

The SCRIPTURE STANDARD

*Pleading for a complete return to Christianity
as it was in the beginning*

Vol. 65 No. 2

FEBRUARY, 1997

BE YE RECONCILED TO GOD

Almost every news-bulletin these days, highlights the extremely high level of strife and animosity which permeates nearly every country in the world, and it's difficult not to despair for the future. There is still no "ceasefire" from the I.R.A., and "nail bombs" killed and maimed many, only yesterday, in Palestine. What then, are the chances in 1997 of seeing any signs of reconciliation amongst all the warring factions.? Not much, it seems. It becomes increasingly clear that man will have to be reconciled to his Maker before he can truly hope to be reconciled to his neighbour. A temporary truce is not quite the same as a genuine reconciliation.

In 2 Cor. 5:18-20 we read *"And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to Himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given unto us the ministry of reconciliation; To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us; we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God."*

The New Testament introduces us to some grand and glorious themes, REPENTANCE: REFORMATION: JUSTIFICATION: CONVERSION: REGENERATION: REMISSION: RESURRECTION: ELECTION: RESTORATION: RESTITUTION are just a few. We could add to this list, of course, and surely one of the most beautiful additions would be RECONCILIATION. We can't always measure the importance of a subject by the number of times it receives mention in the N.T. but Paul (exclusively) advances this subject in his epistles to the Romans, Ephesians, Colossians, Corinthians and the Hebrews. In a discussion with a Christadelphian, recently, it was inferred that the importance of a matter is proportionate to the number of times it is mentioned in the N.T. As far as I am concerned a matter requires *only one mention* in scripture to be important, and as important as anything else; albeit referred to fifty times. When we remember that God **"was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself"** there can be little danger of us over-emphasising the importance of reconciliation. Indeed, Paul aware of the continual process of reconciliation between men referred to **"THE reconciliation"** - the reconciliation to end all reconciliations. This reference (in Rom. 5:11) is translated by the KJV as **"The Atonement"** (the only mention of the word in the N.T.) but is correctly rendered 'reconciliation' in the Revised Version.

We are no strangers to the need for reconciliation between man and man. Squabbings and animosities began early in the human family (it begins in the Kindergarten over a teddy-bear) and gets more deadly and serious the older we grow. Time would fail us to enumerate areas of human conflict, ranging from fully fledged wars to terrorist activities (e.g. Northern

Ireland).

We all recently witnessed unbelievable levels of hatred and vicious animosity in Bosnia and one is left wondering if such wounds can be healed - if a place can be found for reconciliation. Apart from actual bloodshed there are the ongoing 'wars' *on a personal level* in the home, in business and in politics. Matrimonial disharmony is also rife and divorces common-place. Couples now change partners, it seems, as often as the furniture. What a little matter can rupture harmony between humans.

THE IRRECONCILABLE

The very term 'Reconciliation' carries with it a bitter sweet association. Nothing can be more satisfying to the contemplation than the thought of two warring factions being brought together again in peace and harmony. However, the mention of 'Reconciliation' presupposes that estrangement exists and that the parties are (or were) at odds with one another. Fortunate is the individual who has never experienced any form of alienation, and thus has no need of conciliation. Paul (Rom. 14:10) recognises that alienation, even in the Churches, will not be unknown and asks "**But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? For we shall all stand before the judgement seat of Christ!**" *Our function*, Paul states, is merely that of a humble servant and the role of Judge is restricted to, Jesus. "**Let us not, therefore, judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumbling block, or any occasion to fall, in his brother's way.**" This is the awesome responsibility upon each one of us that not only do we not *set at nought* our brother, but that nothing we say or do can possibly cause him *to stumble* much less to fall. *The value* which the Lord placed upon harmony amongst men is well seen in the following: "**If thou bring thy gift to the altar and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee, leave there thy gift before the altar and go thy way. First be reconciled to thy brother and then come and offer thy gift.**" This is a beautiful Christian law in the setting of a Jewish ceremony. The altar and the gifts may have passed but *the principle* remains.

