

THE DOCTRINE OF RECONCILIATION Chapter 19 Its Scope-Continued

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Transcript

THE DOCTRINE OF RECONCILIATION

Chapter 19

Its Scope-Continued

Some times the "world" signifies the Gentiles in general, in contrast from the Jews in particular, as in "If the fall of them (unbelieving Israel) be the riches of the world," which is explained in the next clause—"and the diminishing of them (Jews) the riches of the Gentiles," and "if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world" (Rom. 11:12,15). In other places the "world" refers to the non-elect, as in "the Spirit of truth whom the world cannot receive, because it sees Him not, neither knows Him" (John 14:17), and "I pray not for the world." In Luke 2:1 it is the profane world that is in view: "there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that the world should be taxed"—yet even that included only those parts of the earth which were subject to the Romans: whereas in John 15:18-25 it is the professing world—it was the religious sections of Judaism Christ alluded to when He said "if the world hate you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you." In Romans 4:13 the "world" signifies the Church, for when Abram is there said to be "the heir of the world" it manifestly expresses the same idea as when he is termed "the father of all them that believe" and "the father of many nations" (Rom. 4:11,18). When Christ said of Himself "the Bread of God is He which comes down from heaven and gives (not merely offers) life unto the world" (John 6:33). He must have meant His Church, for all who are not members of it remain dead in sins until the end of their careers. We have just as much right to cite the words "the world knew Him not" (John 1:10) as a proof that not a single member of Adam's race knew Christ—when aged Simeon did (Luke 1:28-30)—as we have to argue that "Behold the Lamb of God, which takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29) means the sin of all mankind. When it is said "the whole world lies in the Wicked one" (1 John 5:19) it cannot mean every one alive on earth, for all the saints are excluded; and "all the world wondered after the Beast" (Rev. 13:4) excepts the faithful remnant! It should be quite clear to any candid and careful reader that, taken by itself, the word "world" in 2 Corinthians 5:19 supplies no proof and furnishes nothing decisive in enabling us to determine the scope or extent of reconciliation, for that term is an indefinite and general one: more so than usual here, for in the Greek there is no definite article—literally "reconciling world unto Himself." It should also be obvious that this verse calls for a careful and detailed exposition: pointing out its relation to what precedes and its connection with what follows, seeking also to define each separate expression in it. To the best of our ability we will now set ourselves to this task, and in so doing

seek to show that everything in it and the setting in which it is found obliges us to regard the "world" reconciled to God as connoting His Church, and not the entire human family. Under our next main division when we shall deal with our reception of the Reconciliation, or our response to the Gospel call "Be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20), we hope to enter more fully into the scope of the whole context (from v. 11 onwards): suffice it now to begin at verse 17. Nor shall we even attempt an exposition of that much misunderstood verse, rather will we limit ourselves to its central truth, namely, that of regeneration. "Therefore if any man is in Christ he is a new creature"—literally "a new creation" (v. 17). That is, if anyone is favored to be "in Christ," first, by federal constitution or legal representation, then it will sooner or later follow that he is "in Christ," second, by vital union or regeneration. Whatever is meant by "old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" no explanation of those words can possibly be right if it clashes with Romans 7:21-25 and Galatians 5:17, for Scripture is perfectly harmonious. "And all things are of God who has reconciled us to Himself by Jesus Christ." When expounding the "all things are of God" Chas. Hodge rightly pointed out that, "this is not spoken of the universe as proceeding from God as its Author, nor does it refer to the providential agency of God by which all events are controlled. The meaning is: 'but all is of God,' that is the entire change of which he had been speaking. The new creation experienced by those in Christ is 'out of God' (Greek), proceeding from Him as its efficient cause. It is His work." Proof that it is His work and that "God" here refers to the Father in His official character, appears in what immediately follows: "who has reconciled us to Himself by Jesus Christ." But that last clause does something more than supply evidence that the glorious work of regeneration issues from the Father as its originating source. It also explains to us the meritorious cause by which the new creation is brought into existence—regeneration is the effect of reconciliation. The connection then between verses 17 and 18 is plain. Having spoken of the new creation in the former, the apostle proceeded to point out the legal foundation on which that new creation rests, namely, God's having been pacified by the work of His Son and that work having purchased rich blessings for His people. It is not simply as our Maker, but as a reconciled God, that He quickens His people into newness of life. On verses 17 and 18 the eminent Puritan, Stephen Charnock declared, "God is first the God of peace before He is the God of sanctification: 'and the very God of peace sanctify you wholly' (1 Thess. 5:23). The destruction of the enmity of our nature (against Him) was founded upon the removing of enmity in God (against us). There had been no sanctification of our natures had there not been a reconciliation of our persons." Thus, there had been no regenerating of us by God until He had been reconciled to us. "All the powerful effects and operations of the Gospel in the hearts of men are from God as reconciled by Christ, not from God as Creator" (Charnock). What has just been before us in the immediate context of 2 Corinthians 5:19 provides a clear index to the scope of reconciliation, being of equal extent with the new creation! It may be stated either way: the ones whom God regenerates are those to whom He has been reconciled; all to whom He was reconciled, in due course He makes new creatures. If the one is universal, the other is; if the one is limited, the other must be. "And has given us the ministry of reconciliation" (v. 18). The "us" refers first to the apostles, and second to all whom God has specially called and qualified to act as His heralds. "The ministry of reconciliation" is but another name for the proclamation of the Gospel, except that it is more specific, having in view that particular aspect of the Gospel which is concerned with the doctrine of reconciliation. Exactly what that consists of in its essential elements is stated in verses 19-21. First, "To wit (or 'namely') that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself" (v. 19). The relation of verse 19 to verse 18 is also quite clear. In the former the apostle said "All things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself by Jesus Christ," which signifies (as shown in an earlier article) has turned away His wrath from His fallen people and received them into His favor by virtue of the mediation of His Son. But here he informs us, that transaction was not one which began of late to be done by Him, but rather had engaged

