

# The Ministry of Reconciliation

2 Corinthians 5:18-20

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## Introduction

Turn with me in your Bibles to 2 Corinthians chapter 5. We live in a time when it seems that just about everybody is offended by just about everything. If not everybody, then certainly this generation's crop of 18 to 25 year-olds, along with their sympathizers. And if you talk to these people—or follow them on social media—you can barely go a day without hearing declarations of, “I am so offended by that!” or “Oh my goodness, that's so offensive!” And that tends to be the end of any rational argument or debate. As soon as someone declares that someone else is offensive or that they themselves have been offended by something someone has said, well the discussion's over. Our society has bought into the lie that the more offended or outraged someone is by something, the more justified and above questioning they are.

Nowhere is this more clearly illustrated than in the burgeoning cultural phenomenon of “safe spaces.” Safe spaces are supposedly places on university campuses where students can go and be promised not to hear any conversation that might be perceived as negative against a privileged class of people. Basically, they're places for students with privileged viewpoints to have their sensitive ears protected from any disagreement. We used to call those “echo chambers;” now they're “safe spaces.” A student at Brown University protested a scheduled debate because, quote, “Bringing in a speaker like that”—that is, like the one who disagreed with her—“could serve to invalidate people's experiences. It could be damaging.” Student volunteers then created a “safe space” for those who might have found the debate too upsetting. According to the New York Times report, “The room was equipped with cookies, coloring books, bubbles, Play-Doh, calming music, pillows blankets, and a video of frolicking puppies, as well as students and staff members trained to deal with trauma.” One student tried to be brave enough to listen to the debate, but had to retreat to the safe space. She said, “I was feeling bombarded by a lot of viewpoints that really go against my dearly and closely held beliefs.”

We have become so hyper-sensitive, so easily offended, that people actually expect that emotional and intellectual comfort is a basic human right—that you have a right not to be told anything you wouldn't like to hear. And as we molycoddle young people like this, we teach them that the more offended someone is the more justified they are, and so we breed a culture of perpetual offendedness. Activist groups are protesting the Washington Redskins, demanding that the professional football team be renamed because of its insensitivity to Native Americans.

Officials at one university banned a Mexican restaurant on campus from giving students sombreros as a promotion of their restaurant, saying that it was racist and discriminatory. A kindergarten school banned the nursery rhyme, *Baa Baa Black Sheep*, because mention of a black sheep signaled racist undertones. People are offended by everything.

And they're especially offended by God, by Scripture, by Christianity. People are offended by the Bible's condemnation of homosexuality as sin, by its definition of marriage as a divinely-ordained institution between one man and one woman, by its affording personhood to unborn children and thus condemning abortion as murder. People are offended by the exclusivity of the message of salvation—that, as Jesus Himself said, no one comes to God the Father but by Him (John 14:6). People believe they're good enough to contribute to their own salvation, and so find it offensive to be told that something is so wrong with them that salvation lies entirely outside of themselves—that they can do nothing to earn favor with God—that even their righteous deeds are like filthy rags (Isa 64:6).

But amidst all that offendedness—ranging from the understandable, to the illegitimate, to the downright idiotic—there is a greater offense that should captivate the mind and attention of all those who are concerned about inequity and injustice. And that is: the just offense that God takes at human sin. Each and every human being has sinned against God. We have belittled His glory. We have esteemed Him but lightly. We have broken His commandments. We have scoffed at His holiness. We have mocked His justice. We have spurned His love. We have distrusted His faithfulness. We have despised His truth. We have treasured false pleasures above Him. “All we like sheep have gone astray; each one of us has turned to his own way.” And God is offended. And He is justly offended! The offense He takes at sin isn't manufactured by hyper-sensitivity and stupid sentimentality. God is *righteously* offended by sin.

And that righteous offense that is effected by sin is the substance of the hostility that exists between God and man. Mankind once walked with God in paradise, in perfect face-to-face fellowship. But after Adam and Eve sinned against God by breaking His law, their immediate instinct was to hide from God and avoid his fellowship. And soon after, God, righteously offended by their sin, expelled them from the holiness of His presence and sealed off the entrance of the Garden. Sin alienates God from man.

