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The Reconciling God

[Reconciliation is God's gift,] "because we cannot, on our own, become reconciled to God. It is the divine sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross that made reconciliation possible."¹

Radical Atonement

Much of the focus of studies and teaching on reconciliation, especially for Protestants, has been on the cross of Jesus Christ and the individual's restored relationship with God.² It is his sacrificial death that cleanses us from sin and creates the way for a new relationship with God the Father. Acknowledging the centrality of Jesus as the good news of who God is and what God has done is a vital emphasis. Both Barth and Bonhoeffer endeavored to correct theology that was losing this center and becoming more anthropocentric than theocentric. They discovered that a message focused more on human experience of God than the God of human experience can become dangerously manipulated for hu-

1. Nalunnakkal, "Come Holy Spirit," 14.

2. See Baum, "A Theological Afterward," 184–92, for contrasts between more private and individualistic interpretations of reconciliation and the more social approach of Roman Catholics. See also Wan, *Power in Weakness*, 87, in which biblical exposition reveals that *new creation* is a communal not an individualistic term.

man ends, rather than leading to transformation into Christlikeness.³ Barth and Bonhoeffer worked to reclaim the centrality of Christ's life, death, and resurrection for the church and its participation in God's purposes for the world.

This Christ-centered emphasis correlates with the emphasis of much Christian theology throughout the ages. Paul stated, "I longed to know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2).⁴ Luther stated, "true theology and recognition of God are in the crucified Christ. The cross of Christ is the only instruction in the Word of God there is, the purest theology."⁵ Eberhard Jüngel wrote that "the basic aporia into which European theology has blundered" under the dictatorship of metaphysics is to "think of God without thinking of him simultaneously as the Crucified."⁶ Miroslav Volf more recently affirmed Paul's central focus on the cross as the basis from which Volf's reflections on "exclusion and embrace" derive.⁷

However, there have been times in which certain views of the cross and certain Christ-centered emphases have been used to obscure the biblical focus on salvation as reconciliation with God and with others, and to marginalize the Holy Spirit in particular. As central and wondrous as the cross is to healing and restoring our relationship with God, problems arise when the cross is seen exclusively through the interpretive lens of penal substitution.⁸ Such framing of God's work of salvation can both inhibit our willingness to trust a Father who demands such sacrifice and eclipse the union with God that Jesus' *life, death, and resurrection* create. In other words, it can obscure the ontological reality that we are saved in and through our having become united with God in Jesus Christ.⁹

3. Though contextual theologians have rightfully challenged as a modernist fallacy the false dichotomy between an emphasis on our subjective experience of God and one on a supposedly objective view of the God of our experience, this author intends to honor the appropriate ways in which Bonhoeffer and Barth shifted the emphasis in their theology from anthropological preoccupations to a more central Trinitarian reference point.

4. Cf. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 25.

5. Luther, *Operationes in Psalmos*, 34. See also Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation*, 1518.

6. Jüngel, *God as Mystery of the World*, 39. "The cross of Jesus Christ is the ground and measure of the formation of metaphors which are appropriate to God." Jüngel, *Theological Essays*, 65.

7. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 25.

8. Schwöbel writes, "It is interesting to note that the model of reconciliation we see developed [in Romans 5:1–11] is wider than any notion of sacrificial death or penal substitution." "Reconciliation," 19.

9. Cf. Barth: "Sound theology can only be 'unionistic,' uniting God and man." "A

Rather, atonement begins in Jesus' birth, when he comes to be one with us and to share fully in our frail humanity. Jesus is tempted in every way as we are, yet offers a perfect response of obedience on our behalf and in our place. Reconciliation is not merely the paying of a debt but the healing and re-creation of defiled humanity through Jesus' uniting his life with ours, and turning our fleeing humanity, through his love and obedience, back toward the welcoming arms of the Father. Because our oneness with Christ begins with his birth and life,¹⁰ Paul clarifies that we share in his baptism and in his death.¹¹ "We have been crucified with Christ, it is no longer we who live but Christ, and the life we now live, we live by the faith of him who loved us and gave his life for us" (Gal 2:20).

