

THE APOSTLES' GOSPEL: PROCLAMATION

2 Cor 5.18-19

CBC-31 Jan 2010 AM & PM

Many people claim to speak for God, but no one more credibly than Jesus Christ ("No one ever spoke like this man," John 7.46; cf. John 12.44, 49-50). Jesus chose authoritative representatives called apostles to speak for him (Luke 10.16; cf. 1 John 4.6). The apostles' gospel ["good news" of salvation through Christ] is the only true one, and it is substantially the NT. The gospel *per se* is a *proclamation* of God's redeeming work, but preaching the gospel involves *exhortation* to respond in faith.

John Stott, in his book *The Preacher's Portrait* rightly points out that "we must never issue an appeal [invitation] without first making the proclamation. Much harm has been done to the souls of men, and much dishonor brought to the name of Christ, through neglect of this simple rule. . . . The gospel is not fundamentally an invitation to men to do anything. It is a declaration of what God has done in Christ on the cross for their salvation. The invitation cannot properly be given before the declaration has been made. Men must grasp the truth before they are asked to respond to it." On the other hand, "we must never make the proclamation without then issuing an appeal [invitation]. . . . It is not enough to teach the gospel; we must urge men to embrace it" (Olford, *Anointed Expository Preaching*, p. 261).

Roughly: NT **gospels** proclaim the great redemptive event, NT **epistles** our faith-response, NT **apocalypse** (Revelation) the complete realization of all gospel blessings.

In our text, the apostle Paul sets forth briefly the gospel they all preached with its first implication for us. NOTHING is more important for us to know.

God reconciled the apostles to himself and sent them to proclaim reconciliation with him through Jesus Christ.

The theme of 2 Cor 5.18-21 is clearly **reconciliation** (used 5x):

God **reconciled** us to himself . . . gave us the ministry of **reconciliation** . . . God was **reconciling** the world to himself . . . entrusting to us the ministry of **reconciliation** . . . be **reconciled** to God.

It basically means "the reestablishment of an interrupted or broken relationship" (BDAG), "restoration of friendship or harmony" (MWCD). In Greek marriage records the term indicated the end of a separation with the couple's coming together again (TDNT). Here, it is "being put into friendship with God" (GEDNT). Before this, mutual enmity. Sin made us God's enemies (Rom 5.10), "alienated and enemies in [our] mind by wicked works" (Col 1.21), having "friendship with the world" and "enmity with God" (Jas 4.4). Also, God hated us and looked upon us with righteous contempt (Psa 5.5; 11.5). The gospel is the wonderful message of **RECONCILIATION**.

BEGINS WITH GOD (5.18a)

"And all things are of [or, from] God." The reality of new creation (cf. 5.17) is on account of God's taking the initiative and acting powerfully and decisively to bring it about, just as in the first creation. God sought Adam, not vice versa (Gen 3.8-9); he also seeks Adam's rebellious sons one by one (Rom 3.11). God in Christ is not only the Author but also the Finisher of our faith (Heb 12.2). "Because of him (God) you are in Christ Jesus" (1 Cor 1.30 ESV). If God were to leave us to ourselves, we would continue as his enemies. Since he doesn't, we become his friends (Jas 2.23; John 15.15).

This is illustrated in the apostles (Paul speaks for them; cf. 1 Cor 4.9; 1 Thess 2.6; 2 Cor 5.12-13, 16). "God has reconciled us to himself." God did it! And, "God was reconciling the world unto himself" (5.19). God was doing it!

The gospel is good news of what God has already done through Christ. It is not a self-help message to people with great inner potential!

THROUGH RECONCILED MESSENGERS (5.18b)

Paul stresses their own reconciliation with God. Never trust God's enemies for spiritual advice! Reconciliation with God is a preacher's first qualification, and amazingly, like Judas Iscariot, many preach without it.

Many have warned others that they come not to that place of torment, while yet they hastened to it themselves: many a preacher is now in hell, who has a hundred times called upon his hearers to use the utmost care and diligence to escape it. . . . Many a tailor goes in rags, that makes costly clothes for others; and many a cook scarcely licks his fingers, when he has dressed for others the most costly dishes. Believe it, brethren, God never saved any man for being a preacher, nor because he was an able preacher; but because he was a justified, sanctified man, and consequently faithful in his Master's work (Baxter, *Reformed Pastor*).

In a message entitled "The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry" (1740), Gilbert Tennent compared such to the Pharisees without a divine call, doing a ministry uncomfortable to gracious souls and for the most part unprofitable, even spiritually dangerous.

"I am verily persuaded," he wrote, "that the generality of preachers talk of an unknown and unfelt Christ; and the reason why congregations have been so dead is because they have had dead men preaching to them."

We know the apostles were reconciled to God, and we should have strong confidence that our own pastors are as well.

