

THE DOCTRINE OF RECONCILIATION

Conclusion

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Transcript

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In the course of our explanation of this doctrine we have sought to make a comprehensive view of it as a whole and then to examine in detail its essential components. Truth is a unit, one harmonious whole, but with our very limited powers of comprehension we are incapable of receiving it as such: rather do we take it in "here a little, there a little." That is according as God has constituted us. When endeavoring to master a subject or problem which is presented to the mind, we are obliged to consider singly its several elements and branches. When partaking of material food we do not attempt to swallow it whole, but first break it into fragments and then masticate them. It is thus with the spiritual ailment which God has provided for the soul. Unless we carefully collate all that the Spirit has revealed on the subject, duly ponder each aspect and view it in its true perspective, we shall obtain nothing more than a vague and faulty conception of it. Though Truth is a unit, it has two sides to it. It had in the communicating of it: it is a Divine revelation, yet it passed through the minds of holy men and is couched in their language. It is thus with its contents, as a whole and all its parts. There is both a Divine and a human side to it, issuing from God, addressed to men: revealing His heart and will, enforcing our responsibility. That necessarily presents a problem to the finite mind, the more so since our mind is impaired by the ravages of sin. As man is constructed, he is unable to take in both sides of the Truth at a single glance, being obliged to view each separately. Unless he does so, a distorted vision will inevitably ensue, for while contemplating but one half he will imagine that he is actually viewing the whole. Now those two sides of the Truth are not contradictory, but complementary. Since God is God, He must maintain His sovereign rights and enforce His authority; and since He has constituted man a moral agent, He deals with him accordingly—having absolute control over him, yet leaving him to act freely. This twofoldness of truth is exhibited in every doctrine contained in Holy Writ, in every aspect of the Faith, in every branch of the Evangelical system, and it is in the maintaining of a due proportion and balance between them that the competency and helpfulness of any expositor chiefly appears, as it is also the hardest part of his task. Most conspicuously is this the case with the doctrine we have been treated of, for not only is reconciliation itself a mutual affair, but Scripture presents reconciliation as being both an accomplished thing and also as something now being effected—according as it is viewed from the standpoint of what Christ wrought at the cross, or from what is required of the sinner in order for him to personally enter into the good of what the Redeemer there procured. It is