If we are going to let reconciliation bear its real fruit in our lives, we must accept that these are no longer our lives, that we have died, and the life we live is Christ's alone. Thus, Christians are not merely justified by grace, but transformed by grace, for we have been put to death by grace and given a new life and identity.¹² Even so, the Holy Spirit is to be honored as the one who indwells God's people and enlivens us to live as those who have been re-created in Christ and are in the process of being recreated daily. As Christoph Schwöbel writes, "The Spirit is the transforming power that allows believers to participate in Christ's way from death to life and so establishes, on the basis of the reconciliation achieved in Christ, a relationship to the love of God in Christ that cannot be broken by any power, not even by the most powerful cosmic forces."¹³

Theological Dialogue," 172

10. "Christ's Incarnation is already an act of salvation." Ware, *Orthodox Way*, 78. See also Calvin: "In short, from the time when he took on the form of a servant, he began to pay the price of liberation in order to redeem us." *Institutes*, Vol. 1, Book II, Chapter XVI, Section 5, 507.

11. Gal 3:27: "And all who have been united with Christ in baptism . . ."; Rom 6:4; Gal 2:20.

12. Cf. Kathleen Hughes, who notes how our celebration of the Eucharist reflects such transformation: "Participation in the liturgy means participation in the life, death and rising of Jesus, *truly* dying and rising with him, *truly* laying down our lives. Participation means working mightily for the establishment of the reign of God by letting the spirit of God work in us to complete Christ's work on earth." "Liturgy and Justice," 50–51.

13. Schwöbel, "Reconciliation," 20.

Three Moments of Salvation

Creation in God's Image

Because Karl Barth took so seriously the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, he understood salvation as being composed of three great moments of God's work among us. Jesus points continually to the Father and the Father's great love. Salvation, seen as communion with God, begins when God from all eternity chooses to create us as part of God's own people.¹⁴ Creation instantiates the first moment of salvation, with grace, freedom, and intimate relationship for humans with God.¹⁵ Human identity is stamped with God's own regal image, with the gift of participation in God's gracious rule and creativity. As Rikk Watts writes, "the biblical language indicates that all human beings—not just the Pharaohs of Egypt—in their physicality, their maleness and femaleness, and their interplay between individual and collective, are intended to be living pictographs of Yahweh the Creator, enlivened by his breath . . . and ultimately by his indwelling Spirit."¹⁶ Shalom with God, with others, and with all creation offers a hopeful image of God's saving intentions in this first moment of creation.

Wonderful Exchange in Christ

Barth describes Jesus' life, death, and resurrection as the second aspect of salvation since God's original gift of shalom was shattered by humans who refused grace. "And this is our rebellion: the fact that we want everything, all that is noble, helpful and good . . . but not this thing, namely, to allow ourselves to be made open, prepared and made fit for God by God. *Grace* is God's sovereign realm. But our enmity toward God . . . the evil that we do; this precisely is our *hostility* toward *Grace*. . . . We cannot abide deity."¹⁷

14. "God in this Jesus has loved us—truly all of us—from eternity, because God has chosen to be our loving Father and had chosen us all to become his beloved children in order to save us all and draw us to himself" Barth, "Teach us to Consider," 165. "Creation is . . . the area and ground of God's great final work of redemption" Barth, "Theological Dialogue," 172.

15. This is not in any way to diminish the wonder of God's creation of the nonhuman world and to place humans over and against the natural world. That is just not the focus of this book at this point.

