

# The Ministry of Reconciliation: II Corinthians 5:18–21

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When we speak of the Ministry of Reconciliation, we are speaking of that which is the reason for the Church's continued existence on earth. This is not merely a profession, a ministerial profession—as, for example, law, medicine, engineering are professions—to be practiced only by those especially trained for it. This is the Church's ministry, your ministry and mine. And it requires no special training other than that call of the Holy Spirit to faith and that enlightenment with His gifts which make the Christian, every Christian, what he is, a member of Christ and of His Body, the Church.

It is true, of course, that there are those among us who have no other calling in life but this ministry—our pastors, teachers, missionaries, professors. By divine and express call of the Church they have been entrusted with the public administration of this ministry in a stated field. Yet the Ministry of Reconciliation remains always the Church's ministry, your ministry and mine. We have not given it up to others; indeed, we cannot give it up, for the Lord has given it to us together with our faith. As we retain our faith, so we retain for all time both the responsibility and the privilege of this ministry.

In practical terms this means that we are, every one of us, directly concerned with everything that the Church, as Church, engages in. This includes the Sunday service with its sermon, the meetings and activities of all organizations within the Church, the parochial and synodical educational system, and, in fact, the entire program of Church affairs. It is with good reason, therefore, that at this convention of responsible, representative Christians we should be asked by our district president to devote a portion of our time to fresh consideration of the question: What is the Ministry of Reconciliation?

Even as Christ, the Son of Man, came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, so the Church which is His Body has no other function but to minister. Now there are in the world many kinds of ministries. In a sense, every honest occupation, every honorable profession, every calling, is a ministry, that is, a service rendered to others. However, the Lord of the Church has not left to our human discretion or choice what shall be our ministry as His Church. Ours is the Ministry of Reconciliation and nothing else. In other words, just as a government's ministry of foreign affairs has to do exclusively with foreign affairs and has no right whatever to meddle in labor or commerce, so the Church's ministry has to do with the one matter of reconciliation; and she ceases to function as Church the moment she attempts to serve in any other capacity.

But the point must be made sharper still. For it is not an indefinite sort of reconciliation that is the heart of our ministry. It is not as though the Church were merely a kind of benevolent agency trying to reestablish peaceful, friendly relations wherever animosities or hostilities may have arisen. It is not the Church's business to serve as mediator or peacemaker between nations, between capital and labor, between social classes, between racial groups, or even between individuals. Which does not imply, by any means, that the Church has nothing to say, or no right to say anything, to such un-reconciled parties. But what she has to say, and her right to say it, has a much deeper motive and a much deeper significance than merely the pious intention of pouring oil on troubled waters.

In the language in which St. Paul wrote his letter to the Corinthians he spoke of "the ministry of *the* reconciliation." That is to say, the Church's ministry has to do, not with bringing about reconciliation, but with a reconciliation that is already there, the one all-important reconciliation that already exists. What is that reconciliation? "All things are of God," says the Apostle, "who hath reconciled us to Himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation."

So then it is the specific reconciliation between God and man, the reconciliation already accomplished by Jesus Christ, which is the reason for our ministry. Already from this fact it is clear that the nature of our ministry is simply that of proclamation, of making known the great good news. Yet even if our logic is not able

to make this deduction, we have it expressly on the strength of St. Paul's own statement: "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself . . . and hath committed unto us the *Word* of reconciliation." Our ministry is a ministry of the Word, a ministry of proclamation, a ministry of preaching, and of nothing else.

But before considering our preaching as the fulfillment or performance of this ministry, we should examine this subject of our preaching, this reconciliation itself, somewhat more closely.

We know, of course, that the English word "reconcile," coming from the Latin, has the basic notion of bringing together again, uniting, restoring to mutual friendship. This meaning, however, is somewhat different from that conveyed by the actual Greek term used here by St. Paul. For if we look briefly at some of the other passages in which the same verb (*ἀλλάττω*) occurs, we find that it always carries the basic meaning of "change" or "alter." So, for instance, it appears in Gal. 4:20: "I desire to be present with you now and *to change* my voice"; I Cor. 5:51: "We shall not all sleep, but we shall *be changed*"; Rom. 1:23: "They *changed* the glory of the incorruptible God"; Rom. 1:25: "Who *changed* the truth of God into a lie." Similarly, as a compound noun, the word gains the meaning of "exchange," as in Matt. 16:26: "What shall a man give in *exchange* for his soul?"

