

RECONCILIATION: SEMANTIC AND THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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ABSTRACT. Although scarcely found in the Bible, the concept of reconciliation has been given much theological weight over the years. The present paper explores the meaning of the term, namely the Old Testament understanding of the concept and its use in Christianity. Subsequently it assesses the scope, object, and subject of reconciliation, how one can be reconciled and the ministry of reconciliation as a feature of the Christian faith.

KEY WORDS: reconciliation, atonement, Gospel proclamation, social involvement, ministry of the Church

Introduction

At the very foundation of the Christian faith stands the affirmation that God came to earth in the person of Jesus Christ to bring mankind into a right relationship with himself. In the protestant tradition this is regarded to be the meaning of the New Testament language of “reconciliation” (Ziegler 2016: 7). The importance given to this concept in protestant theological parlay follows a reputable interpretive trend that extends all the way back to some of the early church fathers, a trend in which reconciliation has been associated with such notions as justification, forgiveness, and atonement (Witt and Scandrett 2022). More recently, scholars have talked about the “Theology of Reconciliation” (e.g. Gunton 2003: 167-174; Coutts 2016), following Karl Barth, who devoted an entire section of his *Church Dogmatics* to the task of articulating a “Doctrine of Reconciliation” (Barth 1956-1969), in spite of the fact that the term itself is sparsely used in the Bible (Käseman 1971: 49-64). In fact, Apostle Paul is the only one who employs it, and that in only six instances: Romans 5.10-11, 11.15; 1 Corinthians 7.11; 2 Corinthians 5.18-20; Ephesians 2.16; and Colossians 1.20, 22. This somewhat paradoxical difference between the low number of uses of the term and the high theological weight placed on it, has prompted the follow-

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ing appraisal of the concept, in the hope that by looking at the relevant biblical material with fresh eyes one may add, albeit in a small measure, to the ongoing discussion on reconciliation.

Reconciliation in the Bible

Although no word for “reconciliation” is available in the Hebrew Bible (Măcelaru 2012: 51), as a theological concept reconciliation has been associated most often with the Hebrew root *kāpar*, translated as “atone”, “appease”, “make amends” and with its derivative noun, *kippurîm*, translated as “atonement” (Lang 1995: 288-303; Averbeck 1997: 689-690). The word “atonement” is commonly found in the Old Testament, in relation to various instances of relationship restoration. Its specific cultic use is however more limited (e.g. Leviticus 8.15, 2 Cronicles 29.24 and Ezekiel 45.15-17), especially when the restoration of the divine-human relationship is in view (Măcelaru 2012: 52).

It has been argued, however, that the Old Testament concept of “atonement” does not do full semantic justice to the New Testament understanding of reconciliation (Richardson 1958: 215-217). Thus, although one cannot deny the influence the Old Testament tradition has had on the post-Easter kerygmatic understanding of Jesus as the messianic reconciler (Stuhlander 1986: 11; Mocan 2016: 196-200), we ought to note that within the Old Testament the “atonement” refers to an act of reparation done by a person and it follows a period of estrangement; as such, it is always describing an upward move, whereby the Israelite man or community is recurrently reconciled to God through the performance of ritual sacrifices.

Within the New Testament, the *vorlage* and semantic connotations of reconciliation are decidedly richer (Link 1986: 145-148). Generally speaking, the terminology still refers to the restoration of relationships between two parties, which in the case in view is the restoration of the relationship between God and mankind, realised by Christ, who is the Agent of reconciliation (Morris 1996: 1002-1003). Nevertheless, the work and results of reconciliation seem to go beyond atonement as they describe the transfer from a certain state to another, whereby a reconciled person is a person restored to a state of favour (e.g. Ephesians 2.16; Colossians 1.20, 22). The terminology includes several words based on, or derivatives of, the verb *allasso* (Acts 6.14), whose basic meaning is “to make otherwise” or “to alter”, with reference to one’s stance or state of being (Büchsel 1964: 251). The four other verbal forms used are: *katallasso* (e.g. Romans 5.10 and 2 Corinthians 5.19), with an application to persons as their stance changes from enmity to friendship (Vorländer and Brown 1986: 166-175); the stronger *apokatallasso* (Colossians 1.21 and Ephesians 2.16), which means “to

reconcile completely”, *diallasso* (e.g. Matthew 5.24), with the connotation “to effect an alteration”, and the noun *katallage* (Romans 5.11, 11.15, 2 Corinthians 5.18, 19), translated as “reconciliation” and conveying the idea of a change of attitude or relationship (Woodroff 1996: 663-664).

Given all these, it could be argued that “reconciliation” receives its final and full form in the New Testament. The Old Testament uses of atonement contain the idea of relationship restoration in an embryonic form, but the actual meaning of change in terms of God’s relationship to humans is fully developed only in the New Testament usage. It is within the New Testament that “reconciliation” fixes the relationship, changing it from complete enmity and disharmony to complete harmony and friendship.

Reconciliation in Christian Theology

The search for a right relationship with the divinity is at the heart of most religions. In Christianity, reconciliation is at the centre of this search, for it is the action that makes this relationship possible. Because of the sin, mankind has been separated from God, but reconciliation removes said separation. Therefore, reconciliation becomes an essential category in the presentation of the gospel and a central notion in Christian theology. In the following pages a few aspects of reconciliation will be further explored.

Christ as Means of Reconciliation

Reconciliation is made possible because of Christ; his sacrificial death is the very climax of the ministry of reconciliation, for by it he mediated vertically God’s forgiveness to mankind (Hunter 1960: 51) and by it, on the horizontal plane, reconciliation among people is made possible (Oprean 2012: 179-187). As Murray states (1966: 11), “it is... through Christ, by Christ, in Christ that the Father acts in his reconciling accomplishment, and the latter cannot be conceived of apart from Christ in his person, office, and doing.”