"By (or, through) Jesus Christ," *by means of* (original preposition); he was God's agent to achieve reconciliation, the one and only Mediator (1 Tim 2.5), especially through his death (Rom 5.10; Col 1.22). The apostles could only be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ, he is our only hope as well. Only Christians (true believers in and followers of him) are reconciled to God.

GIVEN A RECONCILIATION MINISTRY (5.18c)

“God . . . hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation.” This is the language of stewardship, paralleled in 5.19 with “committed unto us.” The apostles were not mavericks, thrusting themselves into the ministry without a divine call. Not many reconciled to God are called to be preachers, and very, very few, apostles. No, they were hand-picked by Jesus Christ himself, even in Paul’s case (road to Damascus, Acts 9.3 ff.; Jesus called him “a chosen vessel unto me to bear my name before the Gentiles,” Acts 9.15; the risen Christ appeared to Paul “as one born out of due time,” 1 Cor 15.8; i.e., the last of the apostles).

Further, they were God’s servants carrying out their assigned responsibility. “Ministry” → “service rendered in an intermediary capacity, mediation” (BDAG); viz., to be agents of reconciling sinners to God primarily by preaching the gospel of the grace of God (Acts 20.24). In this they carried on the ministry consuming Jesus during his time on earth (Luke 4.43).

Paul expands theologically on what God has done to bring about reconciliation, but he does not simply proclaim something, namely, that the cross was an event in the past which took away the sins of the world; he lives the message himself. The ministry of reconciliation therefore involves more than simply explaining to others what God has done in Christ. It requires that one become an active reconciler oneself. Like Christ, a minister of reconciliation plunges into the midst of human tumult to bring harmony out of chaos, reconciliation out of estrangement, and love in the place of hate (Garland, New American Commentary, in loc.).

While all this has a special significance for apostles, it applies directly to preachers today, and even to ordinary Christians. While we aim supremely for the glory of God, an important means is by exercising a ministry of reconciliation—proclaiming gospel truth and practicing gospel love to disarm the hostility of unbelievers toward God and show them he is worthy of their love and loyalty. God reconciled you to himself with a view toward making you an instrument of reconciling others to him and his people. “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Matt 5.9).

AFTER THE RECONCILIATION EVENT (5.19a)

“To wit” (i.e., to know; alt. trans. “how that”) is followed by further explanation of what WAS involved in the great reconciliation of redemptive history, and what IS involved in the here and now (i.e., with the apostles; applies to preachers and Christians today).

So then, how was reconciliation effected historically? The first thing to note is that it was divine action that secured it. “God was in Christ . . . 1) reconciling, and 2) not imputing . . .”. Some interpreters agree with the AV rendering and see this as a statement of the incarnation; others would render it, “In Christ God was reconciling,” etc., stressing that “God, at the historic moment of the cross, was reconciling the world to himself in Christ who suffered there for

us” (P. E. Hughes, in loc.). Both interpretations are true theologically, though the exact sense here is difficult to determine. Historically, then, God was:

- 1) Reconciling the world to himself. Some take this to be a denial of particular redemption, but it is not. Others restrict the term “world” to the elect, but this is perhaps unnecessary. It seems best to understand it as a grand statement of the cosmic implications of Christ’s reconciling work on the cross: mankind is saved (cf. Col 1.20). Not just Israel, but Gentiles were saved through Christ, and not just human beings but the renewal of the entire created order was secured by Christ’s death.
- 2) Not reckoning/imputing to them their offenses. Instead of dealing with sinners in condemnation and punishment, the Lord came to earth on a rescue mission, giving his life for sinners, that they might be saved (cf. Luke 9.51-56). Those who believe in Christ have received the unspeakable benefit of assurance that their sins have all been paid in full by Christ in their place, and cannot be held against them any more (Psa 32.1-2).

ENTRUSTED WITH THE RECONCILING MESSAGE (5:19b)

“And hath committed unto us [esp. the apostles] the word of reconciliation.” Now even though there is a sense in which God’s work of reconciliation is finished, there is another sense in which it continues.

From one point of view, it is a *fait accompli*, standing complete quite apart from any human response. God has, on one occasion and decisively, dealt with the cause of enmity and removed the obstacle to fellowship, namely human sin. Yet . . . Paul adds, “and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.” . . . Reconciliation is a fact, but it must be offered in proclamation and received by the hearer (cf. v. 20, “Become reconciled to God”). Since these latter two stages — proclamation and receipt — must take place before the two alienated parties, God and human beings, begin to enjoy friendly relations, there is a sense in which reconciliation is an incomplete, ongoing process. Not all humans are rightly related to God; some still stand under his wrath. So the task of soliciting human acceptance of God’s offer of reconciliation was committed by God to Paul and his colleagues (NIGTC, in loc.).