His mind and will in His eternal counsels. "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself." As the Church was in Christ from everlasting, as her Surety and Head, so God was in Him from everlasting as His ambassador, making peace for those who had revolted against Him. The reference is not to a present process by which God is little by little winning the world back into allegiance with Himself, but to something actually accomplished. God is already propitiated. "God in Christ" signifies the covenant-God of His people, for out of Christ "our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29). "God was in Christ" speaks then in the language of the "everlasting covenant," and that embraced none but the elect. Definite light is thrown upon what "world" it was unto which God is reconciled by ascertaining the force of that clause "God was in Christ reconciling" it. In His ancient designs He formed the purpose of reconciliation in, by and through the Mediator. The identical idea is conveyed whether it be said we are "in Christ" or God was "in Christ acting toward us," namely that He designed to show favor unto us as a covenant God. God never was and never will be "in Christ" toward any other persons but His Church. Redemption was not the work of the Son only. The Father appointed the Mediator, receiving the stipulated price from Him, and imputes the full value of it to His believing people. The Saviour distinctly affirmed "the Father is in Me" (John 10:38). As the elect were in Christ mystically, federally, legally, the Father was in Him authoritatively and efficiently as His Plenipotentiary. Yet the ultimate reference is to God's being in Christ imminently by His eternal decree. "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them." It is in that last clause we have the most decisive proof of all that the "world" there cannot possibly signify mankind in general, for most certainly God does impute their trespasses unto all who are without Christ. The great problem which confronted the Divine government was how sin could be remitted without righteousness being compromised, but since God has received full satisfaction to His broken law, He has laid aside His official wrath and justice can no longer clamor for punishment. The pardon of sin is one of the main branches and fruits of reconciliation. Not to impute sin is to forgive it. "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man unto whom the Lord imputes not iniquity" (Ps. 32:1,2). Here then is the "world" to which God is reconciled—the pardoned, the justified, the elect (Rom. 8:33). Not only do the verses preceding, not only do all the terms used in 2 Corinthians 5:19 oblige us to understand the "world" there as an indefinite term, including all "the children of God that were scattered abroad" (John 11:52), but the closing words of the passage compel us to take the same view. "For He has made Him to be sin for us who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him" (v. 21). Here we learn why God does not impute their trespasses unto His believing people. It is because they were transferred and imputed to their Surety, and accordingly vengeance was executed upon Him. Here too we learn that not only is there no charge laid to the account of God's elect, but that, positively, they are constituted the righteousness of God in Christ—all the merits of His obedience being charged to them. Thus the "reconciled us" of verse 18, the "their" of verse 19, and the "us" and "we" of verse 21 all refer to the same company, and that company is one and the same as "world" in verse 19. If it is inquired, since it is the Church, the mystical body of Christ, that is in view in 2 Corinthians 5:19, why did the Holy Spirit designate her by the term "world?" First, to show it was not the fallen angels. No Mediator nor Reconciler was provided for them. Second, to show that the love of God in Christ was not restricted unto the Jews (as they supposed) but included also a people to be "taken out of the Gentiles for His name" (Acts 15:14). Third, to represent the freeness of God's grace. "The whole world lies in the Wicked one" (1 John 5:19). "In themselves God's elect differ nothing from the rest of the world till grace prevent them. They were as bad as any in the world, of the same race as cursed mankind." Fourth, "to awaken all that are concerned to look after their privilege, which is come to all nations. The offer is made indifferently to all sorts of persons where the Gospel comes, and this grace is effectually applied to all the elect of all nations" (T. Manton). None should be stumbled by a particular redemption which pertains only to the Church of God