specially for the benefit of the young preacher—scores of which will read them—that these closing paragraphs are penned, for unless he is quite clear upon this distinction, his trumpet will give forth an uncertain sound. When was God really reconciled to the Christian? At the cross or when he savingly believed the Gospel? That question has been discussed earlier, yet we believe that some will welcome a further elucidation. On this subject, as so many, the Puritans are much to be preferred to the best writers of the nineteenth century. "God is never actually reconciled to us, nor we to Him, till He gives us the regenerated Spirit" (T. Manton). "For the preparing us to be reconciled it is necessary that we are convinced that we are enemies to God, and that He accounts us such, and that so long as we remain in that state He is also an enemy to us" (T. Goodwin). "There is a double reconciliation here (2 Cor. 5:18,19). First, fundamental, at the death of Christ, whereby it was obtained, This is the ground of God's laying aside His anger. Second, actual or particular, when it is complied with by faith. This regards the application of it, when God does actually lay aside His enmity, and imputes sin no more to the person" (S. Charnock). Elsewhere Charnock says, "He acts toward the world as a reconciling God towards believers as reconciled. He is reconcilable as long as He is inviting and keeps men alive in a state of probation." The Puritans drew a plain and broad line of demarcation between the impetration [to obtain by request] or purchase of salvation, and the actual application or bestowing of the same. "By impetration we mean the purchase of all good things made by Christ for us with and of the Father; and by application, the actual enjoyment of those good things upon our believing; as if a man paid a price for the redeeming of captives, the paying a price supplies the room of the impetration of which we speak, and the freeing of the captives is the application of it" (J. Owen). Christ merited and obtained the reconciliation of both sides, yet God is not reconciled to us nor are we to Him until we repent and believe. So it is in justification: Christ wrought out a perfect and everlasting righteousness for all His people, yet God does not impute that righteousness to any of them until they savingly believe the Gospel. While most of the best theologians of the last century recognized the necessary distinction between the impetration and the application of reconciliation, yet often they failed to frame their postulates consistently therewith. For instance, one of the most eminent of them, and for whose works we have a high regard, stated, "On the ground of God's reconciliation to us, we are exhorted to be reconciled to Him, and the great motive or encouragement is His previous reconciliation." That such language was not simply a slip of the pen (to which all are liable) is clear from what follows in his next paragraph. "'The chastisement of our peace,' by which peace was procured, 'was upon Him, and with His stripes we are healed.' God was reconciled when that was done, and made justice cease to demand our punishment." It is because such teaching has been so widely received and has led to serious mischief in the evangelical ministry, that its erroneous character needs to be exposed. To affirm that God is reconciled to sinners, or if you prefer it, to His elect, before they are reconciled to Him, is an unintentional but tacit repudiation of John 3:36: "He that believes not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him." Note it is not "the wrath of God shall come upon him," but it is on him now and remains so as long as he is an unbeliever. In these respects there is no difference whatever between the elect and the non-elect. All are "by nature the children of wrath," under the Covenant of Works, and therefore under the curse and condemnation of the Law. The work of Christ has not changed the attitude of a holy God toward a single soul who continues in love with sin and a rebel against Him. "He is angry with the wicked every day" (Ps. 7:11), and "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men" (Rom. 1:18). It is not until the sinner repents and savingly believes the Gospel that he passes from one state to another and the frown of God is displaced by His smile (John 3:18; 5:24). Of the elect (1 Pet. 2:10) it is that "which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy" (2:10). This is another declaration from a nineteenth century theologian of high repute, and to whose works we are personally indebted not a little: "God is reconciled: He is no longer angry with

the sinner, for he is no longer a sinner in the eye of God and His justice." Had he said, "the penitent and believing sinner," that would be blessedly true: instead he was discussing what Christ's work had accomplished Godwards. In the same paragraph he averred, "All the chosen people are redeemed," which is another statement badly in need of qualification and explanation. Christ indeed "gave Himself a ransom for all"—His people (1 Tim. 2:6), and He did so "that He might redeem us from all iniquity" (Titus 2:14), but none then unborn were actually "redeemed." The correct way to state it is this: redemption was purchased for all the chosen people by Christ, and "in due time" (1 Tim. 2:6) they are made partakers of that redemption by the effectual operation of the Holy Spirit. Believers alone are actually redeemed or emancipated, and it is of them such passages as Galatians 3:13; Ephesians 1:7; 1 Peter 1:18,19 speak. It is only by attending closely to the exact wording of Scripture and refusing to go one iota beyond its statements, that we are preserved from confusion and error. Christ was made sin for us "that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21). It is not said that "Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness to all His people," but "to everyone that believes" (Rom. 10:4). "Though He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might be rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). He was "made a curse for us...that the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles" (Gal. 3:13,14). Christ "suffered for sins, the Just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God" (1 Pet. 3:18). But we are not actually made rich or partakers of the blessing of Abraham, nor brought to God, until we repent and believe. As we must distinguish between the impetration and the application of the atonement, so also must we between the grace of God decreeing and the execution of the decree of His grace. The "all spiritual blessings" of Eph. 1:3 include regeneration, yet none are regenerate until effectually called by God. "We were reconciled to God by the death of His Son" (Rom. 5:10) impetratively, for God has accepted Christ's ransom, yet He does not apply it till faith is exercised by us. Reconciliation, redemption and justification are alike the results of Christ's satisfaction, the blessings which He purchased for His people, but they are only bestowed upon them when they are personally reconciled to God. "God the Father justifies, through the Son, by the Spirit, who works faith to receive the same. But until those things meet together our persons are not properly justified, notwithstanding Christ has wrought out a complete righteousness" (W. Bridge, 1670), nor is God reconciled to us till the Spirit has wrought faith in our hearts. In the light of Romans 3:25 and 26 are we not fully warranted in saying that, Christ is set forth a propitiation through faith in His blood that God might be holy, and yet the Reconciler of him who ceases to defy His authority and sues for mercy through the Lord Jesus. Though the governmental requirements of God demand that the sinner end his revolt before He will be reconciled to him, that by no means implies any doubt of Christ's satisfaction securing its designed effects. The atonement has done very much more than remove legal obstacles which previously stood in the way of friendship between God and men or opened the door for Him to bestow peace and pardon upon all who would accept them, as the Arminian speaks; it has absolutely guaranteed the salvation of all for whom it was made. So far from the word "might" in the passages quoted, above denoting uncertainty, it is expressive of design and intimates the sure consequence that follows from Christ's sacrifice. As the Westminster Confession of Faith so well puts it, "To all those for whom Christ purchased redemption, He does certainly and effectually apply and communicate the same," where the word "redemption" is used—as it often is in Scripture—as including all the blessings which it was the immediate object of Christ's death to procure. That there is a human side to the Evangelical system by no means introduces an element of uncertainty into it or jeopardizes its success. "God is in one mind and who can turn Him? And what His soul desires, even that He does" (Job 13:13). The Arminian comes short of the full truth when he says, "All was done on Christ's part which was necessary to make possible the reconciliation and pardon of sinners, and it is now left with them whether they will receive or reject the Gospel offer," and that "since God has constituted man a moral agent, He requires his voluntary