That “message of reconciliation” is the gospel of just described—what God was doing in Christ when he died on the cross. This message is God’s power unto salvation for everyone who believes (Rom 1.16).

- To you who are not real Christians, believe this gospel!
- To you who are believers, deliberately enter into this ministry of reconciliation, announcing the good news, even informally, and adorning the gospel with your good works.

THE APOSTLES' GOSPEL: EXHORTATION

2 Cor 5.20-21

CBC-7 Feb 2010 AM

Preaching the gospel is first and foremost a matter of declaring the good news of what God has done in Jesus Christ to save his people. In 2 Cor 5.18-19, Paul asserts that God had reconciled him and the other apostles, nothing but sinners in themselves, to God, and had sent them to proclaim to other sinners this historic and objectively-accomplished reconciliation of sinners with God through Jesus Christ.

When you hear this glorious good news of salvation, you enter wonderful and dangerous territory, spiritually speaking, because you necessarily bear a brand new moral obligation for which God holds you accountable, and for which you will give account on Judgment Day. All who hear the gospel are morally-bound to respond in faith, believing the gospel.

Many people have never heard it. Some die completely unfamiliar with the name of Jesus; they will perish eternally without knowing the one and only Savior. But those who do hear and effectively reject Christ will be punished more severely because they have more guilt (Luke 12.47-48; Matt 11.20-24). The total pagan will find hell more tolerable than the almost Christian.

So Paul moves from proclamation to exhortation with this thought:

God stoops to plead with you through the apostles to be reconciled to him because of the finished work of Christ.

“Now then” translates a single word that transitions to a new and related thought; it has been rendered “therefore” or “so” or “then.” Literally, “On behalf of Christ therefore we are ambassadors.” Because 1) all things of this salvation blessing proceed from God (5.18a), and 2) God has reconciled us apostles to himself (5:18b), and 3) he gave us apostles the ministry and word of reconciliation (5.18b, 19)—as ambassadors for Christ we exhort you.

THE APOSTOLIC AMBASSADORS (5.20a)

Surprisingly, the original for “ambassadors” is a verb: “we *ambassador* for Christ.” It means to work as an envoy, as a representative for another. In the wake of Jesus’ exodus from earth to heaven, he left behind apostles as his representatives to foster peace between sinners and God. They did not thrust themselves into the ministry, nor were they doing it from self-interest. Paul felt compelled to preach the gospel because of God’s call (1 Cor 9.16). The NT still is the reliable and authoritative apostolic doctrine.

Though the apostles are long gone, faithful gospel preachers are also ambassadors for Christ—called by him, representing him, serving him. It is very important to recognize us for what we are. We may not be personally impressive (2 Cor 10.10) but we represent someone who is.

When a duly-authorized ambassador of the USA sits before the representatives of foreign power and proposes a deal, the most serious consequences will follow their response, not because he is anyone special in himself, but because of whom he represents. If they say, “We do not believe you really are the US ambassador,” it will not save them from the consequences of disregarding or mistreating him. It does not matter if the ambassador himself is personally impressive. The fact that God sends unimpressive men to you is a clear instance of his grace.

THE DIVINE CONDESCENSION (5.20b-c)

Paul increases the strength of his appeal. Not only are we ambassadors for Christ, but God himself beseeches/entreats/exhorts (Gk. παρακαλέω) you by us. The AV “as though” should not be interpreted as a hypothetical; the grammar allows translation as a certain declaration: “In fact, God is speaking to you through us” (cf. 1 Thess 2.13). This is amazing divine *condescension* to our frail creatureliness because we could not survive if he were to present himself to us in all his divine glory (Exod 33.20)! “Condescend” means “to waive the privileges of rank” and “to descend to a less dignified level” < Latin, 3 words meaning “climb down [to be] with” (MWCD).

God appeared on Mt. Sinai and terrifying signs testified to his awesome presence—thunderings, lightnings, trumpet blasts, smoke. There he spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend, giving him the TC, and the people pleaded that he mediate between them and this awe-inspiring God (Exod 20.18-21; cf. Deut 5.5). In this Moses was a type of God incarnate, Jesus Christ. “Veiled in flesh the Godhead see” (from “Hark the Herald Angels Sing”). Jesus was God appearing to us in a form that was true to the divine being (John 14.9; cf. Heb 1.1-3), yet approachable by men—even sinful men (Luke 15.1). The apostles were men like Jesus, yet spoke with the very same divine authority; likewise with true preachers today.

THE PREACHING OF THE WORD OF GOD IS THE WORD OF GOD. Wherefore when this Word of God is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is proclaimed, and received by the faithful; and that neither any other Word of God is to be invented nor is to be expected from heaven: and that now the Word itself which is preached is to be regarded, not the minister that preaches; for even if he be evil and a sinner, nevertheless the Word of God remains still true and good (2nd Helvetic Confession).

