

The Biblical Message of Reconciliation

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THERE IS TODAY a renewed interest in the biblical concepts of “reconciliation,” “liberation,” and “renewal.” In many instances this interest carries with it an interpretation of these terms that differs from the traditional one. Whereas numerous churches and religious movements have long understood reconciliation in a strictly personal and religious sense, the focus of attention today is increasingly on the significance of reconciliation of social relationships — in particular political and racial ones. Traditionally self-oriented, church and theology have shifted their attention to the outside. Theology is no longer dominated by the personalist and existentialist points of view found in such thinkers as Bultmann. Instead, the questions raised by modern critiques of society are the ones to which theologians are trying to find answers on the basis of and in the light of the gospel. These questions must determine the relevance of the biblical message for our times.

It is not easy to pinpoint a single cause for this remarkable and rather sudden shift of concentration to the social and political implications of the biblical message of reconciliation. One may point out that the immense problems of human society in both the international and national contexts impinge on us more than ever before because of the vast amount of direct information reaching us by way of the press, radio, and television. No less important are the hard-hitting critiques of society which young intellectuals in North America and Western Europe have raised during the last decade under the influence of neo-Marxism and Leninism. Many persons in the churches accept this dynamic and often revolutionary movement as a challenge which merits a biblical response that is adequate socially and politically. In addition we may point to the vast problems with which the underdeveloped nations confront us during this postcolonial era, problems which should plague the conscience of affluent nations. Moreover, the Christian churches in those liberated (and not yet liberated) countries do not cease to demand of international church bodies that they translate the gospel of reconciliation into terms of peace and justice and take the lead in waging war against all forms of racial and economic discrimination. Only so, it is argued, can the gospel

become understandable to the world's non-white population. That explains the appearance, for instance, of "black theology."

Not only have these developments occasioned major changes and shifts in church and theology, but they have also led to serious conflicts and oppositions. The essence of human nature is no longer sought first of all in personal self-realization but in the way the human being is involved in history and in the structures of society. Though one must be careful with the distinction between horizontal and vertical, we may say that the horizontal implications of the gospel are receiving heavy emphasis while the vertical ones tend to be overlooked. The vertical relationship to God is still presupposed, but it determines the direction of attention to a lesser degree than does the horizontal relation to other people. Repeatedly we hear that our relationship to God and love for him must prove themselves in relation to our love for our neighbor — in the most universal sense of that word. This is sometimes put in terms of a distinction between micro- and macro-ethics; and it is the latter that is getting all the emphasis lately.

A second major feature of this shift, closely related to the first, is the strong concentration on this earthly and temporal life. The hereafter is a blank entry on the theological balance-sheet. Christians should indeed strive for a different world, but they must not look for it above or after this one, for they should seek it *in* this world. The answer to the question "Are you saved?" must not refer primarily to heaven but to this earth. Expectations for the future do play an important part in this concept of Christianity. This is considered to be of a piece with the messianic longing that appears in the Old Testament and with the future character of the kingdom of God in the New. But we must not look for the fulfilment of this hope in heaven. The Scriptures do speak of a future apocalyptic breakthrough of God's kingdom. To the extent that this newer theology deals with this message, however, it considers it to be only a completion of what confronts human responsibility now.

In this context, concepts of continuity and discontinuity tend to crop up. To the extent that God's great future is not simply the outcome of the renewal of human life now taking place, we are to speak of discontinuity. But complete discontinuity is not considered possible. What can be expected is the harvest of what is accomplished now, during the present dispensation; and that implies continuity, growth, of a future being worked out now. The advent of Christ and of the expected kingdom, then, cover the gap rather than highlight the chasm separating this world from the coming kingdom of God. "Behold, I make all things new" — the theme of the 1968 World Council of Churches assembly in Uppsala — is a promise of God's future only if it can first function as a program for human action in the present.

A third feature is a waning interest in the church as institution in favor of a growing interest in world affairs. Not only is the church's calling to be situated in this world enough to warn it against all forms of egocentricity and self-inversion, but the church's future must be wholly linked with that of the world. For God's reconciliation and Christ's kingship are not limited to the church, but embrace much more. The church may have knowledge of them; it is, as it were, confidentially let in on God's secret; it knows what

the world does not as yet know. But it is not knowing alone that counts, but above all doing. Indeed, some go so far as to say that where reconciliation and renewal are being done, there we find the kingdom of Christ, whether people are aware of it or not. Christ's kingship is not church-bound, it is present wherever the forces of renewal and deliverance operate in the reconciliation taking place among persons, nations, and races.