With those examples in mind, we are able to understand better the full import, for instance, of our Lord's directive in Matt. 5:24: "Go thy way, first *be reconciled* to thy brother." We might paraphrase it thus: See to it that your offended brother *changes* his relationship to you, namely, that he ceases to be your adversary. Or, we may look at a passage from St. Paul, I Cor. 7:11, where the Apostle enjoins: "Let (the wife) *be reconciled* to her husband," as much as to say: Let it be her concern that the husband *change* his relationship of displeasure with her and graciously accept her once more.

It becomes evident that when in our passage, II Cor. 5, St. Paul says God has "reconciled" the world unto Himself, this expression has a connotation which the English does not quite reflect. The fundamental thought of the original term is simply that the relationship between two parties has been radically changed. In this instance God has changed the relationship between the world and Himself. From other passages of Scripture we know well what the previous relationship had been. The wrath of God and the curse of His Law had rested upon all the children of men (Eph. 2:3; Gal. 1:13). If, then, a change has been brought about in the relationship between God and man, it can only mean that there is peace between God and man (Rom. 5:1); in place of God's wrath His grace now prevails.

There is, however, another significant fact that emerges from a study of the New Testament use of the verb "reconcile." In every instance where the active voice occurs, the subject, that is, the *reconciler*, is the *offended* party. This stands to reason, of course, when we remember that in the original term, which we somewhat inadequately translate with "reconcile," there is no notion whatever of "rendering satisfaction," as though the reconciler had to appease the other party. But as stated before, the word denotes simply the *changing* of a relationship. Now in a situation where offense has been given, it obviously is the prerogative only of the offended party, not of the offender, either to maintain or to change the relationship. The offender can only "*be reconciled*," that is, he can only gratefully accept the changed attitude and disposition of the person he has offended. Thus we read in Matt. 5:24 of the man who has sinned against his brother: "Go thy way, first *be reconciled* to thy brother"; and again, of the woman who has deserted her husband, I Cor. 7:11: "Let her *be reconciled* to her husband."

When St. Paul, therefore, says that God has reconciled us to Himself, we are to understand clearly two facts: first, God was the offended party; and second, He alone initiated and carried out the reconciliation. In other words, this change in the relationship between God and man is not the result of a mutual effort on both sides, not even in the sense that after God has taken the first step by sacrificing His Son, men are induced by this evidence of God's love now to give up their natural enmity against Him. The act of reconciliation is rather God's doing entirely. Not even the attitude of man comes into consideration. No matter that man is as hostile to God after the reconciliation as before, the fact remains: The relationship between God and man has changed.

In the passage before us, St. Paul does not present in detail the manner or method by which this change in God's relation to us was brought about. Instead, he briefly alludes to it with two pregnant statements, rich in implication, and filled with meaning for us from the rest of Scripture. He says: "*God was in Christ*, reconciling

the world unto Himself”; and later: “(God) hath made Him to be sin for us who knew no sin.” In other words, the method of reconciliation was the incarnation of God’s own Son, His sinless life, His suffering and death—and all this in substitution for sinful mankind. That is what has changed God’s relation to the world of sinners. His holy wrath, His righteous curse upon sin, has fully spent itself on Christ. Suffering God’s wrath in man’s place, bearing sin’s full curse as the world’s Substitute, Jesus Christ left room only for God’s grace toward men.

The direct consequence of this change in the relationship between God and man was the justification of the whole world, the declaring of every sinner righteous before God. For that is the meaning in positive terms of what St. Paul here states negatively: “not imputing their trespasses unto them.” It is impossible to overemphasize this statement. For in our own time, even in our own Synodical Conference, this vital truth is being endangered, both by direct attack and by neglect. What is stated here by St. Paul means much more than merely that God has “provided and secured” salvation for all men, so that it is now possible for them to be justified through faith. Rather, it means nothing less than that already before faith, without faith, they have been justified by God, declared righteous for Christ’s sake, their sins no longer imputed to them. Henceforth it can never be sin that damns a man, any man, but only the rejection of God’s act of justification. From God’s standpoint every sinner is a reconciled sinner.

