

“The Pauline Conception of Reconciliation”
The Bible Student 4:40-45. [1901]

Among the various forms under which the Apostle Paul sets forth the objective saving work of God centering in the cross of Christ, that of reconciliation occupies a prominent place. The main obstacle to a proper understanding of the truth embodied in this term lies in the inadequacy of the English rendering. In common parlance, the statement that one person reconciles another is most naturally taken to mean that the former changes the subjective frame of mind of the latter, so as to render his disposition from an unfriendly to a friendly one. Now the Greek word *καταλλάσσειν*, while it may be used in this manner, has a far wider range of meaning, and may, under given circumstances, express a transaction which does not include a subjective change of mind at all. *Καταλλάσσειν τινα* simply means to bring somebody into a reconciled relationship. This may be done by the subject of the verb giving up his own hostility, or by his inducing the other party to give up his hostility, or by both. And that which is laid aside may in every case be either the outward attitude and course of action or the inward feeling and disposition of enmity. The same possibilities of interpretation belong to the passive form, *καταλλάσσειναι προς τινα*. In view of this the question, what are the precise implications of the word when used by Paul in a specific soteriological sense, must be determined solely from the context in each individual instance.

Ritschl has endeavored to establish for the phrase, “God reconciles us,” the meaning that God effects a change in our disposition whereby we are moved to cherish friendly instead of unfriendly feelings towards Him. He argues mainly from the correlative term, “alienated,” in Colossians 1:21, “And you being . . . alienated . . . yet now hath he reconciled.” But this term by no means describes a subjective alienation of mind; it rather describes an objective breach between God and man, the only doubtful point being whether the immediately following clause, “enemies in your mind in your evil works,” repeats the same thought in a different form or adds to the objective the subjective aspect of the matter. A brief examination of the most important passages will show how little support there is in reality for Ritschl’s subjectivizing view. In 2 Corinthians 5:18, 19 we find the reconciling act of God represented as something finished once for all, before the message of it reaches the sinner. In the eighteenth verse this appears from the use of the aorist participle: “All things are from God who *did* reconcile us unto himself through Christ”; and also, from the coordination of this participle with the other participle, “who *did give* unto us [Paul] the ministry of the reconciliation.” Just as the commission of Paul was a single, definite, objective act, the coordinated act of the reconciliation must have been of the same kind, and the latter must have preceded the former. On Ritschl’s view the reconciliation ought to have consisted in Paul’s conversion, but his own conversion did not furnish the theme of the apostle’s preaching, as is here affirmed of the reconciliation. Or, if it be replied that not his own conversion, but the change of heart of men in general, formed the substance of his message, we may point to the use of the article before reconciliation. It was not a ministry of reconciliation in the sense that it aimed at producing a change in the hearts of men, but the ministry of *the* reconciliation, i.e., the ministry which conveys the message of *the* reconciliation as an already accomplished fact. Equally conclusive is the representation of the nineteenth verse: “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself.” This *ἦν καταλλάσσων* cannot mean, as some have proposed, God was endeavoring in Christ to reconcile, or God was laying in Christ the basis for reconciling, both of which renderings would involve the subjective view of the matter. Paul uses the periphrastic conjugation in order to give greater emphasis to the fact that it was God and no one else

who did in Christ reconcile the world.