The prophet Isaiah comments on this broken relationship when he says in chapter 59 verse 2 of his prophecy: “Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear [you].” Romans 5:10 calls the natural man the *enemy* of God. Colossians 1:21 says that we are *alienated* from God and *hostile* in mind toward Him. In Romans 8:7, Paul says the natural human mind “is *hostile* toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”

What a miserable condition! We who were created for intimate friendship with our Creator have so offended this perfectly holy God as to have become His enemies. And we are helpless to do anything to please Him. Dear friends, how will we be saved? The answer is: we will be saved by a Gospel of **reconciliation**. We will be saved when God overcomes the alienation that exists between Himself and sinful creatures, by satisfying His own wrath and punishing sin in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ—destroying that hostility, that enmity, that offense; by achieving peace, and thereby reconciling sinners to a restored relationship with Himself.

And it is this Gospel of **reconciliation** that Paul has been expounding on in 2 Corinthians 5. As he meditates on the love of Christ that drives him to lay down his life in service to Christ and His Church, he describes key theological components of the Gospel that so brilliantly displays the love of Christ for His people. And we've looked at those doctrines in depth over the past several weeks. There is the doctrine of substitution in verse 14—that Christ died in the place of His people, suffering our punishment in our place as our Substitute. There is the doctrine of solidarity—that Christ is the head, and we, His body, are so united to Him that what is true of Him is true of us. When He died to sin on that cross, so also did His people die to sin. And when He rose to newness of life, so also did His people rise to newness of life in Him. He speaks of the doctrine of sanctification in verse 15—that God's purpose in saving us is for us to display His glory by living a life of obedience to Him. And then he speaks of the doctrine of regeneration in verses 16 and 17—that if anyone is in a saving union to Christ Jesus, he has been transformed by the Holy Spirit to be a new creation. The eyes of his heart have been opened, so that he sees Christ for who He is and eagerly embraces Him in saving faith. And His changed view of Christ breeds a changed view of everything and everyone else, so that he no longer regards anyone after the flesh, but in accordance with spiritual truth.

And as Paul continues his exploration of the Gospel of Christ—of which he has been made a minister—in verses 18 to 20, he turns to explain *how* the new creation of verses 16 and 17 has come about. And he explains it by turning the multifaceted diamond of the Gospel, and viewing it from the angle of **reconciliation**. Christ's death, which he spoke about in verse 14, was not only a substitutionary sacrifice, it was also the means of **reconciliation** between sinful men and the righteously offended God. Let's read our text for this evening, 2 Corinthians 5, starting in verse 18: "Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation,<sup>19</sup> namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.<sup>21</sup> He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

In verses 18 to 20, Paul expounds upon the doctrine of reconciliation in **two parallel thoughts** that he jumps back and forth between. He speaks of **the message of reconciliation**, number one, and **the ministry of reconciliation**, number two.

### **I. The Message of Reconciliation (vv. 18a, 19A)**

In the first place, then, let's consider **the message of reconciliation**. And Paul discusses **the message of reconciliation** in the first halves of both verses 18 and 19. He says in verse 18: "Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ," and then in verse 19: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them."

So, starting with verse 18, Paul begins by saying, "Now all these things are from God." And the "these things" that he's referring to are the things he just discussed. The new attitude, and worldview, and ways of evaluating people of verse 16, which comes as a result of regeneration, verse 17—all these things are from God. This is a declaration of sovereign grace in salvation. The work of regeneration is not the work of man! Man no more effects his new birth than he effected his first birth.

When Nicodemus asks how man can be born again, Jesus doesn't give him a to-do list. He doesn't say, "Perform this set of religious duties by which you might cooperate with the grace of God." He doesn't say, "Repeat after me and pray this prayer." He doesn't even say, "Repent and believe," because repentance and faith are the *consequences*—not the *causes*—of regeneration. What does He say? John 3:8: "The wind blows where it wishes." The sovereign breath of the Spirit of God breathes spiritual life into the valley of dry bones according to *His* sovereign will—not according to the free will of the dry bones. John 1:13 says the children of God "were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of *God*." "In the exercise of *His* will," James 1:18, "He brought us forth by the word of truth." The theological term for this doctrine is *monergism*, which means "one agent at work." It is the opposite of synergism, which speaks of a cooperative effort. Scripture teaches monergistic regeneration—that the new birth is entirely a sovereign work of God.