This then is our ministry: to proclaim the Word of reconciliation, to make known the accomplished fact, to tell sinners always and again that God’s relation to them has been changed, that He has declared them righteous by not imputing their trespasses unto them. This is the Word of reconciliation that has been committed unto us. And it is by this Gospel Word alone that the Church herself lives from day to day and by this same Word brings life to others. The Church can sustain herself by no other means, and by no other means can she perform her ministry in the world.

There will, of course, always be those who are skeptical and critical of this kind of ministry. Even if they acknowledge that the Word of reconciliation and its proclamation are an important part of the Church’s ministry, they do not see or admit that this is her only ministry and the sum total of that ministry. They cannot or will not understand how this kind of ministry can be adequate by itself. Merely to tell despairing sinners that God has reconciled them to Himself seems to these people a preachment that is neither safe nor sane. “What about encouraging Christian conduct? What about promoting Christian stewardship? What about cultivating works of Christian piety that should distinguish and characterize the Church? How can these important aspects of religion be left up to the sinner who is told that God reconciled him, even justified him, before and without a single pious act on his part?”

To all such questions there is but one reply, and that is simply this: So far as religion is concerned, the Scriptures know only two kinds of ministry, and these two are mutually exclusive. You cannot practice both. The one is this ministry of reconciliation; the other is the ministry of death and condemnation. Of this latter ministry St. Paul speaks in the third chapter of this same Second Letter to the Corinthians. This other ministry is, he says, a ministry of the Old Covenant that has been done away with, as contrasted with the ministry of the New Covenant that abides till the end of time. It is a ministry that yields death, as contrasted with the ministry that gives life. It is a ministry that condemns, as contrasted with the ministry that yields righteousness. It is, in short, a Law ministry, as contrasted with the Gospel ministry.

So then, when the Church now raises her voice in the world and to the world, she must do so in the clear consciousness and for the distinct purpose of carrying out only that one ministry of reconciliation. She must ever be aware that her ministry is nullified, vitiated, as soon as she approaches men, whether heathen or Christian, with any other preachment than this: “Be ye reconciled to God, for He hath made Him to be sin for us who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.” This is the only preachment that is able to save, the only preachment able to produce Christian conduct, the only preachment able to bring forth those works of Christian piety by which the Church should indeed be characterized.

Now this is not to say that Christian preaching does not include the proclaiming of the Law. For the Church does preach the Law. Yet, her ministry remains always and only a ministry of reconciliation, never a ministry of law. Never does she preach the Law as an end in itself. Never does she try to accomplish by the Law

what only the Spirit of God can accomplish through the Gospel, that is, to call, gather, enlighten, and sanctify sinful men and thus make and keep them members of Christ and of His Body, the Church.

It is in this connection that we should note the important difference between Law-preaching and legalistic preaching. We may compare the Christian preaching of the Law in its proper place and at the proper time to the farmer's preparation of his fields for planting, to the plowing, disking, harrowing, by which he makes the soil ready to receive the seed. This preparation does not by itself produce any crop for harvest; in fact, by itself it will leave the field either barren or an ideal spot for noxious weeds. It is only the good seed with life in itself that will bring forth the bountiful harvest. In just this way Christian preaching uses the Law to prepare men's hearts for receiving the lifebearing, life-giving Word of reconciliation. With its demands and threats, its condemnation and curse, the Law shatters the sinner's pride and complacency, turns him to fear and despair, causes him to cry out: What shall I do to be saved? To such a one then Christian preaching can bring the Gospel that declares: You have been saved!

Legalistic preaching, however, (to return once more to our illustration) may be compared to a farmer's heedless plowing of a field in which the newly sown grain has begun to sprout. The result is ruination of the crop. The tender plants are rooted up, torn to pieces, and left to wither. But this is precisely what happens when Law is preached at the wrong time, in the wrong way, or to the wrong people. Righteousness, life, and salvation are fruits of the Gospel alone; and they are ruined and destroyed as soon as the Law is misapplied.