16. Watts, "New Exodus/New Creational Restoration of the Image of God," 21.

17. Barth, *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life*, 19–20.

As Bonhoeffer writes, we have claimed a false identity of “*sicut deus*” rather than “*imago Dei*.”¹⁸

Not content to trust God and God’s ways, humans have asserted their own self-defined identity and the pretense that they could be “like God” making their own judgments as “authors” of their own lives. J. R. R. Tolkien offers a powerful depiction of such hubris in *The Silmarillion* with Melkor, who is not content to draw his life and creativity from the flame of the One, Iluvatar. He withdraws to the barren places to seek his own autonomous source of life and creativity, and thus provokes dissonance and distortion. As with human history, dominance and oppression become Melkor’s ways, rather than loving resonance with God’s gracious creativity.¹⁹

God’s intentions of shalom for humankind remain, however, and it is with a view to extend salvation to every family in every nation on earth that God forms a covenant people. It is through this community that light will extend to all the nations.²⁰ Their identity is again stamped with a regal image, as the beloved of God (Isa 43), and they are given a covenant purpose to be God’s people through whom the nations might glimpse the wonder of God’s saving love and be drawn toward this light. They are the one on behalf of the many.²¹

Even so they prefer to live on behalf of themselves, rejecting God’s gift of gracious election, with each one doing what is right in his or her own eyes. Still, a story of covenant faithfulness emerges where God’s long-suffering love endures generation after generation of rebellious children, with God repeatedly offering all that is needed for shalom. The vine of Israel, planted to grow in response to God’s love for them and to bear fruit for the nations, has to be pruned, divided, and transplanted continually until only a stump remains.²² And it is out of this stump that God raises the True Vine, Jesus Christ, Savior and Messiah.

18. See Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 111–14.

19. Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 3–12.

20. Cf. Wright, on God speaking to Abraham, “through you all the nations on earth will find blessing”: “The vision is universal. . . . So Abraham is actually a fresh start for the world. This promise is God’s great manifesto. This text is God’s declaration of his mission, which is nothing less than the blessing of all nations.” *Knowing the Holy Spirit*, 98. “Israel in the Old Testament was not chosen *over against* the rest of the nations, but *for the sake* of the rest of the nations.” Wright, *Knowing the Holy Spirit*, 100.

21. For more on the concept of “the one and the many” see Torrance, *Worship*, 47–52, and Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 47–51.

22. See Isaiah 11:1–9.

Thus for Barth the second movement of God's salvation is in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. God comes in Christ to fulfill the covenant and become more than a mere example of true humanity. Christ becomes the very fount from which our new life springs. Christ doesn't merely show the way, but he is the way, offering his own life for the transformation and ongoing sustenance of all people. "This union between God and man has not been made only in Jesus Christ but in him as our representative for the benefit of all men [sic]."²³ Christ takes on himself the burdens that enslave, divide, and oppress, and offers a "wonderful exchange" of the peace of living from a new center in God.²⁴ His teaching and his life also cleanse the foul and hopeless images of life by which we have been cowed and subdued. T. F. Torrance describes the incarnation as Jesus Christ receiving the Holy Spirit "with all of his consuming holiness into the human nature which he took from our fallen and alienated condition."²⁵ As Walter Wangerin depicts in "The Ragman," this is a glorious exchange indeed, for he takes our bleeding wounds, our bitter personalities, our hopeless alienation into himself, and offers instead participation together in the very life of God.²⁶

One can see a contemporary analogy of this wonderful exchange and its impact in the film *The Green Mile*. John Coffey (J. C.) is unjustly convicted and on death row waiting for execution, yet is smuggled out by the prison wardens in the dead of night because of his gift of healing.²⁷ They drive him to the home of the chief warden, where the warden's wife lies dying from a brain tumor. Her beauty has been ravaged by the tumor, and her Southern charm distorted, so foul epithets hurl forth from her mouth. She has been cut off from hope, from mutuality in relationships and from wholeness. J. C. is able to see the tumor and to offer her the kiss of life in

23. Barth, "A Theological Dialogue," 172.

24. James Torrance, *Worship*, 15, 46, 89, 90. "The Greek word *katallassein* means quite literally 'to effect and exchange,' . . . So it comes to mean 'to reconcile,' to exchange friendship for enmity, love for hatred, peace for hostility." Torrance, *Worship*, 90.