#### **A. God the Source of Reconciliation**

But the statement that "all these things are from God" doesn't only look back to the work of regeneration; it also looks forward to the work of reconciliation. Reconciliation is every bit a sovereign work of God as regeneration is. "All these things are from God, *who reconciled us*." God is the subject of that sentence, not man. And man is the object of that sentence, not God. Sinful human beings do not undertake to achieve reconciliation with God. Everywhere Scripture speaks of reconciliation, God is the active reconciler, and man passively receives reconciliation

from God. Colossians 1:22: “Although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet *He* has now reconciled *you*.” Romans 5:10: “While we were enemies, we *were reconciled* to God”—passive voice. And the next verse, Romans 5:11: “through [Christ] we have now *received* the reconciliation.” This is plain: **God is the source of reconciliation.**

Reconciliation is not what man accomplishes; it is what man receives as a gift of sovereign grace from an unspeakably merciful and longsuffering God.

And this is truly astounding. There is alienation between God and man, but God is not the cause of that alienation—as if He were just a hard, cruel taskmaster whose oppressive and tyrannical rule mankind righteously rose up and threw off of themselves in principled rebellion! God is the most pleasant, most beautiful, most satisfying being not only that exists, but that can even be imagined! His law is not onerous and oppressive; His commandments are not burdensome, 1 John 5:3. As epitomized in the Lord Jesus, His yoke is easy, and His burden is light. And He didn’t lay that easy yoke and light burden upon mankind in a barren wasteland devoid of any means of sustenance and refreshment; God issued His law to mankind in the Garden of Eden—a lush paradise rich with gold and precious stones, flowing with the refreshing waters of four rivers that watered the multitude of trees that were pleasing to the sight and good for food, from which man was encouraged to eat freely and enjoy—from all except one tree. And in the midst of all of that loving provision, man rebelled against God, and man has been rebelling against God ever since.

Now usually, when there is to be reconciliation between alienated parties, a third party may be enlisted as an impartial mediator. Or, even more appropriate, the offending party initiates reconciliation by going to the one he’s offended and asking for forgiveness and for terms of peace. But while we were still in open, full-throated revolt against our loving and gracious Creator, He—the offended party—took the initiative in accomplishing our reconciliation. While we were running the other direction away from God, obstinately persisting in the very rebellion that is the substance of our alienation, God reconciled us to Himself through Christ. “While we were *yet* sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). “*While* we were *enemies*, we were reconciled to God” (Rom 5:11).

Here we behold the magnanimous heart of God as the eager seeker and Savior of the lost. How many of us, when we are justly offended, are apt to sit with our arms folded in self-righteous self-satisfaction, *not-so-patiently* waiting for the offending party to come groveling back on their hands and knees, pleading for our clemency? And yet here is the offended God, pursuing a rebellious people, taking the initiative to satisfy His own righteous wrath against the sins of His people, because they could never extinguish that wrath even if they wanted to. Dear friends, God is no reluctant Savior! He Himself is the eager reconciler (MacArthur, 199). As one commentator put it, “This is the great glory of the gospel: that God in his grace takes action in Christ to save us from God in his wrath” (Storms, 172). What a glorious God we have! How bountiful is His

mercy! How great is His patience! How large is His heart! This reconciling God, Grace Church—your God—is worthy to be worshiped! Worthy to be praised! Worthy to be admired! Worthy to be loved! Worthy to be delighted in! See that this truth—that **God is the source of reconciliation**—makes its way into your heart, and that your heart returns the praise to God that He is worthy of!

## B. Christ the Means of Reconciliation

But our passage teaches us that, concerning **the message of reconciliation**, not only that God is the source of reconciliation, but that **Christ is the means of reconciliation**. Verse 18 says that God “reconciled us to Himself *through Christ*.” And again in verse 19: “God was *in Christ* reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them.”

