

THE DOCTRINE OF RECONCILIATION Chapter 14 Its Meaning

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Transcript

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Chapter 14

Its Meaning

It may seem strange to some that we have deferred until now a consideration of the meaning of "reconciliation," and to the critical reader it must appear as a real defect. Ordinarily a writer should define the terms which he uses at the beginning of his treatise, but in this case we wish to do very much more than furnish a mere definition of the word itself. Under the present division of our subject we desire to consider more closely and definitely the thing itself. We have dwelt upon the need of reconciliation, its Author, its arrangement, and its effectuation, now we must describe more particularly what reconciliation actually is, as it concerns both God and His people. The previous chapters have been paving the way for this, and in measure furnishing materials for the same, and after what has already been presented the reader should be able to follow more easily our present discussion than if we had introduced it at an earlier stage, as it also relieves the writer from taking anything for granted. It is on the foundations already laid we now propose to build. It is also because that what we are to be engaged with concerns the more controversial aspect of our theme, that we sought to first make clear and establish from Scripture what must be regarded as the essential elements which into the equation. In seeking to ascertain more precisely the nature and character of reconciliation we must carefully distinguish between cause and effect, between the means and end. Many are confused at this point, supposing that "atonement" and "reconciliation" are one and the same—the sound of the English word "at-one-ment" leading them to miss its true sense. Unfortunately this confusion is fostered by the only verse in the Authorized Version of the N. T. where it occurs: "by whom (namely, Jesus Christ) we have received the atonement" (Rom 5:11)—unhappily few avail themselves of the marginal alternative (generally the better rendition) where it is rightly given as "reconciliation." To speak of our "receiving" the Atonement does not make sense, for it was God and not ourselves who required an atonement or satisfaction, but it is correct to say that believers "receive" the reconciliation which Christ effected for them. To "atone" is to placate or appease, to make reparation for injury or amends for wrong done another. "Atonement" simply signifies that a satisfaction has been made, that the demands of the Divine Law have been met, that justice has been honored, that God has been propitiated. The literal force of the Heb. "kaphar" (generally rendered atonement in the O. T.) is a "covering," and thus its appropriateness for this usage is clear—the sacrificial

blood covered what was an affront to the offended eye of God by means of an adequate compensation. The term is applied to the "mercy-seat" which was the lid or cover of the ark of the covenant—and therefore a Divinely-appointed symbol closely connected with the presentation of sacrifices on the day of expiation. Thus there can be no objection to rendering "Christ Jesus: whom God has set forth a mercy-seat through faith in His blood" (Rom. 3:25) so long as its purport be explained and the "blood" be duly emphasized. The principal idea, then, expressed by the word "kaphar"—"atonement" is that of averting vengeance by means of a placating offering. It is rendered "appease" in Genesis 32:20. When Jacob was about to make the dreaded meeting with Esau, he sent his servants with droves of animals before him, saying, "I will appease ("kaphar") him with this present that goes before me!" In Numbers 16:31 it is written, "He shall take no satisfaction (no "kaphar") for the life of a murderer which is guilty of death. But he shall surely be put to death," which again helps us to ascertain the force of this most-important Hebrew word, the word "satisfaction" meaning, of course, a legal compensation—none such being allowed in case of murder. Vengeance must take its course. "Moses said unto Aaron, Take a censer and put fire in it from off the altar and put on incense, and go quickly unto the congregation and make an atonement for them, for there is wrath gone out from the Lord, the plague is begun" (Num. 16:46)—here we see that "atonement" was plainly the means for propitiating Jehovah, for turning away His vengeance. Now such was the Atonement made unto God by the Lord Jesus Christ. His sacrifice was offered for the satisfying of Divine justice, for the averting of Divine wrath from His people. God sent His Son to be "the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10). The judicial displeasure of God was turned away from His Church by means of the substitutionary interposition of the Lamb, who was slain in their stead. The righteous vengeance of God was appeased by the Surety, pouring out His soul unto death. Certain effects or results followed from that. The sins of God's elect were blotted out, they were redeemed from the curse of the Law, God was reconciled to them. The Atonement was the cause, the means, the root; reconciliation was the effect, the end, the fruit. Thus the two things are clearly distinguished and should never be confounded. The very fact that the N. T. employs two entirely different words ("hilasmos" 1 John 2:2; 4:10 and "katallage" Rom. 5:11) shows plainly they are not the same—the latter resulting from the former. It is a pity that the honorable translators of the A. V. did not always preserve that important distinction. Another verse which has served to cloud the judgment of English readers is Hebrews 2:17, where we are told the Son became incarnate that "He might be merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people," which is correctly rendered (as Owen and others of the Puritans long ago insisted that it should be) in the R.V. that is, "make propitiation for the sins of the people." Because Christ made propitiation for their sins, the wrath of God was turned away from them and reconciliation was the outcome: "having made peace through the blood of His cross" (Col. 1:20) sums it up, and shows both the end and the means by which it was accomplished. That our English word "at-one" signifies to reconcile and not to "propitiate" is evident from Acts 7:26—"Moses would have set them at one again" that is, restore them to amity—the Greek word being rendered "peace" elsewhere. But at this point we need to be careful in guarding against a misconception and the drawing of a wrong conclusion. While the atonement of Christ was an appeasement, it must not be regarded as an inducement. That is, as a price which the Redeemer had to pay in order to incline God to love His people. Yet it is right here that the enemies of the Gospel have made their main attack upon that aspect of it which we are now considering. They have accused those who maintain the Scriptural doctrine of propitiation in order to reconciliation as denying the Divine benevolence, as arguing that Christ shed His precious blood in order to induce God to love sinners, that those who insist God required an appeasing sacrifice before He would be gracious unto transgressors, are guilty of grievously misrepresenting the Divine character. But Socinians are the ones who wretchedly pervert the teachings of sound theologians when they charge