25. T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 247.

26. Wangerin, "The Ragman," 3–6.

27. *The Green Mile*, directed by Darabont, 1999, DVD. Similar to Greg Jones's practice in *Embodying Forgiveness*, I also include in this book references to narrative, literary, and film works "not in order to make points accessible to nontheological audiences. . . . My references to these works are integral elements of my theological arguments" Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness*, xv. In addition, the very nature of this book, on the power of the Holy Spirit to work through the imagination, invites the use of imaginative ways of conveying ideas.

which he sucks out of her mouth all that is killing and defiling her, and absorbs it into his own being.

This healing encounter offers a powerful depiction of Ephesians 2:14 and Galatians 3:28 where Paul describes Jesus Christ's destruction of dividing walls and reconstitution of us as united in Christ across ethnic, socio-economic, and gender barriers. A white Southern privileged woman being kissed and healed by a black, incarcerated man on death row evokes the wonder of Jesus' gift of healing through his life and death. In Jesus' willingness to submit to false accusation, incarceration, and the death penalty he swallowed up death forever and created one new humanity in which there is "neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male and female" (Gal 3:28).²⁸ Whereas John Coffey sucked out and swallowed the disease of the warden's wife to fully restore her, Jesus, Son of God and Son of Man, is able to absorb the sins of the world and offer cleansing and re-creation to reunite us with God and with others.

As Peter Kuzmic clarified when preaching on Ephesians 2 in the midst of bombing raids on his city during the Balkan conflict, "Christ the Reconciler [has] 'made the two one' by destroying the enmity. . . . God does not kill the enemy, but the enmity. . . . The enemies are candidates for salvation. They are loved by God."²⁹ He went on to explain that the cross of Christ makes all the difference. We worship a God "who would not shed the blood of his enemies, but would in his divine redemptive plan allow the blood of his righteous son to be shed so that we, enemies of Him and of each other, may be forgiven and reconciled."³⁰

Barth describes the reconciling exchange wrought by the Father and the Son: "What happened [in the death of Jesus] was not an act of God's enmity against man. No, on the contrary, because God in this Jesus has loved us—truly all of us—from eternity, because God has chosen to be our loving Father and has chosen us all to become his beloved children in order to save us all and draw us to himself, for that purpose, he has in Jesus written off, rejected, crucified, slain, not *us* but our old man, however mightily he may live and clamor in us. Precisely for our sake, so that we ourselves may live as free men [sic], he has in the death of Jesus removed the old man in *us*, washed him away, consumed him in fire, smoke, and ashes."³¹ Similarly,

28. Similarly, Isaiah prophesied that the Lord of Hosts "will swallow up death forever" (Isa 25:7).

29. Kuzmic, "Reconciliation in Eastern Europe," 53.

30. *Ibid.*

31. Barth, "Teach us to Consider," 165.

Father Greg Boyle writes, God's love "doesn't melt who you are, but who you are not."³²

Outpouring of the Spirit

The third moment of salvation for Barth is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit into those who share in Christ's death and new life. "[God] teaches us in the complete fire of his Holy Spirit to consider that we must die, that Jesus has died for us. My dear brothers and sisters, if only a spark of this fire should fall into the heart of a man, then—however he be—for this man nothing is lost, everything is won."³³ Jesus promised to come with the Father and dwell in his people by the Holy Spirit. Our baptism means both dying with Jesus and rising with him that we may be filled with his Spirit, and thus new life, new identity, and new visions of life. Baptism is a profound identification with Jesus' death and resurrection, calling for radical transformation from living by one's own inclinations to living in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Eucharist is an ongoing recommitment to join with Jesus in his dying and rising, and to live by his Word and Spirit, rather than the seductive nourishment of lesser identities.

