

In the last issue of THEMELIOS Dr. Morris, who is Warden of Tyndale House, Cambridge, offered a wordstudy of Redemption in the New Testament. He here presents a comment on another aspect of the vocabulary of Atonement which has given rise to controversy.

II

THE VOCABULARY OF ATONEMENT

by Leon Morris

Many modern scholars hold that reconciliation is the fundamental New Testament view of the atonement. They do not so often point out that this concept is applied to the work of Christ in no more than four passages, namely Rom. 5.10f.; 2 Cor. 5.18-20; Eph. 2.16; Col. 1.20ff. Admittedly each of these passages is important, but it is clear that reconciliation is not the way in which the New Testament writers habitually viewed Christ's work. This is still so even when we admit that the idea is present in some passages where the precise term is not found. For example, when we read of 'making peace' the process

meant is essentially that which we call reconciliation. But even the addition of passages like these does not bring the number of references to reconciliation to anything like that of, say, justification. In our day men prefer to think of reconciliation and the like and to dismiss justification as a legal concept foreign to the central idea of the gospel. We prefer to think of God as a forgiving Father than as a righteous Judge. But it is important to bear in mind that our theology must be based on the Bible, not on contemporary habits of thought. The men of the Bible shared neither our predilections nor our prejudices.

They delighted in legal imagery and used concepts like justification, the law, covenant, etc., with great freedom. It is our task to follow them in what they have to say and not to read our own ideas back into their words. All this is not to say that reconciliation is unimportant. It is a very important category and we do well to give it its due place. But we must not exaggerate it either.

THE MEANING OF RECONCILIATION

Fundamentally the idea in reconciliation is that of making peace again after a quarrel. We do not use reconciliation for good relations in general. We use it for those good relations which follow when a quarrel has been made up. Thus, if I were to visit you one evening when your friend Mr. X was present, and your friend and I got on well together you would not go around next day saying 'Mr. X and Dr. Morris were reconciled at my house last night.' That would be quite the wrong word. Of course, if this were not the first time your Mr. X and I had met, if we had known one another at some time in the past and quarrelled violently and you were able to make us see reason so that we became of one mind again, then you could talk of reconciliation. That would then be the right word to use. Reconciliation stands, not for good relations generally, but for those good relations that follow on the healing of an estrangement. In strictness reconciliation is reconciliation. It points to original good relations which have been disrupted and then have been restored

(even though we do sometimes use the word even where there is no stress on an earlier harmony). All this fits the Bible picture, for there we see harmony, then enmity, and then harmony again. The Creation narrative at the beginning of Genesis shows us man as dwelling in Eden in perfect fellowship with God. There we see man living the life for which he was destined. There is unclouded fellowship between man's Maker and man, and that surely is God's plan for mankind. That is the kind of existence in which we ought to be sharing.

THE MAKING OF ENMITY

Now there is no surer way of ruining a state of fellowship than by one person trying to thwart the purposes of another. If you set your heart on doing something and somebody else frustrates you, gets in the way and completely prevents you from doing what you want, then it is difficult for you not to feel annoyed. This is the kind of situation in which people lose their tempers and quarrels develop. This happens whether the will which is being thwarted is being exercised in the right direction or the wrong one. I recall seeing a very small boy out walking in the park with his father. As they passed a pond the little fellow saw a lovely water lily and nothing would do but for him to go immediately into the pond and get it. Father refused with some firmness and a decided, though I hope temporary, coolness arose between father and son. The little fellow's heart was set on the lovely water lily. But he was thwarted in his design and he gave

expression to his displeasure in no uncertain manner. And what we can see naked and unashamed in the case of the little child we can recognize in our own hearts. We do not, of course, always allow ourselves to show it. But when we are prevented from executing our pet designs we find it difficult to remain calm.

This is the case too when our designs are good and right, and not merely selfish as in the case we have been considering. Thus your social reformer may well find that his project for the betterment of the downtrodden is opposed, hindered, and thwarted by opposition. He perhaps sees vested interests making money out of human misery and those vested interests resisting tooth and nail the reforms that he is seeking to introduce. And in that situation we would not think him a better man but a worse if he felt completely unmoved. We think that a good man in the face of such provocation must show righteous indignation. There are occasions when wrath is the only right attitude for a highly moral man.

ENEMIES OF GOD

It is something like this that the Scriptures have in mind when they speak of the divine wrath. Immediately after the Creation story we have the account of the fall of man and the earlier harmony between God and man is never restored. From that time onwards man has always been sinful and his sin represents his thwarting of the divine pattern, his settled opposition to the

divine will, his attempt to overthrow the divine purpose.

We can see this most easily when the sin of one person affects another. Thus a murderous attack may leave the victim crippled for life while the perpetrator of the outrage is undiscovered and goes scot free. We feel that this is a situation which outrages justice and as we contemplate the ruined life we are angry that a wicked man should accomplish such havoc. Perhaps even more is this the case when we see the sins of the fathers literally visited upon the children. The drunkard, for example, may provide such ill conditions in his home that his children grow up without a chance in life. The lazy man may so corrupt his children that they grow up without ideals. Wherever the lives of little children are permanently harmed by the evil their parents do we find it impossible to remain calm. So we see that sin provokes wrath.