them with portraying the cross of Christ as the means of changing God from a merciless Tyrant into a benevolent Being. Socinians grievously wrest the Truth when they argue that those who proclaim the propitiatory character of Christ's death teach that His death wrought a change in God, that He produced a different feeling within Him with regard to sinners. So far from that, the very men who have most faithfully and fearlessly magnified the ineffable holiness of God in its antagonism against sin and His inexorable justice in punishing it, have been the ones who also made it crystal clear that love to sinners, a determination to save His people from the curse of the Law, existed eternally in the Divine mind, that it was the love of God for His Church, His compassion for its members, which moved Him to devise and execute the plan of salvation and to send His beloved to save them by making an atonement for their sins. Christ the Atoner was provided and given by the Father for His people! It was at His own tremendous cost — by not sparing His Son, but delivering Him up for them all—that the Father supplied that very compensation which His holiness and justice demanded. We must not for a moment suppose that the atonement was in order to change the good-will of the Father toward those on whose behalf it was offered. No, He gave His elect—the objects of His everlasting and unchanging love—to the Son, and He gave the Son of His love to and for them. All that we owe unto Christ we owe unto God who gave Him. "Thanks be unto God for His unspeakable Gift" Nevertheless, the atonement was essentially necessary in order that God's love might flow to them in an honorable channel; that, so far from the glory of God being tarnished by their salvation, so far from His evidencing the slightest complicity in their sin, every Divine attribute might be placed in a more conspicuous view. So that in clothing His Church with the everlasting righteousness of His Son and adorning them with all the beauties of holiness, unto the enjoyment of an exceeding, even eternal weight of glory, God might appear "glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders" (Ex. 15:11)—let it be noted that verse is taken from Israel's song of redemption (v. 13) after the destruction of their enemies at the Red Sea. Nowhere does the love of God shine so illustriously as at the Cross. To die for a friend is the highest instance of love among mankind—an instance but rarely found. But God commends His love to men in that while they were sinners, Christ died for them—died for those who were "alienated and enemies in their mind by wicked works" (Col. 1:21). This is the most amazing feature of it. It may then be reasonably inferred that God loves whatever is lovely; but it may with equal certainty be inferred that whatever is not amiable displeases Him. Human reason, then, could never have discovered a way in which sinners should be the proper objects of Divine love. But the Scriptures reveal how God's wisdom found a way by which He has made the loathsome objects worthy of His love! In the atoning death of Christ all their pollutions are washed away, and in His perfect righteousness they stand graced before God with all the merits of their Surety—more worthy than the highest of the holy angels. So far from teaching that the atonement of Christ was the procuring cause of God's love unto His people, we emphatically insist that God's love for them was the moving cause of giving Christ to suffer and die for them, that their sins might be atoned for. It is not that there was insufficient love in God to save sinners without the death of His Son, but that He determined to save them in such a way as gloriously exhibited His righteousness too. The love of God wrought in a way of holiness and justice. He did not choose to receive sinners into His favor without giving public expression to His detestation of their iniquities, but, as the entire universe will yet learn, cried, "Awake O sword against My Shepherd and against the Man that is My Fellow says the Lord of hosts, smite the Shepherd" (Zech. 13:7), so that "He might be just and the Justifier of him that believes in Jesus" (Rom. 3:26). God's love triumphed at the cross, yet not at the expense of Law! Let the reader judge, then, whether the Socinian or the Calvinist furnishes the most Scriptural and blessed exhibition of the Divine character and government. The main objection made by those who formally reject the Atonement is, that it is inconsistent with the love of God. God needed nothing, they say, but His own goodness to incline Him to show mercy unto sinners, or if He did, it could