Aversion to death in Christ is often where Christians remain stunted in growth and thwarted in reconciliation. Letting go of lesser identities and refusing to feed the hungry monster of the old self³⁴ is difficult in contexts where self-actualization, self-fulfillment, and self-realization form the trinity of exalted achievement.³⁵ A close relative's recent death was a reminder of just how difficult it is for us to "die." Though a lifelong Christian and a giving person, her highest value was independence. Thus, loss of power and control were utterly repugnant to her. But her last few weeks of life ushered in complete vulnerability, relinquishment of almost all possessions, and

32. Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart*, 103.

33. Barth, "Teach us to Consider," 166. There are significant debates about Barth's pneumatology, whether he does justice to the personhood of the Holy Spirit, and whether he is Catholic and/or evangelical in his views of the Spirit's work. For a helpful summary see Buckley, "A Field of Living Fire: Karl Barth on the Spirit and the Church," 81–102. It is beyond the scope of this book to enter into this debate. That God works through the Holy Spirit to enliven people with the life of Christ and draw them into God's reconciling grace is this book's operating claim and is consistent with Barth's own pneumatology.

34. See Bantum, "Why Christians Can't Be Post-Racial."

35. David Brooks describes American culture as having moved from a "culture of self-effacement to self-expression." Brooks, "The Humility Code."

utter feebleness. She could accomplish nothing and had to put her trust totally in God's love for her in Christ. Her moment of greatest freedom and peace came just two days before she died, when she could finally let go and pray, "Thy will be done."

The process of my relative's dying provides a radical vision of what it means to die into Christ and to live by the power of the Holy Spirit. It requires complete relinquishment of the illusions of autonomy and independence. This should not surprise those who would be one with Jesus, for Jesus exemplified this in every way. "I can do nothing on my own . . ." he humbly acknowledged. "I do only what the Father does" (John 5:30). He lived his life in utter dependence on the Father and for the glory of the Father by the power of the Spirit.³⁶ Complete vulnerability and Spirit-filled dependency marked his life from his homeless birth to his degrading death.

Furthermore, Jesus says to those who would be his disciples, "Take up your cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). Vision, power, and life in the Spirit remain stunted because we so often prefer to live by the dictates of our old identities rather than from a crucified self and new life in Christ. The Holy Spirit comes to empower God's people to say, "Thy will be done," to cleanse the scales from our eyes that blind us to God's vision of reconciliation, and to free us in vulnerability to become the beloved community—God's new creation in Christ. Perhaps resistance to this comes because we have yet to discover what John Perkins learned, that "to deny yourself is not to abandon yourself but to throw yourself into the loving arms of God."³⁷ Perhaps God's invitation to new life in the Spirit has been muted because many Christians have ignored the wonder of God as triune. Perhaps it is because the central tangible reminders of the drama of death and new life in the Spirit have become so reduced in meaning.³⁸

Baptism and communion in numerous churches have been relegated to the margins of church life, seldom celebrated and then only as a brief and seemingly extraneous part of the service. Rather than being nourished on

36. Jesus was conceived by the Spirit, anointed by the Spirit in baptism, driven out into the wilderness by the Spirit, prayed in the Spirit, and was raised from the dead by God's Spirit. Cf. Moltmann: "*Christ's history in the Spirit* begins with his baptism and ends in his resurrection." *Source of Life*, 15.

37. Perkins, "Contexts of the Journey of Reconciliation." Cf. Jones: "This does not involve . . . the 'death' of selves through annihilation. Rather it is learning to see one's self and one's life in the contexts of communion." *Embodying Forgiveness*, 6.