This is pointing to the truth that the reconciliation God accomplishes He accomplishes through Christ’s cross work. See, our sin alienates us from God, because it arouses God’s righteous wrath against us. And if God is just, He must punish sin. This means that if we are to have any hope of being reconciled to God, sin has to be dealt with. And Paul addresses that in the final phrase of verse 19: “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself, *not counting their trespasses against them*.” And the word “counting” there is the Greek word *logizomai*, that familiar word that Paul uses again and again to refer to the doctrine of *imputation*. It’s well-translated. *Logizomai* is an accounting term that means “to put something down on someone’s account” (Harris, 444). In a positive sense, it can mean to *credit* something good to someone’s account—to *reckon* or *count* someone as having done something positive. In a negative sense, as in our verse, it can mean to debit something from someone’s account—to count someone as having done something wrong and therefore to “count it against them.” Paul says: God achieves this reconciliation by not counting our sins against us—not imputing our sins to our account.

Said another way, reconciliation comes through *the forgiveness of sins*. The psalmist makes plain this link between the non-imputation of sin and forgiveness in Psalm 130, verse 3 and 4. He writes, in what should be the cry of every heart of every person in this room, “If You, O Yahweh, should *mark iniquities*, O Lord, who could stand? But there is *forgiveness* with You, That You may be feared.” Rather than marking iniquities—rather than counting our sins against us and imputing our sins to our account—there is forgiveness with God, that He might be feared, that He might be reverently worshiped and stood in awe of. David praises God for that very thing in the opening verses of Psalm 32. He says, “How blessed is he whose transgression is *forgiven*, Whose sin is covered! How blessed is the man to whom Yahweh does not *impute* iniquity.” You see, as long as God imputes our sins to us, there will be hostility between us. But there is forgiveness with this God, that He might be feared.

But how can a holy God forgive sins? How can a perfectly righteous, perfectly good God, whose nature is to punish all sin and wrongdoing, simply *not count* our trespasses against us? A holy God can't merely overlook sin! He can't pretend as if His own character, and holiness, and worthiness, and loveliness ought not to be honored with the utmost reverence! He would cease to be God if He did that! He would be an idolater, because He would elevate in His affections something above His own holy name. He would be a liar, because He would be saying that it's no big deal if His nature is violated by man's sin. But God is not a liar! He is not an idolater! He regards His own beauty and worth above everything in this world! And when His character is violated by human sin, He can't simply overlook it. How can this holy God not count sin against us, and yet remain perfectly righteous?

And the answer that our text gives us is: He does it **through Christ**. He accomplishes forgiveness and reconciliation through the atoning work of Christ on the cross. God can justly not count our trespasses against us, because He has counted them against *Christ*, our Substitute. God can righteously not impute our sins to us, because He has legally imputed them to Christ, when He put Christ forth as a propitiation for our sins on the cross. In that great Psalm of worship, David says in Psalm 103 verse 10, "He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities." And it's true that God has not dealt with us according to our sins, because God dealt with *Jesus* according to our sins.

You see, God does not just sweep sin under the rug. That is not what grace and mercy are. That's why in Romans chapter 3, as Paul begins unfolding the blessed truth of justification by faith alone apart from works, it's why he's so earnest to vindicate the *righteousness* of God. Because Proverbs 17:15 says, "He who justifies the wicked . . . [is] an *abomination* to the Lord." But God justifies the wicked! So how is He not an abomination to Himself? Answer: Romans 3:24–26: We are "justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. *This was to demonstrate His righteousness . . . for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*" You see? Just *and* justifier, because He set forth Jesus as a propitiation—because His wrath against sin would not go unsatisfied, but would be satisfied by exercising the fullness of His wrath against our sin in the person of Christ our sinless, sin-bearing substitute. Praise the wisdom of God that devises not only a gracious Gospel, but a righteous Gospel!

2 Corinthians 5:21—one of the most precious verses in all of Scripture—says, "He made Him—" that is, the Father made Christ—"who knew no sin, to *be* sin on our behalf." The Father transferred the debt of our sins to Christ's account—God imputed the sins of every person in every age who would ever believe in Christ to the Son of God on that cross, and punished our sin in Him. And He did so—the Father treated the sinless One as if He was the sinner—second half of verse 21: "so that we might become the *righteousness* of God in Him"—so that not only

would our sins be forgiven and have the slate wiped clean, but so that we might be credited the righteousness that God requires for reconciliation and fellowship with Him. God treated Jesus as if He lived our life of sin and uncleanness, so that He might legally and justly treat us as if we lived Jesus' life of perfect righteousness and holiness. The Puritan Richard Hooker said it well when he said, "Let it be counted folly or frenzy or fury or whatever. It is our wisdom and our comfort; we care for no knowledge in the world but this: that man hath sinned and God hath suffered; that God hath made himself the sin of men, and that men are made the righteousness of God" (in *Storms*, 174)!