Jesus is the Prince of Peace. "**For He is our peace, who had made both one and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us . . . for to make in Himself of twain one new man, so making peace. And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body, by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby!**" (Eph. 2:14). Paul is here saying that God hath reconciled by Christ, both Jew and Gentile together but we might be excused for doubting this as we watch (on TV News Bulletins) the Jews and Gentiles blowing one another to bits with bombs and shells. Paul qualifies the matter, of course, and says that the two are reconciled *in the one body, in the Church* of Jesus Christ. Outside the Church the old scores remain to be settled and the carnage goes on. Inside the Church swords are beaten into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks but only those *who come to Christ* can be expected to participate in such reconciliation. **Those reconciled to Jesus are usually reconciled to one another.** Those who come to learn at the feet of Jesus will find others there. However, in coming to Christ we risk other alienations for Jesus said, "**Think not that I am come to send peace on earth; I came not to send peace but a sword. For I am come to set the son at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a mans' foes shall be they of his own household .**" There will, then, be situations where reconciliation is difficult, if not impossible. *Error* can never be reconciled with *truth* just as oil cannot be mixed with water. Jesus said two cannot walk together except they be agreed. Paul said, "**Be not unequally yoked with unbelievers; for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? . . . Wherefore come ye out**

from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing, and I will receive you." (2 Cor. 6:14). Certain things are almost incapable of reconciliation and truth must never bow the knee to error in the cause of reconciliation - rather the reverse. We must abandon self-will and humbly come to the feet of Jesus. We must change.

THERE MUST BE CHANGE

If there is to be reconciliation in Northern Ireland there must be change - not that Protestants should become Catholics, or vice-versa, but that all should become followers of Christ. The problems between white men and black, rich and poor, east and west, left or right, can all be resolved if there is a willingness to change. This indeed is the meaning of the Greek word (*katallasssein*) which is translated 'Reconciliation,' a change from a disposition of enmity to one of friendship. William Barclay, in "N.T. Words" explains that the Greek '*allasssein*' means *change of any kind* (e.g. Stephen accused of wanting to *change* the customs of the Jews (Acts 6:14) or Paul accusing the ungodly of wanting to *change* God's glory into totem poles (Rom. 1:23); or where the inspired writer tells us that the world will be *changed* as a garment is changed (Heb. 1:12). *Katallasssein*, however, generally means the change involved in man's *reconciliation with God* - (i.e. a change in mental attitude from hostility to one of affection) I quote from Wm. Barclay only because I know nothing of Greek, but other Greek Concordances will confirm the above. The word implies a *resumption of dialogue* between God and man for, after all, man was made by God with the intention that a close bond of fellowship and conversation should exist. The first thing, usually, in an estrangement is that conversation is terminated and the parties cease to be 'on speaking terms.' By man's disobedience and rebellious intransigence close fellowship with God is terminated. Jesus came to restore to former harmony by His atoning sacrifice. "The Atonement (or at/one/ment) has been brought about by Jesus and man can not be at/one with his Maker. We must, however, keep the matter in true perspective for God has not found it necessary to change - *man must change*. It was man who moved away from God - it is man who must return. Nothing lessened God's love for man. Nothing turned that love to hate. Indeed God *so loved* the world that He gave His only begotten Son. Man sinned but God still loved. Man must seek the at-one-ment with God.

THE OFFENDED TAKES THE INITIATIVE

The bitter aspect of 'Reconciliation' is, therefore, that there was any alienation in the first place, but the sweet part is the actual reunion of the estranged parties. A time indeed, for rejoicing, as did the father of the Prodigal Son and as do the very Angels when any of the sons of men repenteth. The wonderful thing is that it was God who took the initiative. Probably the most difficult thing to achieve in any reconciliation amongst men is to get one party to take the first step. Human pride and obstinacy being what it is, no-one is prepared to take the first move. By the world's standards to seek conciliation is taken as a sign of weakness. Amongst men it is usual for the poor to seek to pacify the wealthy and the weak to seek conciliation with the strong, but God, *the offended*, seeks a restoration of fellowship with the offenders (the enemies). It is also rare amongst men for the *offended* to seek reunion with the offender but probably the most best known instance would be restoration of Joseph to his brethren. After scheming to kill Joseph and finally selling him into slavery, Joseph's brethren found it impossible to believe that he could forgive them. Joseph had to make a great effort to convince them, pointing out how well their selling of him had turned out and how God's over-ruling hand had emerged. Joseph "**comforted them and spake kindly unto them.**" As we read of the very emotional and tearful re-union we are almost moved to tears ourselves as we witness this amazing example of brotherly love. How much more should we be moved to imagine God of the Universe seeking reconciliation with puny, weak, foolish, sinful little man. "Enough to melt our hearts and prove, the antidote of sin."

What a delight it is to know that God excels *in love* far and beyond His wisdom, power, strength and creative wonders.