This appeal and condescension become still greater when the apostle says, “we pray you in Christ’s stead” (lit. Gk., “we beg / on behalf / of Christ”).

How can anyone understand these words without tears? Here is the Almighty Creator, Preserver, Redeemer, and Judge of all men pictured on his knees, entreating sinners to be reconciled to himself. In the words of Alexander Maclaren, we see “Love upon the throne bending down to ask of the rebel that lies powerless and sullen at his feet to put away all bitterness and come back to the love and the grace which are ready to pour over him.” [Once] a young seminarian [hearing me say this] jumped

up from his seat and yelled: “How dare you reduce God to a beggar on his knees, pleading with sinners!” After a quiet pause I replied, “Young man, go beyond Maclaren’s characterization. See God in Christ not only on his knees, but on a wooden cross, bleeding from head, hands, and feet, with outstretched arms pleading with sinners to be reconciled to himself!” (Stephen Olford, [Anointed Expository Preaching](#)).

THE IMPERATIVE OF RECONCILIATION (5.20d)

“Be ye reconciled to God.” This urgent appeal has the force of a command. This is not only an invitation; it is a summons. It is a proposal of marriage which it is your duty to accept, as when Hosea went to his prostitute-wife’s lover’s house and appealed to her to come back home (Hos 3.1-3).

God, Christ, apostles, and preachers, are all on bended knee before you the sinner, saying, “Please, please, I am begging you, repent if your sins, believe the gospel, and be saved!” And what must become of those that refuse?

For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge his people.” It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb 10.26–31 ESV).

But oh, if you will return to God, how blessed you will be, both now and forever. There will be joy in heaven and in your heart when God in Christ ravishes your soul, and you swoon in his covenantal embrace!

THE APOSTLES’ GOSPEL: EXHORTATION

2 Cor 5.20-21

CBC-7 Feb 2010 PM

In 2 Cor 5.21, Paul reverts to proclamation of God’s past redeeming work in Christ to reinforce the exhortation. By grace you can and should respond to the appeal because of what God has accomplished in his Son’s mission.

*God acted in Christ’s substitutionary death
with the aim of justifying all for whom he died.*

THE BASIS FOR RECONCILIATION (5.21)

2 Cor 5.21 is grammatically complex. God is the subject. The first half tells what God did; the second expresses his resolute purpose in it. The basis for the reconciliation of sinners with God is twofold: God’s act and God’s aim in the death of Jesus Christ.

1. God’s Act in Christ’s Death

A. God dealt with the only sinless human being in Christ.

“He” refers to God. “Him” refers to Christ who “knew no sin” (idiom for his utter sinlessness). Christ alone is completely sinless—the Holy One (Acts 3.14), the Just One (Acts 7.52), the Righteous One (1 John 2.1). Despite temptation, he committed no sin (Heb 4.15). This truth opposes Islam (Jesus sinned) and RCC (Mary also without sin). Both religions assail Jesus’ glory.

B. God dealt with sin in Christ.

“God made Christ to be sin” → points to his “sin-laden death” (NICNT). God did not make Christ experientially sinful, but God imputed/reckoned/counted Christ to be sin (cf. 5.19). Commercial term: “to charge to one’s account.” “He suffered as though he himself were a sinner” (NICNT). God condemned the only one who was inherently righteous yet legally guilty. How could God do this and remain just (Prov 17.15)?

C. God dealt with a substitute in Christ.

“For us.” God’s justification from all charges against him in his treatment of Jesus Christ. “For” can mean “on behalf of” or “in the place of” (substitute); here it means the latter. I can go to the grocery store FOR my hungry child (on behalf of, for the benefit of), or I can go FOR my wife (instead of). If the latter, she would protest if I required her to come with me (no substitution).

“For” here must mean substitution or God’s act would be criminal.

The idea of substitution is involved in the very nature of the transaction. The victim was the substitute for the offender. It was put in his place. So Christ was our substitute, or , was put in our place. This is more apparent from the following clause, which teaches the design of this substitution (C. Hodge).

2. God’s Aim in Christ’s Death

A. God intended a definite result.

“That we might be made the righteousness of God in him.” God did not punish his Son for nothing or a mere possibility, but for a definite result. “That we might” conveys definite purpose and result of an action (3 John 8).

B. God intended a divine righteousness.

“The righteousness of God” is either righteous FROM God (source) or WORTHY OF God (quality). Both contrast with a merely human righteousness. God credits divine righteousness to all the sinners for whom Christ died, just as God charged all our sins to Christ the Righteous One—the great exchange.

C. God intended a deliverance in Christ alone.

“In him,” i.e., Christ. Only 2 men representing the human race: Adam & JC. In Adam unbelievers are condemned; in Christ believers are justified. Legal union is in view. Faith alone is the instrumental cause of justification. This gospel is why sinners can actually be reconciled to God. Amen.