cooperation." Christ's sacrifice has made certain the reconciliation and redemption of all for whom it was offered, for it ensured that He would "see the travail of His soul and be satisfied." Christ's impetration secured an infallible provision for the effectual application, namely, the gift of the Holy Spirit, who by His invincible operations should regenerate each of Christ's "seed" and work saving repentance and faith in them. Though eternal life, repentance and faith are the "gifts" of God, they are also the fruits of Christ's atonement, and are conferred upon all in whose room He suffered and died. Instead of merely opening a door of salvation for the whole of Adam's posterity to enter if they feel disposed to, the atoning work of Christ has effectually secured the actual salvation, of all the people of God, for by the wisdom of the Divine counsels and the power of the Spirit they are brought to gladly concur with God's will, and put their trust in the blood of the Lamb. Nevertheless, God still enforces the righteous requirements of His government and treats with men according to their responsibility, sending forth His ambassadors to charge them with their wickedness, bidding them to be reconciled to God, and assuring them of His gracious acceptance upon their ceasing to fight against Him. Before the sinner can enjoy the benefits of Christ's death he must consent to return to the duty of the Law and live in obedience to God, for He will not pardon him while he continues to live in rebellion against Him. The Gospel calls upon men to repent of their sins, forsake their idols, and enter into solemn covenant with God, yielding themselves up unreservedly to Him, to henceforth live unto His glory. The work of the evangelist is clearly defined: the O. T. precedes the New, the ministry of John the Baptist went before that of Christ, the substance of Romans 1-3 is to be preached before the truth of Romans 4 and 5 is proclaimed. His first duty is to preach the Moral Law, for "by the Law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20): its requirements, its strictness, its spirituality, its curse, that his hearers may be brought to realize their guilty and lost condition. Coupled with this preaching of the Law must be a presentation of the character of the Lawgiver and His claims upon the creatures of His hand: that He is sovereign Lord, demanding unqualified submission to His will; that He is ineffably holy, hating all sin and iniquity; that He is inflexibly just and "will by no means clear the guilty," and will yet judge every man according to his works. Conviction of sin, by the application of the Law to the conscience, is the first step in the progress by which men are led to take hold of God's covenant. Peace with God, which the covenant established, will be sought and prized by none except those who are conscious of their guilt and dread the displeasure and vengeance of the Judge of all the earth. The second duty of the evangelist is to preach the Gospel, and that, in such a manner, that he neither contradicts nor weakens what is pointed out in the preceding paragraph—though complementing it. He is to show that the principal design of God in sending His Son here was to magnify the Law, to manifest His detestation of sin, to exhibit His justice; all of which was solemnly seen at the cross. He is then to open the wondrous grace of God in giving His Son to execute His mission and perform His work, not only for the glory of God but the good of sinners. He is to show the amazing thing is that God takes the initiative, that in Christ He makes the advances, that by Christ provision is made for the healing of the breach, and that He sends forth His servants to make overtures of peace, bidding sinners "be reconciled to Him"—to be converted, to repent of their sins, abandon their wicked ways, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and walk according to His precepts. It is the duty of the evangelist to show that though Christ is read to be the Friend of sinners, yet He will not be the Minister of sin, but rather maintains the honor and interests of the Father at every point. His call is, "Come unto Me, all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." That is, Come unto Me, all you that have in vain sought satisfaction in gratifying self and partaking of the pleasures of sin, and are now weighed down with burdened consciences and a sense of the deserved wrath of God. "Take My yoke upon you. . . and you shall find rest unto your souls." That is, Own My sceptre, surrender to My lordship, walk in obedience to My commandments, and rest of soul shall be your portion. The One who made satisfaction to God tells us the benefits of it are received only through our believing (John 3:16), and that is