not be of grace, since a price was paid to obtain it. But in the light of what has been pointed out above it should be quite evident that such an objection is utterly pointless, confusing the moving cause of mercy unto sinners with the manner of showing it. The sacrifice of Christ was not the cause but the effect of God's love. The love of God was amply sufficient to have pardoned the vilest sinner without any atonement, had God deemed it consistent with the holiness of his character and the righteousness of His government. David was not wanting in love for his son Absalom, for "his soul longed to go forth unto him," but he felt for his own honor as the head of the family and the nation, which, had he admitted him immediately to his presence, would have been compromised and the crime of murder connived at. Therefore, for a time he kept him at a distance, and when introduced, it must be by a mediator. As Winslow so sublimely expressed it: "It is a self-evident truth that, as God only knows, so He only can reveal His love. It is a hidden love, veiled deep within the recesses of His infinitude, yea, it seems to comprise His very essence, for 'God is love.' Not merely loving and lovely, but love itself, essential love. Who, then, can reveal it but Himself? 'In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent His only-begotten Son into the world that we might live through Him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins' (1 John 4:9,10). But behold God's love! See how He has inscribed this glorious perfection of His nature in letters of blood drawn from the heart of Jesus. His love was so great that nothing short of the death of His beloved Son could give an adequate expression of its immensity.

'God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life' (John 3:16). Here was the great miracle of love. Here was its most stupendous acknowledgment—here its most brilliant victory—and here its most costly and precious offering. 'Herein is love.' as though the apostle would say 'and nowhere but here.' That God should punish the (intrinsically) Innocent for the guilty—that He should exact His co-equal Son to cancel the guilt of rebels—that He should lay an infinite weight of wrath on His soul, in order to lay an infinite value of love on ours—that He should sacrifice His life of priceless value for ours, worthless, forfeited and doomed—that the Lord of glory should become the Man of sorrows—the Lord of life should die and the Heir of all things be as 'He that serves.' O the depths of love unfathomable! O the height of love unsearchable! O the length and breadth of love unmeasureable! O the love of God which passes knowledge!"

"Great is the mystery of godliness" is the Spirit's own express declaration. Therefore the finite mind, especially in its present condition (impaired by sin and clouded by prejudice) must expect to encounter features that are beyond its comprehension. Nevertheless, it is both our privilege and duty to receive all that Holy Writ reveals on it and beg God for a spiritual understanding of the same, and refuse to reject any aspect of the Truth, because, we no doubt, are unable to perceive its harmony with some other aspect. The Scriptures plainly teach that the Atonement of Christ was an appeasement of the wrath of God against His people, yet they are equally clear in making known that the Atonement was not made as an inducement of the love of God unto His people. The Saviour did not shed His blood in order to procure God's love for His Church, rather, was God's gift of the Redeemer the supreme expression of His love for it. The Atonement appeased the wrath of God in His official character as the Judge of all; the love of God is His good-will unto the elect as the covenant God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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