

THE DOCTRINE OF RECONCILIATION Chapter 1 Its Distinctions

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Transcript

THE DOCTRINE OF RECONCILIATION

Chapter 1

Its Distinctions

Before taking up our subject in a positive and constructive manner it seems advisable that we should endeavor to remove a misapprehension under which a number of our readers are laboring, and which requires to be cleared up before they will be in a fit condition to weigh without bias and thus be enabled to receive what we hope to present in later articles. It is for their special benefit this one is composed, and we trust that other friends will kindly bear with us if they find it rather wearisome to follow a labored discussion of that which presents no difficulty to them. To enter into a consideration of this particular point at such an early stage in the series will oblige us to somewhat infringe upon other aspects of our subject which will be taken up later, but, this appears necessary if we are to "clear the decks for action," or to change the figure, if we are to rid the ground of superfluous encumbrances and fit it for a sowing of the seed. That which presents a difficulty to those who have been brought up in some Calvinistic circles is, how can God be said to be reconciled to His elect, seeing that He has loved them with an everlasting and unchanging love? Much of our opening article was devoted to a particular answer to such an inquiry, but as we deem that answer far from being a satisfactory one, we shall here confine ourselves to its elucidation. To us it appears that the explanation furnished by Mr. Philpot was confused and faulty, and that is was so through failure to distinguish between things that differ—therefore the title we have accorded this article. If we are to avoid becoming hopelessly muddled on this point, we must discriminate sharply between what the elect are as viewed only in the eternal purpose of God, and what they are in themselves by nature. And further, we must carefully differentiate between God considered as their Father and God considered as the Moral Governor and Judge of all mankind. That it may appear we do not advance anything in the remainder of this article which clashes with or deviates from the teaching of sound theologians in the past, we will make brief quotations from four of the best-known Puritans. "We are actually justified, pardoned and reconciled when we repent and believe. Whatever thoughts and purposes of grace God may have towards us from eternity, we are under the fruits of sin till we become penitent believers" (T. Manton). In his treatise on "The Work of the Holy Spirit in our Salvation" Thos. Goodwin points out: "There are two different states or conditions which the elect of God, who are saved, pass through, between which regeneration is the passage. The one is their first state in which they are born: a state of bondage to sin, and obnoxious to

instant damnation while they remain in it. .The other of grace and salvation, therefore opposite to the former state." "God does hate His elect in some sense before their actual reconciliation. God was placable before Christ, appeased By Christ. But until there be such conditions which God has appointed in the creature, he has no interest in this reconciliation of God, and whatever person he be in whom the condition is not found, he remains under the wrath of God, and therefore in some sense under God's hatred" (Stephen Charnock, vol. 3, p. 345). When writing on "The Satisfaction of Christ" John Owen said: "This then is what we ascribe to the death of Christ, when we say that as a sacrifice we were reconciled to God or that He made reconciliation for us. Having made God our Enemy by sin, Christ by His death turned away His anger, appeased His wrath, and brought us into favor again with God." How far Mr. Philpot digressed from the teaching of these men we must leave his friends to judge for themselves. But we appeal now to an infinitely higher authority, namely, the Word of God. Nothing is more plainly taught in Scripture than that all men without exception are before actual regeneration in a like state and condition, and occupy the same standing or status before the Divine Law. Whatever distinguishing design God has purposed in Himself to afterward effect as a change in His own elect by the operations of His free grace, until those operations take place they are in precisely the-same case as the non-elect. "We have before proved both Jews and Gentiles that they are all under sin"—guilty, beneath sentence of condemnation. "There is none righteous, no not one"—not one who has met the requirements of the Divine Law. "That every mouth may be stopped and all the world may become guilty before God"—that is, obnoxious to the Divine Judgment. "There is no difference for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:9, 10, 19, 22, 23). The condition and position of every one relative to the Law is one and the same before his regeneration and justification, and the decree of God concerning any difference that is yet to be made in some in nowise modifies that solemn fact. This is one chief reason why the Gospel is to be preached to every creature. The Scriptures are equally explicit in describing the effects and consequences of lying under God's wrath. Before conversion the elect equally with the non—elect are in a state of alienation from God (Eph. 4:18), and therefore none of their services or performances can be acceptable to Him. He will receive naught at their hands: "he who turns away his ear from hearing the Law (an in the case with every unregenerate soul), even his prayer is a hateful thing" (Prov. 28:9). They are all under the power of the Devil (Col. 1:13), who rules at his pleasure in the children of disobedience (Eph. 2:2). They are "without Christ. . . having no hope, and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12). They are under the curse or condemning power of the Law (Gal. 3:13). They are "children in whom is no faith" (Deut. 32:20) and therefore utterly unable to do a single thing which can meet with God's approval, for "without faith it is impossible to please God" (Heb. 11:6). They are therefore "ready to perish" (Deut. 26:5). "He who does not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides upon him" (John 3:36). What could be plainer than that? Is not an elect soul an unbeliever until the moment God is pleased to give faith unto him? Assuredly: then equally sure is it that he is also under the wrath of God so long as he remains an unbeliever. Not only so, but the Word of God solemnly declares that the elect are "by nature the children of wrath even as others" (Eph. 2:3), and no Papish priest can make them otherwise by sprinkling a few drops of "holy water" upon them. But "children of wrath" they could not be had they come into this world in a justified and reconciled state. No person can be in two contrary states at the same time, obnoxious to wrath, and yet God at peace with him, under the guilt of sin and yet justified. Wrath is upon them from the womb (because of their sinning in Adam), and that wrath remains Oft them so long as they continue unbelievers. Though they were (in God's purpose) in Christ from eternity, that did not prevent them being in Adam in time and suffering the penal effects of this fall. There is an appointed hour in their earthly history when the- elect pass from under the penal wrath of God and are justified by Him and reconciled to Him. Justification is an act of God, an act in time, an external act. It is an act of God in a way of judicial