an act which principally respects the will. The believe is to "receive" Christ (John 1:12) as He is offered in the Gospel: to receive a whole Christ, to be our Prophet, Priest and King. The work of the pastor or teacher is to further instruct those who have responded to the message of the evangelist. He is to show that as God out of Christ was an offended and threatening God, God in Christ is an appeased and promising God. He is to make it clear that the reason why those who responded to the call and appeal of the evangelist was not because they were in themselves wiser or better than those who reject it, but that it was God who made them to differ (1 Cor. 4:7). That God did so first, by choosing them in Christ before the foundation of the world; second, by giving them as sheep to the good Shepherd for Him to save; third, by causing the Holy Spirit to bring them from death unto life, illumine their understandings, convict them of their lost estate, and make them willing to receive Christ. Thus they have no cause for boasting, but every reason to ascribe all the glory unto the Triune God. Should the young preacher say, I am not yet quite clear in my mind, especially does the doctrine of election puzzle me as to exactly how I should address the unsaved. Neither election nor particular redemption should in anywise cramp your style. Your commission is to preach the Gospel to "every creature" you can reach, and the Gospel is that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15), and therefore you are warranted in telling your hearers that there is a Savior for every sinner out of Hell who feels his need of Him and is willing to comply with His terms. Your first business is to show him his need of Christ and count upon the Spirit's making your efforts effectual, assured that God's Word shall not return unto Him void, whether or not you are permitted to see its fruits. But if you are granted the privilege of seeing some comply with Christ's terms, then you may know that they are members of that Church which Christ loved and gave Himself for, and that the Spirit has now vitally united them to Him. The evangelist's message is that there is salvation in Christ for all who receive Him as He is offered in the Gospel and put their trust in Him. Though Christ purchased reconciliation and justification for all His people, yet they do not receive the same until they repent and believe. God is willing to be on terms of amity with the sinner, yet He will not be so until the sinner submit to those terms. Christ has perfectly made peace with God, so that no other ransom or sacrifice is required, yet none are admitted into it until they make their peace with God. God has appointed a connection— a moral and holy one—between the blessings purchased by Christ and the actual conveyance of them to His people. Though Christ died in order to procure Heaven for them by His merits, He also died to procure for them the regenerating operations of His Spirit to prepare them for Heaven. The test or evidence of our compliance with God's terms is a life of voluntary obedience: "as many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them and mercy" (Gal. 6:16)—"mercy" toward their defects.

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