38. "The gospel is thus a truth widely held, but a truth greatly reduced." Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, 1.

life in the Spirit that flows from dying and rising with Christ, some Christians have often focused almost exclusively on “justification by faith.” As Gordon Fee writes, “Any careful reading of Paul’s letters makes it abundantly clear that the Spirit is the key element, the *sine qua non*, of all Christian life and experience. To put that in theological perspective, it needs to be noted that, contrary to historic Protestantism, ‘justification by faith’ is not the central theme of Pauline theology.”³⁹ And whereas the early church practiced communion regularly as a joyous reminder of Christ’s death and resurrection and believers’ participation by the Spirit in his dying and rising (Rom 8:11), communion in many denominations has come to be an irregular and somber event focused primarily on forgiveness of sin.

God offers us nourishment for life through both Word and Spirit and comes to meet with us at the Lord’s Supper. It was at his last supper with his disciples that Jesus pledged his peace to them and reminded them of their true identity, as branches of the true vine. In his vulnerable hours before crucifixion, he reminded them that they too were utterly dependent, that “apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15). They were not servants but friends, into whom Jesus would pour his Spirit that he might be present with them always and lead them in his way. Thus, this third moment of salvation, power to live out restored shalom with God and God’s people, is rooted in and constantly nourished by *communion* experienced at the table.⁴⁰

Brueggemann identifies three ways in which the Spirit nourishes God’s people to live into the vision of God’s reconciliation by God’s power. First, “At the table we drink to another reality and toward another order.”⁴¹ Here the Spirit renews a vision of what it means to follow Christ and to be released from our own petty identities and agendas.⁴² Here we celebrate the kingdom of God in our midst and deepen our imaginative capacity to perceive God’s realm.

39. Fee, *Listening to the Spirit in the Text*, 37.

40. The obvious irony remains that this is such a contentious and divided place for Christians. Barth asserted: “Now we shall have to win and assert freedom for our one Lord Jesus Christ in spite of these divided Lord’s Suppers.” “No Christian Marshall Plan,” 1331.

41. Brueggemann, *Living Toward a Vision*, 143.

42. Cf. Cavanaugh: “To participate in the Eucharist is to live inside God’s imagination. It is to be caught up into what is really real, the body of Christ. As human persons, body and soul, are incorporated into the performance of Christ’s *corpus verum*, they resist the state’s ability to define what is real.” *Torture and Eucharist*, 224–25.

Second, at the table, the Spirit reminds us that “true life is in mystery and not in management.”⁴³ Jesus is the host and center of all that happens at the table. We join with others as welcome guests who relinquish control and receive the wonder of communion with God and with those very unlike ourselves.

Third, at the table, it becomes clear that “we are the Lord’s and not ours.”⁴⁴ Our lives belong to God and have become earthen vessels for the treasure that God would pour out for the world. Brueggemann warns that it is all too easy to betray the mystery of the table and to try to take the ministry of reconciliation into our own hands as a task we must accomplish: “we doom our *shaloming* to failure, either in pride or despair, before we even begin.”⁴⁵ He continues, “But it does begin at the table. It always does. And the promise to us is that the church that lets this historical mystery fashion its life can hear the word and can be empowered to live in and toward the new age of *shalom*.”⁴⁶

Reconciliation will never be our achievement, but is God’s symphonic gift to us through three movements of creation, redemption, and renewal. Thus, “*reconciliation is more a question of spirituality than a strategy*.”⁴⁷ This accords with the crux of our argument that if we neglect the present work of God through the Holy Spirit in reconciliation, we enfeeble our efforts, reducing them to a human-centered activity rather than participation in God’s great work. The invitation to drink from the wells of new creation through reliance on the Holy Spirit who empowers us to share in the joyous community of the triune God.

43. Brueggeman, *Living Toward a Vision*, 143.

44. *Ibid.*

45. *Ibid.*, 144.

46. *Ibid.*

47. Kuzmic, “Reconciliation in Eastern Europe,” 54. Cf. Schreiter, *Ministry of Reconciliation*, 16.