And so the New Testament testifies with one voice that this reconciliation of which God is the source is accomplished **by means of Christ and His Cross**. Romans 5:10 says, "While we were enemies we were reconciled to God *through the death of His Son*." In verse 11 he says it is *through Christ* that we have now received the reconciliation. Ephesians 2:18 says it is "*through Him* we have our access in one Spirit to the Father." And in Colossians 1:20, Paul writes that God was pleased "through [*Christ*] to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace *through the blood of His cross*."

Because of this most glorious atonement accomplished by our Great High Priest, we who were alienated and separated from the God we were created to know and worship will be **reconciled**—will be restored to loving fellowship with Him. 1 Peter 3:18: "Christ died once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, so that He might bring us to God." That's what salvation is about! That's the goal! Restoring us to the all-satisfying, unspeakably glorious, consummately delightful God that our sin cut us off from! It is one thing for the righteous to die for the unrighteous. It is one thing for a Judge to declare a guilty criminal righteous because a sufficient payment has been rendered on his behalf. But it is entirely another thing for that Judge to then enter into a personal relationship with that forgiven criminal—for that Judge to become as a Father and care for that criminal as if he were His own son.

Dear friends, in the marvelous gift of salvation, God does not merely make an alteration in His bookkeeping concerning the sin reckoned to our account (Garland, 290). The Judge does not just drop the charges against us. Our God reconciles us to Himself through Christ, so that we might have access to our Father, in whose presence, says David, is fullness of joy, and in whose right hand are pleasures forevermore (Ps 16:11). Our sin cut us off this magnificent treasure, this ocean of delight! And the cross of Christ overcomes the alienation and hostility that exists between us, and purchases the **reconciliation** that brings us back to Him. The very bottom of why the Gospel is good news is because it **reconciles** us to the God who makes heaven *heaven*.

## **II. The Ministry of Reconciliation (vv. 18b, 19b–20)**



And just as we have considered that the Father is the source of reconciliation, and Christ is the means of reconciliation, we also discover that we, Christians, are the instrument of reconciliation. That brings us to our second point: **the ministry of reconciliation**. We see this in the parallel phrases in the second halves of both verses 18 and 19, and then through verse 20. Paul says, God “reconciled us to Himself through Christ *and gave us the ministry of reconciliation*.” In verse 19 he says, God “has committed to us the *word* of reconciliation.” And then verse 20: “Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, [in the conviction that] God [is] making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” We who are beneficiaries of the message of reconciliation have been commissioned to **the ministry of reconciliation**—that is, the ministry of the proclamation of that message to those who are not yet reconciled to God.

#### A. A Ministry of Proclamation

And these verses contain several features of the **ministry of reconciliation**. In the first place, I want you to notice that the ministry of reconciliation *is* a ministry of proclamation. And we see that by the parallelism in verses 18 and 19. In verse 18 it says that God “gave us the *ministry* of reconciliation,” and then in verse 19 it says that God “has committed to us the *word* of reconciliation.” The *ministry* of reconciliation is the proclamation of the *word* of reconciliation, which is to say, the message of reconciliation that we just discussed. Namely, that the perfectly holy God who is justly offended by the sins of men has, in His infinite wisdom, devised a way for His infinite love to rescue sinners from His infinite wrath, without compromising His infinite righteousness—that He can be both just and justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus, through the wrath-propitiating, reconciling work of the cross.

Brothers and sisters, *that* is our ministry. So many people are running around chasing their tails trying to discover the mission of the church. Some think the church’s ministry ought to be lobbying for political change and turning the tides of the culture’s morality. Some think the church’s ministry is to usher in the kingdom of God by working to eliminate poverty and hunger and homelessness, and by advocating for social justice. Others seem to think the church’s mission is to entertain an unchurched society—just get people to come to church by any pragmatic means necessary. No, first and foremost, we are to be preachers of this Gospel of reconciliation! *That* is our mission. The heart and soul of the ministry to which Christ’s followers have been called is the verbal proclamation of the Gospel.