The implications of this new theory of reconciliation are far-reaching. It would be unfair to evaluate it solely with reference to its most radical exponents. In any event this movement does not want to be understood as a secularization of the biblical message. Where it speaks of "radicalization" it is to take seriously what *the Bible* calls reconciliation here and now. The starting point for this entire train of thought is the Christian's basic confession of Christ's lordship, even though this lordship is said to concern not just, or not even primarily, the church but the world in the most universal sense of the term. As for reconciliation, from the vantage-point which Christ offers there can no longer be any room for discrimination among people by reason of lineage, sex, culture, or color of skin, for all of these barriers have been abolished in Christ. The focus is on the effect of the gospel's message of reconciliation: on relationships among people. Is this not precisely the effect God intended with the message and ministry of reconciliation? Did he not love us in order that we should love our neighbor? And could there be a love of God which is not expressed in love of fellow man? Does our love of God not in fact consist in the love of the oppressed and afflicted? Does not Jesus himself teach us that "as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me?" Hence must we not say that the one who loves his brother loves God as well?

This effect of reconciliation constitutes the basis for a renewed interpretation of the entire biblical message. Many central biblical notions and concepts, such as kingdom of God, resurrection, messianic expectation, and conversion have been reinterpreted in the light of this concept of the message of reconciliation. If the biblical message is not to be left on the sidelines as an imperviously mysterious doctrine about transcendent truths relevant only within the hallowed confines of the church, if it is to be relevant for people today and to acquire some live meaning for them, this message will have to be practiced as a message of renewal and reconciliation.

This new development has encountered powerful opposition within the churches. We may in fact speak of a tendency towards polarization over this issue. The question has to do with a proper understanding of the gospel of reconciliation. Many feel that to the extent that we stress the social implications of the biblical witness we run the risk of bypassing and neglecting the most fundamental human needs, thereby robbing the biblical concept of reconciliation of its power. Is our personal relationship to God not the central concern of the biblical message of reconciliation? And does not the ministry of reconciliation, to the extent that it affects our neighbor, consist first of all in proclaiming the good news of God's love to that neighbor and living in spiritual communion with him, rather than in trying to accomplish a ministry of reconciliation in the areas of social and political structures?

Many Christians will readily suffer considerable hardship in missionary activity among the nations and races of the world while showing scant concern for racial segregation, colonization, and *apartheid*. These are dismissed as “worldly structures,” in which a person lives but which are not essential for salvation. It is of much greater consequence that a human being acquire citizenship in heaven, that his soul be saved, that his future in eternity be secured. Small wonder that those who think this way are suspicious of church leaders who demonstrate for human rights and against colonialism and *apartheid*. They oppose the World Council of Churches for providing humanitarian aid to movements that are engaged in armed struggle to procure liberty, such as the Program to Combat Racism. Such a program, it is thought, turns the biblical message of reconciliation into its opposite: instead of teaching men to expect salvation from God, the church enters the scene as counsel and defense for those who take the law into their own hands. How could that possibly tie in with the biblical message of reconciliation through the blood and spirit of Christ? Does it not secularize the church and the word it preaches to such an extent that we may no longer consider this seriously to be an interpretation of the biblical message?

In the midst of such great spiritual confusion, there is good reason to reflect anew on the actual material content of the biblical message of reconciliation. I take my point of departure in what follows at the heart of the gospel in the New Testament. I do not wish to imply that the Old Testament does not contain this message or that its proclamation of the law constitutes a bleak backdrop to the New Testament message of grace and reconciliation. Quite the contrary. What reconciliation is, how it is achieved, and what it involves are things we can understand only if we recall the Old Testament continually. Without the New Testament the Old is but a torso; and the New Testament dangles in mid-air, as it were, if one does not see its foundations in the Old. Nevertheless, it is in the New Testament that what is symbolically contained in the Old achieves its full explication and fulfillment.

Moreover, if we take our position there, we must take care not to limit ourselves to those New Testament passages which contain the term “reconciliation.” The use of the term in its religious meaning is found only in Paul (Rom. 5:10, 11; 11:15; 2 Cor. 5:18-20; Eph. 2:16; Col. 1:20, 22). The word (*katallage*, reconciliation; in German *Versöhnung*) stems from the social sector of life and refers in all these passages to the restoration of the broken relationship between God and the world, God and man (Thou, we), and God and all things. The effect of this reconciliation is repeatedly denoted by the term “peace,” which may, in turn, have different meanings; for example, inner peace (of the soul) (Phil. 4:7); peace with God in the juridical sense of the word (Rom. 5:1); peace as universal restoration of the proper order on earth (Col. 1:20); and also peace as restoration of the relations among men (Eph. 2:14).