process—His declaration as supreme Judge. It is opposed to condemnation, the granting a full discharge therefrom (Rom. 8:33-35). It is not an internal decision in God, which always remains in Him, and effects change in the status of the person justified; but is a temporal act of His power which makes a relative change in the person's standing before Him. It is upon the person's believing in Christ that God justifies him and that he passes from a state of guilt and alienation to one of righteousness and reconciliation: he that believes on Him is not condemned (that is, he is justified), but he that believes not is condemned already (John 3:18). "He who believes on Him that sent Me but has everlasting life (by regeneration), and shall not come into condemnation, but is passed from death unto life"—that is, the life of justification (John 5:24). If persons are justified in a proper sense by faith, then they are not justified from eternity, for we believe in time, not eternity. That we are justified by faith, is the doctrine of the Gospel, as is apparent from the whole current of God's Word. To cite but one verse: "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law, but by faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ," (Gal. 2:16). That the apostle is there speaking of being justified in the sight of God, and not merely in the court of conscience, is beyond all doubt to any that will duly and fairly consider the scope of the Holy Spirit in that passage. Being justified by faith in Jesus Christ is there placed in opposition to being "justified by the works of the Law" which shows that something more fundamental than our own assurance is in view. "By the deeds of the Law shall no flesh be justified in His sight" (Rom. 3:19) makes it clear that none can obtain sentence of acquittal in the court of Divine adjudication by their own deeds. It is before God and not in the believer's consciousness that justification takes place. "And the Scripture foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the Gospel unto Abraham, saying, In you shall all nations be blessed" (Gal. 3:8). It is to be noted that there are two words here which lie directly against justification before believing: that God would justify the heathen—which must needs respect time to come; and "shall all nations be blessed" or justified—a "shall be" cannot be put for a thing already done. To this agrees "in the Lord shall all the seed of Israel be justified" (Isa. 45:25): by union with Christ through faith shall they be pronounced righteous. Again; "For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of One shall many be made righteous" (Rom. 5:19). Upon which the Puritan Win. Bridge said, "It is remarkable. that when the Holy Spirit speaks of Adam's sin condemning his posterity, He speaks of it as already past; but when He speaks of Christ's righteousness for the justification of sinners He changes to the future tense—as if He purposely designed to prevent our thoughts running after justification before believing." What has been said above about the justification of God's elect upon their believing, holds equally good concerning His reconciliation to them when they throw down the weapons of their warfare against Him. Not only was their reconciliation decreed from everlasting but peace was actually made by Christ when He shed His blood (Col. 1:20); nevertheless, reconciliation itself is not effected until the Holy Spirit has so wrought within them as to bring about their conversion. This is conclusively established by the following passages: "For if, when we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more being reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. And not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the reconciliation" (Rom. 5:10, 11)— that "now" would be meaningless if we were reconciled only in the eternal decree of God: what God decreed for us is here received by us! So again, "And you that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet NOW has He reconciled" (Col. 1:21). It would obviate considerable misunderstanding if it were clearly perceived that the everlasting love of God toward His elect is mainly an act of His will, the exercise of His good pleasure, the purpose of His grace, whereby He determined to do certain things for them and instate them in glory in His own good time and way. But that purpose effects nothing for them nor puts anything into them—for these there must be external acts of God's power making good His purpose. From all eternity God determined to make this earth, yet six thousand years