Sin is always the opposing of God's good purpose. Even if we cannot see it ourselves, the effect of the sin is there. If sin does nothing else it makes of a man a sinner. Thus the selfish man, precisely because he is a selfish man, is prevented from being the gloriously unselfish creature that he might have been. And if we look closely into it, every sin represents the setting of the will of the creature in opposition to that of the Creator. It means replacing the good that might have been with evil of some kind.

Now since God's purposes are always good this means that the righteous wrath of God is visited towards the sinner. The result is that man can be spoken of as God's enemy and the

Bible does not hesitate to do this. It was 'while we were enemies' that 'we were reconciled to God' (Rom. 5.10), and Paul can remind the Colossians that they were 'in time past alienated and enemies in (their) mind in (their) evil works' (Col. 1.21). Many other passages could be quoted. The Bible is quite clear on the fact that the sin of man has made man God's enemy.

Now an enemy does not mean someone who is just a little way short of being a friend. An enemy is a person in the opposite camp. An enemy is out to destroy all that one stands for. In the case of God and man it is usually thought in modern times that the enmity is all on the human side. Man is pictured as a sinner and therefore a rebel. He has rejected God's authority. He has set himself in opposition to God. But it is to be borne in mind that the biblical term *echthra* usually indicates reciprocal hostility; (for example, in Luke 23.12 we read that Herod and Pilate had been at enmity between themselves). It is true that there are passages where a one-sided enmity is spoken of as in Rom. 8.7: 'the mind of the flesh is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can it be'. Yet even here the divine opposition is not overlooked for the following words are 'they that are in the flesh cannot please God'. Moreover it must be borne in mind that the fact that there is an enmity at all is due first and foremost to the unyielding demand of God for complete uprightness in man. Sinful man by and large is not hostile to God. He is not worried by his sins, indeed he does not think of them as

sins. They are imperfections, flaws, minor peccadilloes, and he sees nothing very terrible about them. He is not worried by them and he cannot imagine why God should be. We should be clear in our own minds that the fact that there is enmity at all is due to God's demand on man, to God's insistence that man live righteously, and to God's attitude when man does not comply.

Now if of two men Jones says, "Smith is my enemy" whereas Smith says "Not at all! I am peaceably disposed towards men in general and Jones in particular", then it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that there is enmity from the side of Jones. The term 'enemy' is used of Smith, not Jones. But clearly Jones cannot be acquitted of enmity. So in the case of God and man. If the word of God insists that men are God's enemies though they do not naturally think of themselves as opposed to Him then it seems impossible to avoid the conclusion that there is in God that which we can scarcely avoid calling enmity towards sinful man. This is not a case of citing proof texts. It arises from the whole thrust of biblical teaching. It is one of the hard facts of existence. God and man are enemies because of God's demand for righteousness. God is implacably opposed to all evil and that fundamentally is why there is an enmity.

THE WAY TO RECONCILIATION

Now when there is an enmity the way to reconciliation is by dealing with the root cause of the quarrel. Unless this is faced there can never

be any real and lasting peace. There can be nothing better than a patched up truce. Real peace, genuine reconciliation takes place when the causes of the enmity are sought out and dealt with. Thus it may be that you have a quarrel with your friend. In the heat of the moment you say things you ought not to say and cause him to retaliate in kind. Your friendship is disrupted by a furious quarrel. But presently you calm down and you say to yourself 'I was a fool to have quarrelled with John. We have been friends for years. I ought never to have said those stupid things'. Then you reflect further on the matter and you decide to take the initiative and seek reconciliation. What do you do? You put your pride in your pocket and apologize. You say, 'Look here, old man, I am very sorry for what I said the other day. I withdraw it all unreservedly. I apologize from the bottom of my heart'. As far as in you lies you take the cause of the enmity right out of the way. If it was a matter of money that had not been paid you pay it. If it was a letter that should have been written you write it. If it was a duty that had been left undone you discharge it. Whatever the precise reason for the quarrel, the path to reconciliation lies in getting to grips with the root cause of the enmity and dealing with it.

That is what makes the concept of reconciliation helpful to the New Testament writers when they seek to talk about the cross. The whole Bible witnesses to the truth that the cause of the enmity between man and God is man's sin. Apart from that they would be in complete

fellowship. Because of it they are enemies. The way to reconciliation then is the way of dealing with man's sin. And when Christ died on Calvary's Cross He dealt with sin finally and effectually. He took it out of the way. This particular way of viewing the atonement does not say how sin had to be dealt with, whether by the paying of a price, the winning of a victory, the offering of a sacrifice, the liquidation of a debt, or what you will. There are other ways of viewing the atonement which deal with this. All that reconciliation does is to remind us of the facts of the enmity and of the complete putting away of sin that Christ effected. He got to grips with the cause of the enmity and dealt with it. Thus Paul can say 'For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, shall we be saved by his life; and not only so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation' (Rom. 5.10f.). Notice here that the reconciliation is something objective, something outside man. It is something that we have now 'received' and which accordingly must be conceived as having some existence before we received it. It scarcely needs saying that reconciliation is an affair between persons, and it must be received before it can be held to be fully effective. Nevertheless there is a sense in which reconciliation was wrought by Christ first, and only then offered to us. There was reconciliation wrought out on Calvary before there was anything in man's heart to correspond.