In view of the all-encompassing significance of the word “reconciliation” and of the wide range of meanings of the “peace” which issues from it, the message of reconciliation is clearly not to be limited to those texts which make explicit mention of the term. The question we are discussing is in order everywhere in the New Testament, and the entire content of the New Testament could be called a message of reconciliation. This is true

of the apostolic letters, but it is equally, and more directly, true of the gospels. For this was the purpose and significance of Christ's coming: to call men back to God, to liberate the world — God's creation, according to the Old Testament — from bondage to Satan, and to restore peace on earth in the most universal sense of the word.

On the basis of this universal and central conception of the message of reconciliation I will circumscribe the specific content of this message in terms of three questions: What is its general context? What is the way or mode in which it is effected? To what extent does it affect the world today?

The first thing to note about the context of reconciliation is that the New Testament places it in the all-encompassing framework of the kingdom of God which was revealed in Christ's coming. Reconciliation is not just a matter between God and the individual person, but must be understood from the universal and eschatological point of view of God's coming to a world estranged from him, an advent of redemption and of judgment. In this light we must hear the call to reconciliation in the overture to the New Testament's "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"

Christ represents this universal character of the kingdom in many ways. At his birth the angels sang "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased." This peace is not just an inner contentment in the hearts of those who know themselves to be reconciled with God. No, it is the state of shalom, the kingdom of peace and justice of which the Psalmists had sung and which the prophets had foretold, a kingdom that begins at Christ's birth.

And so Jesus appeared among the people too. He made himself known as the one who had come to destroy the power of Satan and all his henchmen. Christ preached the gospel in its all-embracing meaning, but he also put it into effect. When doubts beset John the Baptist so that he was not sure of Jesus and his messianic kingship, Jesus sent him the following message: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them" (Matt. 11:4, 5). That is the peace on earth of which the angels sang in the field of Bethlehem. It cannot be denied that forgiveness of sin and reconciliation of God with man is the heart and basis of that peace, but it is no less true that forgiveness and peace involve more than the new relation between God and men and also imply a new relation among people mutually. For that reason the oppressed and afflicted, those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, are also called blessed and those who make peace are called children of God. We may conclude that reconciliation is the central focus of Jesus' universal proclamation of salvation. Only within this all-encompassing framework of the kingdom will we be able to understand the profound and true significance of reconciliation.

Some have argued that Paul has a different view of the matter. Paul is, after all, the apostle of justification by faith; and that concerns primarily the relation of the individual person to God, not one's relation to the world or interpersonal relationships. When Paul, in his well-known passage on reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:11-21) speaks of the ministry of

reconciliation he refers first of all to the message of justification and of forgiveness by grace alone, which are available because God made Christ to be sin in our place “so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (vs. 21).

Still, it would be a mistake to think that all of Paul’s preaching centers on the individual’s certainty of salvation. Paul’s doctrine of justification is embedded in his wide perspective on the history of salvation, in which Christ’s resurrection forms the great eschatological breakthrough. Therefore Paul does not exceed the limits of his own framework, when he describes Christ as the *kosmokrator* at whose feet the Father has placed all things (Eph. 1:22) and in whom all things — not only the church — acknowledge their head (Col. 1:15ff.). Therefore, the church in its activity in the world must no longer be governed by fear nor be characterized by submissiveness to the forces and rules obtaining in this world, but instead ought to be guided by faith in Christ’s victory over all principalities and powers. Moreover, in this context the apostle speaks of the reconciliation of all things (Col. 1:20) (we might also render it as the “pacification” of all things), which does not refer primarily to a personal change of attitude, but to the restoration of the divine order. In other words, Paul too acknowledges the worldwide dimensions of reconciliation and sees it as a restoration of divine order in heaven and on earth, which has begun with Christ’s resurrection and ascension.

There can be no doubt then that this biblical message is to be understood within the wide compass of the history of salvation and cannot be contained within some individualistic soteriology, whether that be couched in pietist or existentialist categories. This holds good not only for the preaching of Jesus and Paul but also for the entire New Testament. In Revelation the exalted Christ is repeatedly described in the language of reconciliation as the Lamb that was slain (Rev. 5:6, 8, 12, 13, etc. — 29 times in all). As such, however, he bears seven horns to symbolize his power, and we behold him before the throne of God receiving the book of the seven seals (to symbolize his lordship over the history of the future) from him who sits on the throne (Rev. 5:6). As in the gospels and the letter to the Colossians, here, too, the concept of the kingdom and the concept of reconciliation are very closely interrelated.