From all this it appears that the apostle means by reconciliation an objective transaction accomplished by God in Christ. Still the possibility remains that the apostle's conception of it may have been wide enough to include alongside of this a change of disposition or of attitude on the part of men also. The twentieth verse is quoted in favor of this: "We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be ye reconciled to God." Here the imperative mode places it beyond dispute that something to be experienced by the Corinthians subjectively is intended. But it would be hasty to infer from this that his subjective experience cannot have been anything else than a change from hostility to friendship towards God. Undoubtedly the passive form of the verse might mean this. But, grammatically considered, it may just as well have another meaning. It may be rendered with equal correctness by "let yourselves be restored to a relation of friendship." The context alone can decide here. Now, if Paul had intended to say, "After God has on his part shown his willingness to be reconciled, do ye on your part show the same by laying aside your feeling of enmity," he would naturally have indicated this contrast between God and man by adding the pronoun *υμεις* "be ye also reconciled." Further, it is evident that what Paul here desires of the Corinthians is the application of what has been done by God, the human response to the divine act. And the response must in its general character resemble that to which it answers. Now all the terms used show, as we shall presently see, that on God's part this act did not consist in a change of disposition, but simply in the removal of certain objective conditions which rendered it impossible that He should deal with men on the basis of friendship. If, then, God reconciled us by providing an objective righteousness, the natural inference is that we will be reconciled in response to this by appropriating this righteousness subjectively, i.e., by the act of believing. God *reconciled* us and we *let* ourselves be reconciled; on neither side is a change of disposition referred to, although in the case of men it is of course presupposed as underlying the act of faith. Finally, the connection of thought between verses 20 and 21 shows how the idea of an appropriation of the objective work of Christ lay uppermost in Paul's mind. This connection is as follows. Because God has brought about the reconciliation in Christ, Christ Himself is supremely interested in the attainment of the end for which it was designed. This being so, the appeal made by Paul is in reality an appeal made on behalf of, for the sake of, in the interest of, Christ. The motive urged is the fear lest Christ's work should be in vain: "In the interest of Christ, therefore, we are acting as ambassadors—in the interest of Christ we beseech you, let yourselves be reconciled to God." But the 21st verse shows under what aspect the work of Christ, which would be frustrated if men did not let themselves be reconciled, comes under consideration: "Him that knew no sin, he made sin for our sakes, in order that we might become the righteousness of God in him." Plainly here the primary effect of men letting themselves be reconciled is represented as consisting in this, that they become the righteousness of God in Christ. We conclude, therefore, that not the experience of conversion, but the exercise of justifying faith forms the subjective reflex of the reconciliation.

This result is confirmed by the manner in which Paul handles the conception in the second classical passage, Romans 5:9-11. Here Paul first says that, being justified by Christ's blood, we shall be assuredly saved through Him from the eschatological manifestation of God's wrath. Then, in the tenth verse, the apostle formulates this identical thought in the following manner: "If, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, shall we be saved by his life." It is evident that what is here expressed by "being reconciled" was before expressed by "being justified." And as between the two states of our being "sinners" (vs. 8)

and our being “justified” stood the “Christ died for us” (vs. 8), so between the two states of our being “enemies” and our being “reconciled” stands “we were reconciled through the death of his Son.” The objective reconciliation took place in the death of Christ; its subjective result is justification. It is incorrect to say with Cremer that “being reconciled” in verse 10 means more than “being justified” in verse 9, and far worse to seek this plus in a subjective change of heart. The two are entirely equivalent. The only progress of thought lies in this, that the contrast between the death and life of Christ is introduced in the tenth verse as strengthening the assurance of final salvation. When God first showed His love, the circumstances were unfavorable in a twofold respect: (a) we were at enmity with God; (b) our salvation required the death of God’s Son. Now, after we have been justified or reconciled, the circumstances are favorable in both respects, for (a) we are at peace with God, and (b) for further saving us not the death but the life of Christ is required. Finally, in verse 11, “the reconciliation” is something objectively finished; it exists outside of us; we do not actualize it or add to it in any sense at all; all we can do is take it: “we have *received* the reconciliation.”