Yes, we are called to serve one another in ministry. Yes, we are called to minister compassion to the lost world around us. Yes, we are called to live holy lives that adorn the Gospel. But all of our service, and all of our compassion, and all of our holy living will never open blind eyes to the glory of Jesus. Only the *word of reconciliation* will do that. Romans 10:17: “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the *word* of Christ”—by the proclamation of the message concerning

Christ and His atoning work of reconciliation. And so we must proclaim this message. If we claim to be *partakers* of the New Covenant and therefore *ministers* of the New Covenant, above all else, we must open our mouths and preach to our friends and family and neighbors the life-giving truths of the Gospel. We cannot fool ourselves into thinking that we are being faithful in Christian ministry if we are not regularly testifying that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them. The Christian ministry is—first of all—a call to proclamation.

## B. A Privilege and Responsibility

Secondly, the ministry of reconciliation is both a privilege and a responsibility. We see that in the two verbs used in these parallel phrases in verses 18 and 19. Verse 18 says that God “*gave* us the ministry of reconciliation,” and verse 19 says that He “has *committed* to us the word of reconciliation.” The word “gave” communicates the idea of giving as a gift. Paul uses it earlier in 2 Corinthians to speak of the gift of the Holy Spirit that God gave to us as a pledge of our future inheritance (1:22; 5:5). That means that, so far from complaining about God’s commands upon us to be faithfully engaged in evangelism, we ought to see this call to Gospel ministry as a gift of God’s grace—a special privilege that we, creatures of the dust, ourselves offenders of the holiness of God, might be used by God to announce His message of reconciliation to others.

And that second word, “He has *committed* to us the word of reconciliation,” speaks of giving as a sacred trust. The ESV brings that out by rendering it, “. . . *entrusting* to us the message of reconciliation.” This means that not only is our ministry a gift and privilege, it is also a sacred responsibility. It’s not a gift that we’re free to reject. No, when God reconciled us as His people through Christ, He also entrusted to us this **ministry of reconciliation**, and He expects that we steward that trust faithfully—that we don’t take our lamp and hide it under a basket, but put it on the lampstand and shine it for all to see.

## C. An Ambassadorship

Third, Paul illustrates **the ministry of reconciliation** by picturing it as an ambassadorship. Listen to a literal translation of verse 20: “Therefore, we are *ambassadors* [on behalf of, and in the place of] Christ, [in the conviction that] God [makes His] appeal through us.” And this is a fascinating figure of the Christian ministry. Similar to today, an ambassador in the ancient world served a ruler—in their day an emperor or a king, in ours perhaps a president or prime minister. And that ruler, because he could not go himself to a foreign land, would commission a messenger—a spokesperson—to represent himself, his office, and the interests of his country to that foreign land. The ambassador acted on behalf and in the place of his sovereign, and embodied all of the authority of the one who sent him. Insofar as he remained faithful to the message he was sent to deliver, the voice of the ambassador was as the voice of his king. In fact,

there was a Rabbinic proverb that said, “The one who is sent is as the one who sent him,” and “A man’s agent is as the man himself” (Harris, 446).

But note, not only is the ambassador invested with the authority of his king, his authority and the particulars of his message are circumscribed by his king’s desires. That is to say, the ambassador does not speak in his own name. The authority for his message rests not with him or his reputation, but in the name of the one he represents. He does not have the authority to embellish his message or deviate at all from communicating his king’s intent. He is bound not to speak his own opinions or make his own demands; he must speak only and exactly what he has been commissioned to say. The moment the ambassador utters his own opinion, or speaks contrary to the intent and interests of his sovereign, he is relieved of his post.

How many implications this figure of ambassadorship has for our understanding of Christian ministry! God Himself is our Sovereign King, who takes those He has reconciled to Himself and commissions us as ambassadors of heaven to all the climes of this foreign land called planet earth to speak the word of reconciliation on His behalf and in His place. We represent God Himself and the interests of the country of our heavenly citizenship in this fallen world. Therefore, as we carry out this **ministry of reconciliation**, preaching the Gospel of reconciliation, we are bound to speak only the words with which we have been commissioned. We do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord (2 Cor 4:5). We do not preach our own doctrines. We do not preach our own opinions or speculations. We do not embellish the message here or there.