The biblical record is also pre-eminently clear and unambiguous concerning the way reconciliation is realized. If this were acknowledged in today’s discussions of the subject, much would be gained. Quite simply, the way reconciliation is effected consists in the unique significance the Bible attaches to the person and work, especially the death and resurrection, of Jesus Christ as the Savior and Mediator of the world sent by God.

The decisive importance of Christ’s death and resurrection in the biblical account comes to expression in various ways. As we noted, the New Testament describes reconciliation in the categories of power and dominion. Christ gains the victory over demonic powers which have set themselves up as the enemies of God. He subjects the hearts of men to himself and so restores peace, shalom. His dominion, too, is closely related to his death on the cross and his resurrection. This concept of reconciliation then depicts Christ as gaining the victory over all the powers of darkness which conspired

against him, a victory gained on the cross, where he established his dominion, the power of his love and Spirit over against the power of the world. In this pattern of thought reconciliation means that the Lamb receives dominion, that the crucified and risen Christ is Lord of the cosmos, and faith in Christ is faith in his dominion.

This conception merits close attention. Still it does not exhaust the redemptive significance of Christ's death and resurrection; indeed, we may question whether it presents the most essential features of the biblical message of reconciliation. To these features we now turn.

No matter how vast and universal the context within which the Bible places reconciliation it always presents the mode by which it is effected as the way God in Christ deals with humanity. We are positioned within this vast context of past and future, of creation and redemption, of the great redemptive plan of God, of powers and demons which surpass our strength. This position determines our existence. Nevertheless, the message of reconciliation focuses above all on people and their relationship to God. The way of reconciliation through Christ's death and resurrection is also determined by that relationship and can be explained only in terms of it.

It is decisively important here that Christ took the place of the new humanity in his death and resurrection. To do that Christ had to suffer and die: it was not enough that he preached, performed miracles, and showed concern for the human condition. He also had to bear the burden of sin on the cross and in death; not just as the victim of human wickedness and ill intent, but also as the one who took on and destroyed the sin of the world as the Lamb of God. This is the most profound dimension of the Bible's message. The mode of reconciliation thus consists of more than Christ's victory and rule over demonic forces; it consists also in his willingness to be led to the slaughter as a sacrificial offering for the sins of the world.

The oldest Christian confession of reconciliation known to us is "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3). "In accordance with the scriptures" here refers to the Suffering Servant of the Lord in Isaiah 53. In other words, reconciliation (*Versöhnung, katallage*) is effected only in the mode of expiation (*Sühnung, hilasmos*). These words originated in a cultic context and refer to the expiatory offering, the blood of which was to cover the sins of the people. This offering was to be performed by a priest before God on behalf of the people. All of the New Testament pictures Christ's death as a sacrificial offering to God performed in our place, an offering that covers and takes away the sin of the world, reconciling us with God and calling us to be reconciled with him.

It is well known that this view of reconciliation through the blood of Christ has always encountered opposition in the history of the church; and it does so today. It is thought to be reminiscent of the heathen idea that the godhead must be appeased by means of bloody sacrifices. How — it is asked — could such a view fit in with the New Testament idea of a God of grace and love? The God of the New Testament did not have to be moved to reconciliation; he himself took the initiative and called apostate human beings

back to communion with him. And so, some have reinterpreted the sacrifice of Christ, for example by claiming that Christ delivered himself to death in order to bring us to remorse and repentance, which in their turn would serve to reconcile us with God (the so-called subjective theory of reconciliation).

No matter how much Christ's death ought to bring *us* to repentance and conversion, it is no less necessary in order to cover and take away the sin of the world, as an offering of expiation which he as the great high priest had to perform before God — not to move God to different ideas, not to alter his mood, for God himself took the initiative to give us his Son for a holy peace offering. But God's love does not reduce the need for sin to be covered by the blood of reconciliation. God forgives the sinner, but he does not make room for sin. Sin must be displayed in its reprehensible character, and God must carry sin to judgment. Since sin cannot stand before his countenance, he must execute judgment on it. In this execution Christ took our place, and so God himself has restored the broken relationship with us. That is why Paul can say that we were reconciled with God (on Golgotha) *while we were yet sinners* (Rom. 5:8); that is why Christ says concerning himself that he came to give his life as a ransom for many; and that is why we are called again and again to the Lord's supper to commemorate the sacrifice he performed for us and in our place before God. He speaks of his body and of his blood in sacrificial terms: his body was given over to death on our behalf and his blood was poured out for us as an expiation for all our sins.

