

“Ambassadors for Christ!” (Part 3): “The Ministry of Reconciliation”

2 Corinthians 5.11 – 6.2

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Last week we started taking a close look at two key verses in this passage from 2 Corinthians, verses 18 and 19: “All of these new things are from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. In other words, God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ, by not counting people’s sins against them. He has trusted us with this ministry of reconciliation.” I said that when somebody becomes a Christian there’s a critical change that takes place in our relationship with God, that we become *reconciled* to God by receiving the grace that God offers us in Jesus Christ. In the original Greek that’s an economic term; it has to do with balancing the scales. What Christ did on the cross accomplished something that we could never do on our own, and we are now free to live in the joy and freedom of God’s amazing grace.

But, as I hinted last week, there’s a second element to these verses about reconciliation. It’s apparent in the clauses that tell us God “gave us the ministry of reconciliation” and God “trusted us with this ministry of reconciliation.” There’s something that *we get to do* because of what *Christ did for us*. After the *vertical* reconciliation – being reconciled to God – there is a *horizontal* reconciliation – a ministry that *we do* with the world. It’s that horizontal reconciliation that I want to talk about today.

Some of you may know that back in 1967 our denomination created a document called “The Confession of 1967.” It’s part of our *Book of Confessions*, part of the Constitution of our church. It’s not very long – only about ten pages – but it’s important, and worth reading. I’ve put a few copies at each narthex so if you’re interested you can pick it up and take it home. The confession centers around the theme of reconciliation, and around these two verses in 2 Corinthians 5. The central affirmation of the confession is this: “In Jesus Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself. Jesus Christ is God with man. He is the eternal Son of the Father, who became man and lived among us to fulfill the work of reconciliation. He is present in the church by the power of the Holy Spirit to continue and complete his mission. This work of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is the foundation of all confessional statements about God, man, and the world. Therefore, the church calls men to be reconciled to God and to one another.” That’s the basic theme, and it flows right out of these verses in 2 Corinthians. *First* comes our reconciliation with God; *then* we engage in a ministry of reconciliation with the world.

The first half of the confession explains the vertical dimension, God’s work of reconciliation. It talks about Jesus: his coming, his ministry, his death, and his resurrection. It talks about what Christ

accomplished through his death on the cross, using phrases like “the sacrifice of a lamb,” “a shepherd’s life given for his sheep,” “atonement by a priest,” “ransom of a slave,” “payment of debt,” “vicarious satisfaction of a legal penalty,” and “victory over the powers of evil.” All of that comes pretty much straight from the New Testament. The confession talks about Jesus Christ as both the Savior and the Judge of all mankind; and about sin, and God’s love, and how “God expresses his love in wrath,” and how “God took on himself judgment and shameful death in Jesus Christ, to bring men to repentance and new life.” This is all *solid, foundational* stuff. It is well-grounded both biblically and theologically. There’s a lot of *meat* here. Then there’s more about the work of the Holy Spirit, and the new life that Christ offers, and the centrality of the scriptures. All of it is right on target. *So good, so rich.*

That’s the first half of the confession. In the second half, the confession talks about the horizontal dimension. We move from Part I, “God’s Work of Reconciliation,” to Part II, “The Ministry of Reconciliation.” It talks about the ministry that we are called to engage in with the world. It talks about the mission of the church, about our call as Christians to “carry the gospel to all men whatever their religion may be and even when they profess none.” That’s *evangelism*, folks – in a Presbyterian confession! Then, the confession talks about reconciliation in society, and it lifts up four issues that were pressing in the late 1960s, four issues that remain pressing today: race, war, poverty, and confusion in human sexual relationships. There’s one paragraph on each of those four issues. The church is not called to be indifferent to these issues; these issues *matter*; Christians ought to *care* about these issues. (I was glad the presidential candidates talked about some of those issues at the debate Monday night, though honestly I was disappointed in what both of them had to say. Racism, for example – that’s a *spiritual* issue; it’s a failure to recognize all people as equally created by God and equally precious in God’s sight; and I didn’t hear either candidate saying anything remotely close to that.) Then the confession talks about the means by which the church can make a difference in the world around us, and the tools that God has given us to use. You might be surprised at what gets named: preaching, teaching, praise, prayer, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper. Notice that *advocacy* is not on the list. *Politicking* is not on the list. *Passing resolutions* is not on the list. *Sound bites* and *social media* are not on the list. There’s a brief concluding section – Part III, “The Fulfillment of Reconciliation,” which talks about the reign of Christ and the various biblical images that illustrate what that will look like, like the heavenly city, the new heaven and the new earth, the marriage feast, and other similar images drawn from the New Testament. The confession concludes with a benediction. It’s a *fabulous* little document, very wise, and extremely solid both biblically and theologically. It was also *balanced* – balanced between the vertical and horizontal dimensions of faith, and balanced in that it lifted up *both* evangelism *and* social concerns as part of the ongoing mission of the church.