Such misapplication of the Law is legalism, and legalism is the insidious poison of Satan with which he continually seeks to infect and vitiate the Church's ministry of reconciliation. To keep our Christian message free from every taint of legalism, whether in public preaching or in our private dealings with each other, must be our constant endeavor. This means simply keeping at all times a clear distinction between Law and Gospel, at no time permitting the two to be mingled. In our preaching of the Law there dare be nothing of the nature of Gospel. And in our preaching of the Gospel there dare be nothing of the nature of Law. The Law can have no evangelical tone, and the Gospel no legal tone. To preserve this distinction clearly, to proclaim the Law in all its severity, the Gospel in all its sweetness, is theology's greatest task, and our ministry's highest, yes, her only art.

The dangers here are many and subtle, but in general let it be said that any softening or weakening of Scripture's denouncement of sin, any excusing or ignoring of transgression, is a confusion of Law and Gospel and renders them both ineffective. This happens in the home, when the father winks an eye at the misdeeds of his son; in school, when the teacher neglects to deal with infractions of the rules; in the congregation, when disciplinary action is avoided. It is legalism, in fact, whenever the impression is given, willfully or not, that God does not regard all sin and every sin, from original sin to the smallest peccadillo, as damnable and under His righteous curse. Repentance begins with the knowledge of sin for what it is, and unrepentance in even one point of the Law is unrepentance altogether. The Law must be preached unconditionally, that is, free from all grace, forbearance, and indulgence; otherwise it is no more the Law of God, the plow-share that prepares the heart for the Gospel, but a piece of legalism that can only harden the heart in its unrepentant state.

Still less, however, dare the Gospel be preached with any overtones of Law. This means again that it must be preached unconditionally. Here the greatest danger perhaps in our Lutheran preaching is that faith itself is made a condition of salvation. The blessed words: "He that believeth shall be saved," can in themselves be understood evangelically or legalistically. Evangelical they are and a Gospel preachment only then when they are spoken in contrast and opposition to any idea of justification by works. But they become Law, or even worse, legalism, as soon as salvation is made contingent upon "believing," as soon as faith is *demand*ed as a condition that man must meet in order to obtain salvation. It is of the Gospel's essence that it demands nothing of man, not even faith. While faith itself, that precious gift whereby the sinner joyfully appropriates and clings to the salvation already given him, faith itself cannot be called into being by any demand, but only by the evangelical, unconditional, divine assurance of God's grace in Christ, that is, by the sheer Gospel, the Word that proclaims reconciliation, unmixed with any elements of Law.

But as little as a conditional Gospel can bring a man to faith, so little can a man be kept in faith if faith is preached as a condition of his justification. For faith is essentially reliance on God's grace, yes, the certainty of God's grace. Faith relies alone on the Gospel promises of God, and they are unconditional. So too, the

believer's certainty regarding the future, regarding his preservation in faith, is unconditional, even as the promise of God to keep him to the end is unconditional.

Here, however, we meet the objection that the Scripture itself attaches a condition to the promise of final salvation in passages like the following. "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life" (Rev. 2:10). "Hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown; him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God" (Rev. 3:11f.). "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12). Now, while it is clearly true that in these and similar passages salvation is promised on condition, on condition of faithfulness, persistence, fighting, this is far from making the *certainty* of salvation a conditional one. On the contrary, to draw from these passages the conclusion that faith's certainty of salvation is conditional only is a glaring failure to distinguish between Law and Gospel, is in fact a confusion of the two and a corrupting of the one through the other. The preacher who makes this mistake has misunderstood the so-called evangelical admonition as though it were a pure Gospel promise.

To recognize this evangelical admonition and to understand and use it properly we must see clearly that Christian preaching in accordance with Scripture has a threefold form. There is first of all the Law, absolute, demanding, condemning. This is our preachment to all unregenerate, unrepentant sinners, and to all Christians insofar as, according to their old man, they still are and always will remain to be unregenerate. The second is the Gospel, equally absolute, pardoning, absolving. This is our preachment to all sinners whom the Law has terrified, whether they are unconverted or Christian, in order that they may believe and be made certain of their salvation. The third form of Christian preaching is the evangelical admonition. This is our preachment, not to the unregenerate and unconverted, but to Christians only. And its purpose is not to show the sinner who is conscience-stricken by the Law how he may escape its condemnation and be certain of salvation, but to encourage the believer who knows he is freed from the Law in sanctification, in keeping the Law.