This meaning of Christ's self-sacrifice provides the New Testament message of reconciliation with a depth-dimension of which the church may never lose sight. To slight this dimension is to lose touch with the very mystery of the gospel. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that many who live out of this mystery of salvation and who find there the only consolation for life and death view with suspicion any new ideas putting all the emphasis on what *our* lives ought to reveal, instead of emphasizing what *Christ* has done, once and for all, in our place. Is this not a radical shift in focus? And ought we not rather to count as nothing all human effort so that we focus our attention and faith exclusively on what Christ, by his death and resurrection, has fully done, once and for all, in our place?

To think that way is to run the risk of making a serious mistake. For although we are completely correct to stress the expiatory and atoning effect of Christ's sacrifice as the focal point of the biblical account of reconciliation, we may not restrict the power of that sacrifice to what Christ once suffered and performed in our place. We refer again to the victorious power of Christ's death and resurrection in his battle against the powers and demons which, as God's adversaries, chained persons to their service. But this victory not only affects Satan and his subjects; the suffering and death of Christ also exert a liberating and renewing power in the lives of all who believe in him. The effect of this sacrifice is not only that it frees us from the guilt and punishment of sin, but also that it subjects us to Christ's regime. Reconciliation means that the world — all things, man included — is again put right with God. To that end man must be freed from the *guilt* of sin through the *blood* of Christ as well as from the *power* of sin through the *Spirit* of Christ.

The biblical message of reconciliation is full of God. It is also full of man, but only from God's point of view (*sub specie Dei*). Human life cannot find fulfilment in itself, nor in the I-thou relation to the neighbor, nor in the overwhelming, God-given instrumentation of life, of knowledge and wisdom and development, but only in communion with him who said: "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life: no one comes to the Father but by me."

As to the question of the *extent* to which reconciliation affects the world today, we have to recall that the biblical message of reconciliation has a universal scope, and we may not reduce it to the strict personal relation between God and the individual human being. God's reconciliation also affects our relations. Just as love of God and love of neighbor are closely related in the twofold commandment of love, so it is in the biblical message of reconciliation. By reconciling us to himself, God also puts us in a new relationship to the world about us, a relationship no longer governed by fear and hostility but by peace and love towards God. This renewed relation must not be understood merely as a consequence of reconciliation with God, but is itself part and parcel of it. In Ephesians Paul says that Christ has broken down the hostility between Jews and Gentiles and has thus become our peace, that is, he is the peace *among us*. Reconciliation with God institutes peace among humans, since they partake of the same redemption. The same thing is expressed in the well-known words of Colossians 3:11, which leave all religious, social, and racial discrimination far behind as having been removed in Christ: "Where there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man, but Christ is all, and in all" (cf. Gal. 3:28).

Undoubtedly these passages refer first of all to relationships *within the church*. One may not use these texts to proclaim a so-called objective unity of the human race supposedly established with the coming of Christ, a unity from which we are to proceed as a given of faith. For the major condition for such a shared unity, after all, is reconciliation with God. Nevertheless, it is of paramount significance that reconciliation with God aims at and serves to transcend and do away with all manner of discrimination among people. It is important in this connection that the record of reconciliation repeatedly makes explicit mention of the world as the object of divine action: "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor. 5:19) and "God so loved the world" (John 3:16). Here again we are not to think of some objective universal atonement (whether a person is aware of it or not, and whether he believes it or not) but to think of the grace of God who comes to all without distinction, who wants to give eternal life to "everyone who believes."

This should motivate the church to show proof of that same all-embracing will to peace and reconciliation in its attitude to the world. This theme is stressed particularly in the pastoral letters (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus), which constantly appeal to the universal character of divine reconciliation. In 1 Timothy 2 the church is exhorted to make prayerful intercession "for *all men*," also for kings and those in high places in order that there may be peace. For this is how God, who (as we read elsewhere in Timothy) seeks the redemption of *all* and wants *all* to know of this redemption, would have it. It is curious — and useful for the formation of our thought — that here the political and social dimensions, too, are drawn within the compass of reconciliation. The letter to Titus also expresses this idea. Those who believe are called to be gentle, showing meekness to

all (3:2). After all, they themselves used to live in malice and envy toward each other, but they have been liberated through the coming of God's mercy and love of man (*philanthropic*). The faithful may not occupy a negative or isolated position with respect to social and political relationships, but must instead prove themselves to be ready and willing to serve, "submissive to rulers and authorities . . . obedient . . . ready for any honest work" (Titus 3:1).