The two passages discussed not merely prove the objective character of the reconciliation, they also determine its essence. It consisted in the removal of objective legal obstacles, which notwithstanding God’s love for sinners yet compelled Him to treat them on the basis of enmity. According to Romans 5, as we have seen, the two transactions of reconciliation and justification are in substance identical. They both rest on the death, or the blood, of Christ. The other passage, in 2 Corinthians 5, goes beyond this, in explicitly ascribing to the reconciling transaction a vicarious character. This is done in two ways. First, by finding the reality of the reconciliation in this, that God does not reckon their trespasses to men.¹ Secondly, by the explicit statement of verse 21 that the refusal to receive the reconciliation by faith means a frustration of the arrangement under which Christ was made sin on our behalf, in order that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. This latter arrangement, therefore, constitutes the essence of the reconciliation. And its meaning can be none other than vicarious. Christ knew no sin, but was made sin. This was no ethical change in Christ’s inherent character, but a change in His status before God. The apostle does not say that He was made “a sinner,” but “sin.” The former might have expressed a subjective change of character. And the use of the word “sin” is also stronger in that it generalizes and universalizes the legal identification between Christ and sin. The connection between 5:19 and 5:21 further requires that the act, whereby God made Christ to be sin, involved an imputation of sin to Christ. And the same is demanded by the correlative clause, “that we might become the righteousness of God in him.” In Paul’s view the death of Christ was a penal death. Weiss, Stevens, and others, while acknowledging the principle of substitution of Christ’s death for our penalty, are yet unwilling to admit that, according to Paul, what Christ took upon Himself bore for God, who inflicted it, and for Christ, who endured it, the character of a penalty. It is plain that the apostle’s close reasoning does not tolerate this qualification. If Christ was made sin that we might become righteousness, then obviously He was made sin in the sense of unrighteousness, by imputation. And if the effect of this imputation was death, then obviously there was a legal penalty. The death was but the execution in act of the ideal imputation.

The foregoing results are not modified in any way, but fully confirmed by the use of the terms “reconcile” and “reconciliation” in the two remaining passages, Colossians 1:20, 21 and Ephesians 2:16, which we must ask the reader to examine for himself. The question may be asked, in conclusion, why, if the interpretation given correctly expresses the mind of Paul, the apostle never uses the construction “God reconciled himself” or “God was reconciled.” The answer to this is not far

to seek. It is twofold: (1) Paul wished to place all the emphasis upon the fact that in the work of reconciliation God does not play a passive, but a most active part. Though the claims of God are actually satisfied, and it would be entirely proper to say that He, in so far as He stands back of these claims, is Himself reconciled, yet Paul desires before all else to bring out that God satisfies His own claims, that He is the Reconciler. In this lies precisely the specific character of the representation of God's saving work as a reconciliation, that whereby it is distinguished from the other Pauline forms of representation, such as redemption and sacrificial propitiation. In 2 Corinthians 5 the scope of the entire passage is determined by the statement in the eighteenth verse: "But all things are of God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ." And in Romans 5 strong emphasis rests on the fact that God showed His love for sinners when there was nothing in them to solicit or deserve such love. The term "reconciliation" describes the atonement as springing from the initiative of God Himself. (2) The other construction with God as the direct object, "God reconciling himself," seems to have been avoided in order to guard against the misunderstanding as if a change of disposition in God had been needed before He could show favor to sinners. It is from a failure to appreciate these two motives of the apostle that the subjectivizing interpretations of the conception have arisen. Because Paul nowhere says that God "was reconciled" or "reconciled himself," and does say that "he reconciled man" and that "man was reconciled," it has been rashly argued that the reconciliation means the production of a change in man. We trust our remarks have shown that such a view is irreconcilable with the concrete description given by Paul of the reconciling act and what it involved.

(Footnotes)

¹ On the relation of the two participial clauses, "not reckoning unto them their trespasses" and "having committed unto us the word of reconciliation," to the preceding statement, two views are possible. Either they may be taken as *explicatory* of what the reconciling act consisted in, or the connection may be *argumentative*: God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, *as appears from this*, that He is not reckoning unto them their trespasses, etc. On either view the removal of trespasses through Christ forms the essence of the reconciliation. The second interpretation is favored by the form of the words.