling community is doomed and only serves to bring destruction upon himself. For 'If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple' (1 Cor. 3:17).

The unification of all things does not come by political deals, nor is Christian unity achieved by denominational reunification. Rather, 'the unity of the Spirit' and the 'bond of peace' have been established by Christ. 'For he himself is our peace', having 'broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility' (Eph. 2:14). Where Christ's people are nourished in the word of grace they are built up and made holy (Acts 20:32), where the vine is unfruitful it is pruned (John 15:2), and where a congregation is unrepentant its lampstand is removed (Rev. 2:5). In this way the community of reconciliation is refined and renewed according to its true character in Christ. And so the sovereign, living God causes all things to work for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (Rom. 8:28). The following declaration, then, holds true as the authoritative and powerful word which God is bringing to its certain fulfillment at the telos:

There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (Eph. 4:4–6).