Fifty years later, we’ve lost a lot of that balance. It would be difficult for me to stand up here and tell you precisely how or why that imbalance has occurred, or even to prove it to you in a definitive way. But I know that my perception, after thirteen years in the ordained ministry, after sitting through a *lot* of presbytery meetings, after watching events unfold that have caused our denomination to rupture, after countless conversations with pastors of all sorts of theological stripes, is that our denomination, and others like it, has been giving more weight to the *horizontal* dimension of reconciliation than the *vertical*; and within the horizontal dimension, more attention to social issues than to evangelism. That is

to say, we don't talk nearly as much as we should about what Christ did for us on the cross and what that means for our lives, or about sharing the gospel with non-Christians. We've given most of our attention to social issues. I'm not saying that it's wrong to talk about social issues – race and poverty and war and sexuality *ought* to matter to us Christians – but what's happened is that to a certain extent those issues have eclipsed scripture and salvation and evangelism. People on the outside look at us and wonder if we care about anything *other* than social issues. They wonder if we care about the cross, about evangelism, about scripture. We *used* to. The Confession of 1967 makes it clear: not all that long ago we *did* care about these things. But there's been a lot of water under the bridge. I have one colleague who boasted some years ago that in the church he serves, they don't sing *any* hymns about the blood of Christ. I have another colleague who posted a rant on Facebook on Good Friday last year about how she doesn't believe that Jesus needed to die for our sins. I have a friend in another denomination who tells me he has trouble trusting Presbyterian pastors because his impression is that we play fast and loose with scripture. After the last General Assembly a magazine article poked fun at us, saying that we seem to pass more resolutions than we have members. You witness enough stories like that, and you begin to believe we really do have a problem. You become pretty convinced that somewhere between 1967 and the present we lost our way. In our efforts to save the world, Jesus got put on the back burner. Which is both ironic and sad: ironic because how can we do any *saving* if we're not willing to be saved ourselves, and sad because so many Presbyterian churches are just crumbling at the seams. There's life-giving water right in front of us, and yet we seem unwilling to drink it.

If we are to have a future, we need to restore the balance. We need to get the cross back on center stage. We need to be as concerned about sharing the gospel as we are about race and poverty and war and sexuality. We need to get back to what Paul was talking about: *first*, our reconciliation to God through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ; then, flowing out of that, a ministry of reconciliation to the world that includes *both* sharing the gospel with non-Christians *and* addressing societal ills.

So how do we do that? How do we restore the balance that we have lost? Well, we're trying to beef up our evangelism efforts around here, and you'll hear more about that another time. You also know that we've significantly increased our adult education offerings in recent years, and I hope you're taking advantage of that. We need to encourage other Presbyterian congregations to do the same.

But beyond those efforts, maybe we need to spend more time thinking about the cross. Maybe we need to spend more time exploring just *what exactly Jesus accomplished* through that saving death on the cross, and what difference it makes for you and me. I've become pretty convinced that I haven't talked about the cross as much as I need to, and I'll probably be doing some things differently during Lent and Holy Week this coming spring to begin to make up for that. And I certainly hope you'll make an effort to be here for our Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services. That's the most important 24-hour period in the entire Christian year, and too many Christians *aren't there*. We need to care more about the cross. We need to care more about the fact that Jesus died for your sins and for mine, and we need to do a better job helping people understand what that means for them. What *does* it mean? Well, in a word, it means reconciliation. It means *freedom*. It means *life*. It means *joy*. Christ died ... *for you!*

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