being expressed in such extended terms as "the world" and "all men" in the N. T. The employment of such language is fully accounted for by the change of dispensation, from the local religion of Judaism to the international reach of Christianity. The Mosaic economy was entirely exclusive, whereas that of the Gospel is inclusive. In anticipation of that, we should note the indefinite language used by the Prophets when predicting the blessings of Messiah, as extending beyond Judea and bestowing indiscriminately. "The Desire of all nations shall come" (Hag. 2:8). "All kings shall fall down before Him and all nations shall serve Him" (Ps. 72:1). "O You that hear prayer, unto You shall all flesh come" (Ps. 65:2). "I will pour out My Spirit upon all flesh" (Joel 2:25)—interpreted by Peter as accomplished on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:16)! Such language was as universal as any employed by Christ and His apostles, yet it certainly did not signify that every individual the earth over would become a subject of Christ's kingdom and a partaker of His saving benefits. There are other general terms used in the N. T. besides "world" which cannot be taken in an unlimited sense. For example "every man." We read of one to whom the Lord gave sight that he "saw every man clearly" (Mark 8:28). The kingdom of God was preached "and every man presses into it" (Luke 16:16). The early Christians sold their possessions and goods "and parted them to all, as every man had need" (Acts 2:45). "God has dealt to every man the measure of faith" (Rom. 12:3 but see 2 Thess. 3:2). "Then shall every man have praise of God" (1 Cor. 4:5). Other passages could be quoted where "every man" cannot be understood without qualification. "The Gentiles" is another general expression which is restricted by what is predicated of them in each case. For instance "on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts. 10:45). And again "God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18). "Declaring the conversion of the Gentiles" (Acts 15:3). "The salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and they will hear it" (Acts 28:28). Let those who say of John 3:16 or 2 Cor. 5:19 "we keep by the plain declaration of the passage," apply the same principle to the verses quoted in this paragraph! "And having made peace through the blood of His cross, by Him to reconcile all things unto Himself; by Him, whether they are things in earth or things in heaven" (Col. 1:20). These words bring before us another aspect of our theme, and one which has been generally overlooked by writers on this subject. By means of His mediatory work Christ has not only effected a reconciliation between God and the whole election of grace, but He has also closed the breach which existed between the celestial hosts and the Church. At the creation of the world the holy angels sang together and even shouted for joy (Job 38:7), "because though it was not made for them, but for the children of men, and though it would increase their work and service, yet they knew that the eternal Wisdom and Word whom they were to worship (Heb. 1:6), would 'rejoice in the habitable parts of the earth' and that a large part of 'His delight would be with the sons of men'" (Prov. 8:31) [Matt. Henry]. Likewise, when the grand foundation of the new creation was laid, we read of "the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, good will toward men" (Luke 2:13,14). When God made the earth and placed man in it the angels rejoiced in the work of their Creator's hands, and so far from being jealous at the appearing of a further order of beings, they took delight in them. But upon man's revolt from his Maker and Lord, they would be filled with disgust and holy indignation. The sin of Adam (and of the race in him) not only alienated man from God, but also from the holy ones on high. No sooner did our first parents fall from their original state, followed by their expulsion from Paradise, than God employed the holy angels as the executors of His vengeance against them: represented by the cherubim with the flaming sword [for He "makes His angels spirits and His ministers a flame of fire" (Heb. 1:7)] to keep them out of Eden and from the tree of life (Gen. 3:24). Yet now they are "all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation" (Heb. 1:14). And, my reader, it is the blood of the cross which has brought about that blessed change. The atonement of Christ has made the celestial hosts the friends and helpers of His people. It was not that "the things in heaven" were alienated from God, but that Adam's fall introduced disruption into

the universe, so that the inhabitants of heaven were alienated from those on earth; but Christ has restored perfect concord again. His sacrifice has repaired the breach between the elect and the holy angels; He has restored the broken harmony of the universe. As one has well pointed out, "If Paul could address the Corinthians concerning one of their excluded members, who had been brought to repentance, 'To whom you forgive anything, I also' (2 Cor. 2:10), much more would the friends of righteousness (the angels) say in their addresses to the great Supreme, concerning an excluded member from the moral system, 'to whom You forgive anything, we also.'" For this reason we find "there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repents" (Luke 15:10), for another has been joined to their company as worshippers of the Most High.

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