ago it did not exist! He had ordained a final Day of Judgment but it has not yet arrived. God has purposed that in and through Christ He will justify and save certain persons, but they are not thereby justified because God has purposed it. It is true they will be in due time, but not before they have been enabled to believingly appropriate the atoning work of Christ in their behalf. We must therefore draw a line between the absolute certainty of the fruition of anything God has eternally purposed, and its actual accomplishment or bringing it to pass in His appointed time. What has been pointed out in the last paragraph should make it easier for the reader to grasp that God's eternal love unto His own (which is an imminent act of His will or good pleasure, entirely within Himself) does not exempt them from coming beneath His anger (which is not any passion in God, but the outward visitation of His displeasure—because of sin; nor does it prevent their lying beneath the dispensations of His judicial wrath, until by some interpositions of His grace in time, when He actually changes their personal state (by regeneration) and legal status (by justification), freeing them from condemnation and instating them into His favor. In other words, much may occur in the interval between God's eternal purpose and the actual working out of the same—though nothing which can in anywise jeopardize His purpose, and nothing that was not foreseen when He framed it. But it is objected by hyper-Calvinists, If the elect were not justified in Christ from all eternity then when God pronounces them just there is an alteration in His will and love toward them. Not so, God is no more mutable because He justifies His people in time, than He is because He regenerates them in time. God is no more chargeable with change of purpose when He produces a change in a person's standing upon his believing, than He is when He produces a change in a person's condition by the miracle of the new birth. All the change is in the creature. Though God absolutely decrees, and that from everlasting, to regenerate, to justify and to reconcile all His chosen, with the alteration of His governmental attitude toward them which that involves, yet this argues not the least shadow of change in God Himself when at the predestinated hour that great change is effected. Do but distinguish between the grace decreeing and the power of God executing, and all is plain. "Whom He did predestinate, them He also called, and whom He called, them He also justified" (Rom. 8:30) —the calling and justifying are the fruits of His electing love. But again it is objected, the elect are designated "sheep" before they believe (John 10:16), and in God's esteem they are then in a justified state. Answer: they are called "sheep" according to the immutability of the Divine decree, which cannot be frustrated, and on that account God calls "things which are not as though they were" (Rom. 4:17), nevertheless, that verse affirms they "are not" that is, they have no actual existence. They are "sheep" in the purpose of God, but not so as touching the accomplishment of the same until they are regenerated. Paul was a sheep in the decree of God even when he was wolf-like in preying upon the flock of Christ. Surely none will say he was actually a sheep while he was "breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord" (Acts 9:1). From the decree of God we may safely conclude the certainty of its accomplishment; but to argue that a thing is actually accomplished because Divinely foreordained is a most foolish and dangerous way of reasoning. The love of God's purpose and good pleasure has not the least inconsistency with those hindrances to the peace and friendship of God which sin has interposed, for though the holiness of His Law, the righteousness of His government and the veracity of His Word, stood in the way of His taking a sinner into friendship and fellowship with Himself, until full satisfaction has been made to His broken Law and insulted Majesty; nevertheless His love determined and His wisdom devised a way where His sovereign good will should recover His people, and that, without sullyng the Divine character to the slightest degree, yea, in magnifying those attributes which sin had affronted. God's love has proven efficacious by the means He devised "that His banished one may not be cast out from Him" (2 Sam. 14:14). From all that has been pointed out above it should be quite evident that this doctrine of reconciliation does not teach that God loved and hated His elect at the same time and in the same

respect. He loved them in respect of the free purpose of His sovereign will; but His wrath was upon them in respect of His violated Law and provoked justice by their sin. But His love gave Christ to satisfy for their sins and to redeem them from the curse of the Law, and in due time He sends His Spirit to regenerate them, which lays the foundation for their conversion and restoration to Him. The following distinctions must, then, be kept steadily in mind: Between God's looking upon His elect in the purpose of His grace and as under the sentence of His Law: though the elect are born under the dispensation of His wrath, yet it is not executed upon them personally. Between there being no change in God and a change in His outward dealings with us. Between God's purpose concerning His elect in eternity and the accomplishment of that purpose in a time state. Between God's viewing the elect in Christ their Covenant—Head and as the depraved descendents of fallen Adam. In the one cause, as "His dear children" in the other; as being "by nature the children of wrath." Between God's unchanging love for us as our Father, and His official displeasure as our moral Governor and Judge. This distinction is illustrated in the case of Christ. He was the Beloved of the Father and never ceased to be so, yet Divine wrath was visited upon Him at the cross. He was dealt with not as the Son (as such) but as the Surety of His guilty people, by the Father, not as such, but as the supreme Judge.

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