

Some Words About...

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Katallage (reconcile)

The Greek word katallage means reconciliation. It does not appear in the Old Testament but is used in 2 Maccabees. Reconciliation indicates a change for the better in relationship.

Pre-New Testament

In the pre-New Testament context reconciliation with God implied a change in God's attitude. 2 Maccabees hopes that God will "listen to your prayers and be reconciled to you" (1:5), and it tells of a young man who said that God was angry with his people but that "he will be reconciled with his servants again" (7:33), and the victorious fighters asked God "to be completely reconciled to his servants" (8:29).

New Testament

The New Testament sees reconciliation not as a change in God but as a change in the situation as a result of Christ's sacrifice.

Paul's letter to the Romans was his way of introducing himself to the various Christian congregations in the most important city in the Mediterranean area. Among them were Gentiles with many different pagan backgrounds and Jewish Christians with their ethnic and religious heritage. Paul's message was the same for all, a proclamation of God's love and of Jesus Christ's sacrifice for their sins. But he dealt carefully with their different outlooks.

In the fifth chapter of Romans Paul tells his friends that while they were still sinners Christ died for them, and he points out that if "we were reconciled to God through the death of his son, how much more, being reconciled, shall we be saved in his life" (5:10). "And furthermore, we are joyful in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, having now received reconciliation through him" (5:11). The message of joy applies to all, because all have received reconciliation through Jesus.

Later Paul addresses the Jewish Christians, speaking as a Jew to Jews. Then he speaks to the non-Jewish congregations in a way that does not ignore the differences between them but emphasizes that all come before God as sinners needing reconciliation and receiving it through Jesus.

Specifically addressing the Gentile churches in Rome, Paul asks if God has cast off the Jews, and he answers "God forbid!" (11:1) And if it should appear that there is some disconnect between God and the Jews, Paul would have his Gentile friends make nothing of it, "because if by their dismissal the world is reconciled, their restoration is life from the dead" (11:15).

In 2 Corinthians Paul says "All things are from God who reconciled us to himself through Jesus Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation" (5:18). The Christian's reconciliation to God through Jesus is not the culmination of communion with a domesticated God but the result of realignment with an outreaching God. Reconciliation is not a devotional relationship but an energizing relationship. God's love does not stop with the individual Christian. To try to confine God's love there is to reject the very nature of God's love.

Paul's explanation of the Christian's ministry of reconciliation is that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19) and that he "has entrusted to us the word of reconciliation" (5:19). We must be "reconciled to God" (5:20). We have been given the word (the logos, the primordial and eternal, the incarnate and intimate, the meaning-giving and explanatory Word) of reconciliation. Jesus, the Word, reconciles the

individual sinner to God but also reconciles the world to God. Christians have been given that word of reconciliation.

The need for reconciliation is real. God's love is for all but can be received only by those who accept it. God loves the sinner, but sinning is rejecting God and rejecting God's love.

Reconciliation is the adjusting of one thing or person to another. The promises God made to Israel and the promises God makes to us in Jesus Christ are the pattern of divine intent, and the difference between that pattern and our actuality demands reconciliation. To look to God to change is to think as pagans thought when they sacrificed to idols to appease their gods and cause them to change the way the gods were acting.

Today

When we look at Paul's admonition first to the Jewish Christians and then to the Gentile Christians, we are liable to read too many twenty-first-century assumptions into first-century conditions. Judaism was the one significant monotheistic religion in the first century, and Christianity was a sect of Judaism as far as the Roman government was concerned. Monotheism was not the socially and politically respectable entity that it is today. On the contrary, it was likely considered unpatriotic by the government and out-of-sync by the various religions that surrounded it. So when Paul emphasized his Jewishness and yet called himself an Apostle to the Gentiles, he was speaking as an energetic monotheist on both counts, and the reconciliation he proclaimed was to the one true God, not to a sectarian deity. The destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. left Judaism without its traditional form of reconciling God to this people, and the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross assumed a new and wondrous significance.

Three things are necessary if we are to be reconciled to God. First, we need to be aware of our need for reconciliation — that we are sinners who cannot accomplish reconciliation on our own. No amount of spiritual exercise can reconcile us with God. No mystical experience reconciles us with God. We cannot devise the method or set the terms for reconciliation. Second, God must offer reconciliation; this he has done in Jesus Christ. Third, we must accept God's and respond to it.

Contemporary Christianity alternates between emphasizing the reconciliation of the individual — "It's me, it's me, it's me, O Lord, standin' in the need of prayer" — and the reconciliation of the world — "Christ for the world we sing: the world to Christ we bring." Both emphases are important, and both are emphasized by Paul in 2 Corinthians 5. They are not presented as opposite choices but as two sides of the same coin. Both are implicit in the logos, Jesus Christ.

We have been given the ministry of reconciliation for ourselves, for other individuals, and for humanity as a whole. To fulfill it, we must emphasize both words: ministry and reconciliation. There is a subtle danger in the Christian clergy being called ministers. Too much emphasis falls on the first of the two words, and the ministers are in danger of deciding for themselves the nature and sphere of their ministry. If the clergy were called reconcilers, their whole understanding of their calling might change. Whatever one's special field of activity, the ministry is a ministry of reconciliation.

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