This evangelical admonition is not Law only, or Gospel only; neither is it a mixture of the two. But it is a unique association in one preachment of both Law and Gospel with each retaining its distinct nature. The reason and the need for this form of preaching are to be found in the unique character of the Christian himself. For in this life the believer consists of two natures in one person; he is both old man and new man, both carnal and spiritual. Insofar as he is a new man, spiritual, reborn, filled with the Holy Ghost, he needs no Law whatever, but lives entirely from the Gospel by faith. Yet insofar as he is still carnal, still the old unregenerate Adam, he requires the Law and nothing but the Law. While as spiritual and carnal simultaneously, he needs both, both Gospel and Law in proper combination, though always in clear distinction.

Since he is a Christian, however, he is not equally spiritual and carnal; but the new man is always on the ascendant, always stronger, in him. He is governed by his spiritual nature, while his carnal self, though strong, does not rule him, but only clings to him and makes him sluggish in following God's will. In order then that the Christian, who is primarily spiritual but still burdened with the old man, in order that he continually increase in godliness, it is the will of God that His double Word be preached to him, Law and Gospel as evangelical admonition, and this in such a way that the Law is clearly applied to him so far as he is still carnal to *show* him what the holy will of God is and toward what ends he should employ the spiritual powers with which he has been endowed; while the Gospel is clearly applied to him so far as he is a new man to give him the joyful will and needed strength to perform the deeds of the Law. This is evangelical admonition: Law in the precept, but Gospel in the motivation - Law in the directive, but Gospel in the foundation.

Christian preaching, then, in the ministry of reconciliation can be summed up in three statements: 1. You are damned! 2. Your sins are forgiven! 3. Therefore sin no more! The first is pure Law; the second, pure Gospel; and the third, evangelical admonition. To preach each clearly and at the right time is to distinguish properly between Law and Gospel and to lead many souls to salvation.

It still needs to be said, however, and with emphasis, that even when these distinctions and principles are clearly held in theory, or for that matter, technically observed in preaching, we are still in danger of creating an altogether wrong impression and again confusing our hearers as soon as these truths are handled pedantically, mechanically. And that is what happens the moment we forget that our ministry is essentially not a ministry of Law, nor yet a ministry of admonition, but solely a ministry of reconciliation. We are preaching inadequately,

worse, we are preaching wrongly, if the Word of reconciliation, the glad news of the Gospel, does not ring out clearly, joyfully, setting the whole tone of our message.

It will not do, for instance, to admonish our Christians in regard to this point of the Law or that work of Christian piety, stewardship, let us say, and supply as motive only tag-ends of the Gospel—and even those in the form of stultifying clichés, long since worn threadbare from repetitious use. For that matter, is not the cant phrase, the mealy-mouthed jargon, which so easily becomes the trademark of the professional parson, is not this too often among us, a substitute for fresh and vigorous and simple Gospel preaching?

It seems to me, in this connection, that we are in danger of erring in either of two directions if we do not constantly remind ourselves that our ministry is one of reconciliation, a ministry that above everything else strives to appeal to the hearts of sinners in the manner of St. Paul who invitingly says: “We *pray* you in Christ’s stead, Be ye reconciled to God.” The double danger is either that we preach in such a way as to give the impression that Christianity consists mainly, preponderantly, in conforming one’s life to God’s Law, when actually it is a constant *receiving* that spontaneously brings forth fruits; or that we preach in such a way that the astounding Gospel is toned down to the dry and dreary nature of a school-room lecture with the ad nauseam repeated refrain: “This you must believe, if you want to be saved.” That is not Gospel, neither is it Law. It is moralizing, legalistic moralizing.