This means that there is a Godward side to reconciliation, a fact that is often overlooked in modern discussions. It is usually pointed out that the New Testament never speaks of God as being reconciled to man, but rather of to man as being reconciled to God. 'God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself. . . we beseech you on behalf of Christ, be ye reconciled to God' (2 Cor. 5.19f.). But too much should not be made of this. While it is true that God's attitude to man is an attitude of love and nothing must be said to obscure this great truth, and while it is also true that in the past some theologians have made nonsense of the basic Christian position by an unworthy view of God as a vindictive tyrant, yet it is true, too, that in the process of forgiveness God's righteous indignation against the sin of man cannot be overlooked. God's opposition to every form of evil is very real and is not to be dismissed with a mere shrug of the shoulders. If there is to be a reconciliation at all then the deepseated enmity must be dealt with. And the New Testament writers assure us that it was dealt with.

It is most important to be clear on this lest we replace an inadequate view of God with an inadequate view of Christ. We may give up the view of God as vindictive. We may reject the idea that God is implacable. We may retain a firm hold on the love and the compassion of God. But if what Christ did has no Godward aspect, then effectively we take Christ out of the work of reconciliation altogether. If what Christ did had no effect on God then we must conclude that quite

apart from Calvary God would still be the same to us.¹ Ultimately this view means that Christ's death accomplished nothing.

We have already pointed out that the concept of reconciliation as such does not say how sin is dealt with, but only that it is dealt with effectually. However one of the greatest passages on reconciliation does at least give us a hint. It tells us 'that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, not reckoning unto them their trespasses, and having committed unto us the word of reconciliation. We are ambassadors therefore on behalf of Christ, as though God were entreating by us: we beseech you on behalf of Christ, be ye reconciled to God. Him who knew no sin he made to be sin on our behalf; that we might become the righteousness of God in him' (2 Cor. 5.19ff.). Here reconciliation is linked in the first place with God's not reckoning our trespasses to us and in the second with the fact that God made Christ 'to be sin on our behalf'. This latter passage is generally misquoted. People say 'He was made sin' or 'He became sin'. We should not overlook the fact that the verb is active and that God is the subject. God, none else and none less, made Christ to be sin for us. This must surely be taken with such passages as Gal. 1.3,13 which says that Christ became 'a curse for us', with the agony in Gethsemane, and with the cry of dereliction. All these passages point us to the horror of dealing with sin. Nothing seems adequate to explain them apart from the view that Christ was bearing to the full the penalty of the world's sin when He hung on the cross.

This was the means whereby reconciliation was effected. If Christ bore our sins, then there was no need for God to impute them to us. Therefore reconciliation may be spoken of both as a not reckoning of our transgressions to us and as God making Christ sin for us.

'BE YE RECONCILED'

We should note also from this passage the appeal to men to be reconciled. This is important. Reconciliation has many values as an illustration of what Christ has done for us, not the least of which is that it points at one and the same time to a finished work and to the necessity for a response to that finished work. Let us go back for a moment to our illustration of the human quarrel. It is not a perfect illustration but it helps. We supposed earlier that, after you had quarrelled with your friend, you decided to seek reconciliation. But even if you make such amends as are in your power, if you go back to him and apologize, and do whatever else needs to be done, then that does not necessarily mean that reconciliation is effected. Your friend may look you in the eye and say: "I've met your sort before! After what you said the other day I don't care what you do, I don't care what you say, I will never call you friend again." What can you do? As far as in you lies you have taken away the cause of the enmity. You have dealt with the sin that rought about the -quarrel. But it takes two to make a reconciliation, and your friend is adamant. He will have none of it.

There is nothing more that you can do. Reconciliation remains an unrealized possibility.

So on the cross Christ dealt with the root cause of the enmity. He made the way back to God wide open. Man may now be reconciled to God. But that does not mean that in fact he is reconciled. If he persists in his sinful way, if he rejects God's proffered hand then there is no reconciliation. So it is that Paul can appeal to his readers "Be ye reconciled to God". Reconciliation preserves for us the great truth that God in Christ has done everything that is necessary and alongside it the other great truth that if we are to be reconciled to God then we must respond to the gracious divine offer.

(1.) Cf. James Denney, 'Reduced to its simplest expression, what an objective atonement means is that, but for Christ and His Passion God would not be to us what He is' (*The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, London 1918, p. 239). He also says "The alternative is to say that quite independent of any value which Christ and His Passion have for God, God would still be to us what He is. But this is really to put Christ out of Christianity altogether' (*ibid.*). We must avoid taking up a position with such disastrous consequences.