These reconciliations in the Bible, such as Joseph to his brethren, Jacob and Esau, and the many more, are surely amongst the most blessed and happy experiences in life, and did not Jesus pronounce a blessing upon all those who would try to bring such scenes about - the Peacemaker - (the go-betweens). **"Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God."**

THE MEDIATOR

We are conversant with the fact that in the event of an impasse between two alienated parties an **arbiter** must be found. Indeed, in the world of commerce and industrial relations there are many professional arbiters who successfully arbitrate between the factions and establish common ground. Quite often a third party can bring the other two together. Jesus mediates between man and God. Paul never speaks of God being reconciled to man but three times speaks of God reconciling man unto Himself. This reconciliation has been achieved through *the sacrifice of Jesus*, for it was **"by the cross"** that Jesus **"slew the enmity"** between **"Jew and Gentile"** and **"reconciled both unto God in one body"** (Eph. 2:16). And so, Jesus, in one great master stroke, not only reconciled *man to man* but also all *men to God*. **"God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself."** In any reunion, one party must be induced to confess wrongdoing and desire forgiveness, while the other must be induced to forgive. Thus Joab intervened to get David to forgive and bring home his banished son, Absalom. In the case where *the injured party* is ready and anxious to forgive, the battle is seemingly half won. All that remains is to persuade the wrongdoer to acknowledge his wrongdoing and accept the offer of forgiveness. But this is surely the stumbling block for man is most reluctant to do any such thing. Man is the immovable object. At school it used to be a boyish conundrum to ask "What would happen if an irresistible force was to meet an immovable object." I now know, of course, that it is impossible to have both phenomena co-existent but at the time the usual answer was that there would be a great and noisy explosion. I suppose that, in a spiritual sense, we could ask the same question today. God is the irresistible force who has removed all obstacles, legal or moral, to a free reconciliation with man, and man in turn, is the immovable object, cold, hostile, disinterested and implacable. We can but marvel with the Psalmist. **"What is man, that thou art mindful of him? or the son of man that thou visiteth him."** Man can thus 'cock-a-snook' at an all powerful God and is allowed to resist the Omnipotent God.

Jesus was highly qualified to be the go-between in that He was endowed both with the divine and human nature. He was intimately acquainted with God and man. He was a friend of both parties and loved both parties. It might be thought that, as God was desirous of forgiving the world all He had to do was proclaim a general amnesty to all men. Doubtless this would be well received but would ignore the problem of Sin. Forgiveness of sin could only be obtained at a great price. God had to demonstrate His hatred of sin by providing a sacrifice. His own Son. **"Without the shedding of blood"** there could be no remission of sins and so Jesus was Mediator in a very real sense - for He was the actual sacrifice. **"The Lord laid upon Him the iniquities of us all,"** Jesus did not have to die to pacify an angry God. God is the Governor of the Universe and, as *His law* is necessary to the happiness and harmony of all His intelligent subjects so *His love* demanded that pardon must be obtained *without dishonouring that law* - and so sin had to be over-come. He who knew no sin was made sin for us. The death of Jesus did not result in God loving us, but rather God's loving us, resulted in the death of Jesus.

BE YE RECONCILED

"God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself." God's initiative in this is a measure of His love for us. God has acted and we must respond. In the world around us, in

Palestine, N. Ireland, Russia, S. Africa, etc., it seems that men are busily re-erecting barriers that Christ has already broken down. When we consider God (holy and undefiled) and then look at man, and see a vast disparity between them (Potter and clay), are we not lost in wonder, love and praise that God would seek such a reconciliation? The barricades will come down only *"in Christ."*

According to our quotation from 2 Cor. (at the beginning of this article) God has given *to the Church "the ministry of reconciliation"* and the Church must honour this ministry. The quotation also says that we have received *"the word of reconciliation"* and we must publish this good news in every corner of the world. As *"ambassadors for Christ"* in this ministry of reconciliation we have a great compliment given to us in that God depends upon us to tell the world that He is prepared to receive sinful men in reconciliation. And so the joyful function of God's preacher is not to announce the threat of God's wrath, but the proclamation of God's offer of love. The task of the preacher is to break mens' hearts at the sight of the broken heart of God. Contemplate the cross and see how much God loved us. Jesus has removed all obstacles to reunion with God and this is the most important theme of the gospel, if not the most beautiful. What unfeigned joy there would be at the news. Let us not be cold and implacable, let us not be the unmovable object but let us succumb to the irresistible love of God, for God is indeed irresistible in more ways than one.

"Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, (as though God did beseech you by us). We pray you (in Christ's stead). Be ye reconciled in God."

Any meaningful reconciliation amongst men must begin with men being reconciled to God, their Maker.