Creation as Scope of Reconciliation

One particular passage that casts light upon the scope, or extent, of reconciliation is Colossians 1.19-20. According to this passage we can speak about reconciliation not only as it relates to the restoration of mankind to God but also as the restoration of the entire creation. To explain, since the entire creation has been affected by the adamic rebellion (cf. Romans 8.20), so is the effect of Christ’s obedience and restorative sacrifice. Paul’s language in Colossians clearly implies that not only the visible but also the invisible creation is included in the work of reconciliation. This would include all that upon which Christ is exalted (Ephesians 1.21, cf. Colossians 1.20). Of course, since not all things would be reconciled in

the soteriologic sense of the word (e.g. principalities and powers) the pauline notion of reconciliation here would necessarily include Christ's victory over the powers of evil. As argued by Bruce (1984: 293), with reference to the Christological hymn of Colossians 1.20, Christ's work in regard with the hostile powers is "pacification" by conquest.

Mankind as Object of Reconciliation

Although the scope of reconciliation covers the entire creation, it is important to note that in Paul's teaching the emphasis is not on its cosmic implications but on its relation to mankind. Mankind is the object of reconciliation. This becomes evident in the Pauline preponderant use of the first-person plural when referring to the beneficiaries of reconciliation. The Pauline logic is clear: because of sin, mankind became "alienated" (Colossians 1.21; Ephesians 2.12; 4.11, 18). In these passages alienation is two-fold: on the one hand it is mankind's hostile action toward God, while on the other hand, it is the consequence of sin seen as mankind's exclusion from divine favour and blessing. Reconciliation however resolves both: as action, it removes the alienation and its consequence is the mankind is brought nigh to God and therefore peace is restored (cf. Colossians 1.20, Ephesians 2.13-17). Thus, estrangement is replaced by fellowship and rebellion becomes obedience. Moreover, for Paul the reparation of the vertical relationship results in social reconciliation on the horizontal plane (Oprean 2012: 179-187; cf. Măcelaru 2022: 621-629; Gheorghe-Luca 2021: 95-111), as mankind becomes reconciled to life itself (cf. Ephesians 2.14), and ultimately in the flourishing of the entire creation implied in the Old Testament notion of *shalom* (Măcelaru 2012: 52-53; cf. Măcelaru 2019: 31-40; Măcelaru 2017: 49-56; Măcelaru 2016: 13-19; Măcelaru 2015: 109-115; Măcelaru 2014: 233-236).

God as Agent of Reconciliation

According to Paul, the agent of reconciliation is God the Father (cf. 2 Corinthians 5.18-21; Colossians 1.19-22). But the Apostle also stresses the fact that God's reconciliation is mediated through Christ's action (cf. Romans 5.8-10; Colossians 1.22; Ephesians 2.13). Moreover, as we move from the vertical to the horizontal plane, the effects of reconciliation are seen in the fruits of the Holy Spirit (cf. Galatians 5. 22-23), which enable believers to serve one another. As such, in the New Testament and the teaching of the Church the Triune God is the subject of the verb "to reconcile" (Ziegler 2016: 2-4).

Faith as Doorway to Reconciliation

Although reconciliation in the New Testament is solely the work of God, one's access to reconciliation is based on one's faith. Thus, faith is the doorway by which one benefits of God's reconciling work, for it is the proper response to the gospel

proclamation. This is explicitly the Pauline view, as expressed in 2 Corinthians 5:18-20. The act of reconciliation done by God, through Christ, meets the exigency of the human condition and makes available the divine grace. However, it neither carries the confidence of reconciliation nor its assurance. These become a reality in the believer's life through faith alone. As Bruce (1994: 291) explains, it is only those who respond in faith to the invitation posed in the Gospel proclamation that "receive reconciliation" (cf. Romans 5:11), that is, they come to a state of peace with God through Jesus Christ (cf. Romans 5:1).

Proclamation and Social Involvement as Ministry of Reconciliation

Finally, the Pauline teaching discloses that there is a "ministry of reconciliation" that is the responsibility of the Church (2 Corinthians 5:18). This, on the one hand, is the work of proclamation, for God "has committed to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:19). However, as shown by Constantineanu (2010), there is also a social dimension that Paul has in mind, one that goes beyond proclamation to encompass an actual concern for the other (cf. Ziegler 2016: 4-6; Oprean 2012: 182-185). This is in tune with the way "reconciliation" as a social reality is exemplified in the Old Testament teachings (Măcelaru 2012: 52-53). As such, the ministry of reconciliation will necessarily be reflected in the work of the Church in addressing social realities and conjectures with the purpose of promoting the common good (Riviş-Tipei 2018: 117-122; Riviş-Tipei 2016: 319-328; Constantineanu and Riviş-Tipei 2018: 359-372).

Conclusions

This has been an introductory study on the biblical and theological meaning of reconciliation. Our aim here was to provide a springboard for further, deeper reflection, by showing that,

- The Old Testament does not have the terminology of reconciliation found in the New Testament but serves as foundation for the development of the notion in Christian thought.
- Reconciliation is a fundamental concept for the Christian faith as it has to do with the restoration of relationships: between God and mankind and between humans.
- The scope of reconciliation addresses the entire creation, soteriologically in its consequences for mankind and restoratively in terms of the created order.
- The one who mediates the work of reconciliation is Christ. In him, God reconciles the world to himself.
- The object of reconciliation, soteriologically speaking, is mankind.
- The agent of reconciliation is the Triune God.

- Reconciliation is accessed by faith alone.
- The ministry of reconciliation is the work of the Church, both as proclamation of the gospel and the care for the other.

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