We are not innovators, seeking to improve upon our King’s prescribed methodology of communication. “Well, you know, *preaching*, authoritative *declaration*, simple *pronouncements* of absolute truth—our culture doesn’t take kindly to that sort of discourse. Instead of just preaching and announcing and declaring, let’s have a *conversation*; let’s *dialog* and have a give-and-take, a back-and-forth. Or let’s not talk at all: let me *show* you what my king’s message of reconciliation is just by the way I live my life! Or better yet, you can come to my ‘church’ and watch our drama team pantomime the Gospel through interpretive dance!” No! We are not orators, seeking to adapt and contextualize the message we’ve received to the whims and tastes of our various audiences! We are heralds! ambassadors! men and women under assignment! methodologically obligated to communicate our King’s message precisely as we have received it! Any deviation from the content or the intent—the message *or* the method—and we will be found a rogue ambassador, an unfaithful steward, and will summarily be relieved of our post.

And note, as God’s ambassadors, we embody all the authority of the one who sends us. Insofar as we remain faithful to our King’s message, verse 20, we maintain the conviction that God Himself makes His appeal to the lost through us! As we go through these foreign lands as faithful ambassadors, heralding terms of peace from the King who these sinners have offended

and alienated—terms of peace and reconciliation from the One whose wrath is justly kindled against them, and against which they have no escape—as we proclaim to them that the Lord Jesus Christ has come to pay for sin, and satisfy wrath, and accomplish peace through the blood of His cross, and that this reconciliation might be received through faith alone apart from any works, and as we plead with these enemies on behalf of Christ to be reconciled to God, the voice of the ambassador is as the voice of the King! God Himself speaks through us! Friend, think of it! You who were once a hostile, alienated enemy—yourself having *received* this gracious reconciliation—are now put into service by the reconciling God to be the *instrument* of the reconciliation of other enemies! Praise God for His grace in entrusting to us **the ministry of reconciliation!**

#### D. Urgency

And note, finally, the urgency and earnestness with which we are to announce the terms of this reconciliation. This is not a cold, detached, impersonal, matter-of-fact, take-it-or-leave-it, recitation of facts! This earnest entreaty! “Dear sinner, in the conviction that God Himself is making His appeal through the very words we speak, we *beg* you on behalf of Christ—we stand in the very place of Christ Himself and we beg you: be reconciled to this great God! Be reconciled to this King whom you have so exquisitely offended, whose wrath is justly kindled upon you, whom you cannot beguile or manipulate, out of whose strict hand of justice you cannot wiggle! Be reasonable! You cannot withstand the strength of this King if He comes against you in the fierceness of His anger! You have no defense against the Holy One of Israel, who will by no means leave the guilty unpunished! And yet this fearful King sends me to you with terms of peace! With entreaties of reconciliation! Dear sinner, lay down your arms! Run from your certain destruction! Confess your sin! Turn away from your rebellion! Turn away even from your good works, which avail nothing for righteousness before this holy God who demands perfection, and put your trust in Jesus Christ alone for righteousness, who has lived, has died, and has been raised for sinners just like you!”

#### Conclusion

And friends, there are some of you who sit here tonight who have yet to heed these entreaties from Almighty God. You may convince others—and perhaps even deceive yourselves—that you have come to terms of peace with the Holy God of the universe, but you are still alienated from Him, you are still His enemies. Because you haven’t yet forsaken your sin. You still carve out pockets of your own life and your own behavior which you refuse to submit to His Lordship. You still trust partly in your own merit to avail with you before the bar of God’s righteousness. Dear friend, I plead with you—I beg you on behalf of Christ—be reconciled to God! Don’t dare to meet this King before having come to terms of peace! You will not survive it! Be reconciled to God through Christ, even today.

And dear brothers and sisters who have been reconciled, stand in the strength of this amazing grace that has been shown to you. We are guilty criminals, rightly condemned for our sin, and yet through Christ we know forgiveness. We have offended and alienated God our Creator, and are rightly condemned to eternal separation from Him. And yet through Christ, we enemies are reconciled as friends—even more, as sons and daughters in the family of God. May we stand in this grace, and exult in the hope of the glory of God (Rom 5:2). And may we be faithful to the ministry of reconciliation with which we have been entrusted—ambassadors who herald terms of peace to our King’s enemies through Christ our Savior. Love the *God* of the Gospel. Preach the *Word* of the Gospel.