Where these dangers are succumbed to, it may often be without the preacher’s own knowledge or volition. Yet the effects are no less sad on that account. And it is for the preacher continually to examine his preaching to see that it conforms in tone as well as in letter to the nature of his message and the nature of his ministry. Now, the tone of his preaching will be determined by his attitude toward the content of his preaching. And the only attitude, the only tone, that is in keeping with the Word of reconciliation that he brings is amazement, joyous astonishment, that he, poor child of man, is called by God to take on his lips the marvelous message of that divine mystery which holds the angels of heaven entranced, the blessed mystery that we are saved through our Lord Jesus Christ. At whatever point this message is touched, it is nothing less than wonderful; and the only proper way to proclaim it is in tones of wonderment and joy, even as did the shepherds of Bethlehem. The preacher who has felt in his own heart the wondrousness of the Gospel will never tire of telling the news, will never tire of glorifying God for all that he has seen and heard. If the preacher is himself amazed at the wonderful tale he tells, his hearers too will be drawn and attracted to it. But this wonderment is not a matter of oratorical tricks, of the lifted eyebrow, the sweeping gesture. Rather it comes only from the heart that has been steeping itself in the Gospel.

The same tone of gladness should pervade also the evangelical admonition, even though this includes the preaching of the Law; for it is actually the Gospel, the glad Word of reconciliation, that gives to this admonition its effectiveness. The Law in this instance is only held before the believing Christian as instruction, because the Gospel has made him eager to know the holy will of God that he may guide himself accordingly. The tone of this preaching, then, should be such that it could never give rise to the thought that the Christian hearer might not want to keep the Law. Rather, he should always be addressed as a Christian, that is, as one who self-evidently delights in the Law of the Lord. Let the note of wonder and joy ring in the voice of the preacher as he discloses and unfolds that glorious, pure, and holy will of God, and his Christian hearer will take pleasure in learning that will, even as the glad words of the Gospel give him the joy and strength to do that will.

This, then, is the Church’s ministry, yours and mine, the ministry of reconciliation. As Church we have no other ministry. All our endeavors, all our activities, must be a part of this ministry or be kept separate from the Church. Does this mean that the Church really has no other proper activity? We say, none whatever! But what about such a thing as Christian fellowship, as we’ve grown accustomed to speak of it in connection with our various organizations in the congregation, for example, young people’s societies, ladies’ aids, men’s clubs, and the like?

To this we say, true Christian fellowship cannot be legislated, that is, it cannot be called into being by mere formal organization, drafting a constitution and by-laws, scheduling dart-ball tournaments. In themselves, of course, these activities are neither bad nor good; they may, in fact, be wholesome, commendable activities as such. However, they have no right to independent existence in the Church, still less can they be imposed on a

congregation as a means of creating fellowship. Fellowship in the Christian sense is a fruit of the Spirit through the Gospel. And the only justification for any organization or activity in the Church is to proclaim and apply in wider or narrower circles the Word of reconciliation. From this alone will spring true Christian fellowship, which may then manifest itself in many ways—even in dart-ball leagues.

Now it will not do with lawyer's tricks to argue that this or that endeavor of the Church, in itself unrelated to the Word of reconciliation, "contributes" somehow to the spread of the Gospel, to its preservation, or to the enjoyment of it. The endeavor must be to *proclaim* the Gospel, or it is no business of the Church.

Here it must be remembered, however, that not every proclamation is necessarily oral. When we help to build, equip, and staff a hospital in Nigeria, that is itself a proclamation, a preaching by deeds, of the great good news that we are all, black and white, fellow-redeemed. We serve the bodily needs of our Negro brethren, not in order to lure them into a position where they must hear what we preach for their souls, but first, out of Christian charity, and then, because, like our Lord Himself, we preach to the whole man, soul and body both. Christian insight into the true nature of the Gospel, an insight given by the Gospel itself, will always enable us to discern what is and what is not a real proclamation of the Word of reconciliation. We have no time to waste in our ministry on anything that is not such a proclamation.

Finally, to carry out this ministry is the purpose to which we have all dedicated our lives and our entire selves when in Holy Baptism we laid hold with the God-given hand of faith on the reconciliation that is in Christ Jesus. In our homes, in our schools, in our congregations—wherever God may place us—we are called by Him to proclaim the wonderful reconciliation, rightly dividing the Word of truth, applying Law and Gospel as each is required. This is a calling that will occupy us, with all our time and energy, as long as we live. But a burdensome task it will never be, but rather always a precious, more than that, a royal privilege. For we too can say with St. Paul to all men: "Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us." Ambassadors for Christ! We could not ask for a higher calling, a nobler ministry, than that!