It is along these lines that we must understand the idea to which we have referred several times, that God was in Christ in order to reconcile all things to himself, as the letter to the Colossians puts it. It is not easy to fathom this far-reaching thought in its full meaning. That it was said to the church in Colossae is not without reason. The church in Colossae was a church intimidated by human philosophy, by the principles and the taboos of this world and the demonic powers suspected to be behind them. To such a church it was said: God "has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son. . . . Through him [he has reconciled] to himself all things . . . making peace by the blood of his cross" (3:13, 20). And so the apostle concludes — and we see here how far reconciliation does affect the world in which we live — If you died with Christ to the principles of this world, why do you live as though you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to the dogmas, the institutions, the taboos, the enchantments of this world?

This is a tremendously bold and courageous word to the church: Do not submit yourself to the world, do not believe in any spiritual power except Christ, not only on the personal level but also on the cultural and social levels. I am not one of those who only criticize the existing order, existing institutions, established authority, because I believe in order, in legal systems, even in existing legal systems. But I also believe that human society can be and is caught in the clutch of pernicious institutions, moral and social prejudices, unjust distribution of power and wealth. The church is told that it especially, as the church of Jesus Christ, should not believe in those powers as inevitable structures, just belonging to this world and therefore to be accepted for the time being. The breakthrough of the kingdom of God in history means also the proclamation of that spiritual freedom and the mandate not to acquiesce to what is essentially wrong but is often glibly referred to as a matter of "historical necessity."

Therefore, when we hear the gospel, go and teach the nations to observe all that Christ has commanded, we have to be aware that the *full* message of reconciliation is at stake: reconciliation by the blood of Christ saving souls from the guilt of sin; but also reconciliation by the power of Christ. And this has something to do with that reconciliation of all things; that is. it also applies to dimensions of life and human existence greater than the personal. The church as a whole has perhaps thought too much and too long in the categories of the two realms, the realm of Christ, applicable only to the church and personal life, and the realm of the world for the other aspects of life. This has often obscured the totalitarian character of the kingdom of God and reconciliation. A double conversion, so to speak, is necessary, just as the great commandment of love is a double commandment.

Then, undoubtedly, the danger exposes itself again that the “second” conversion and second commandment become the whole thing; as people say that God is only met and only served in our neighbor and that the actual meaning of reconciliation is thus to be understood in the social sense of the word. But this distortion of the message of reconciliation may never be a pretext for the church to limit its interest in this message to our relationship to God and to the content of the first commandment.

Even then not all has been said about the all-embracing power and extent of reconciliation. For the reconciliation of all things, as achieved in the cross of Jesus Christ, does not only mean that there is room to live and a calling to work for the church in the present world, but also that the world itself, even in its present state, is the object of God’s redemptive will and work. Christ, therefore, is the hope of the world in this all-encompassing sense of the word.

Without a doubt this is complex and difficult to understand and explain. It includes the powerful “objective” fact that the future of the world does not belong to the devil but to the Lord, and that therefore the world even in its most desperate (and sinful) situations is not abandoned to the power of darkness. But it also contains a “subjective” element: the world itself has a certain awareness, an intimation, a feeling or whatever you want to call it, of that salvation which is in Christ and of being liberated from the powers of darkness. Paul in Romans 8 calls that the groaning of the entire creation for the revealing of the sons of God. Of course this does not mean that the world is consciously and purposely waiting for the return of Christ, for it does not do that. But in its struggle for liberation, for justice, for truth, and for peace the world unconsciously witnesses to this reconciliation of all things. That is why Paul says that creation is *waiting* for the revealing of the sons of God. In the context of Romans 8, this looks forward to the great future, but it also applies to the revealing of the sons of God in *this* world. Jesus himself points to it in his Sermon on the Mount, when he says: “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). This presupposes that there is a knowledge of God in the world, which in the midst of all sin and misery still keeps alive the hope of a better world. Paul especially points time and again to this remnant of awareness of God in the world. God not only discloses his wrath from heaven on increasing human apostasy (Rom. 1); he continues to write his law on the hearts of those who do not know him in Christ (Rom. 2). If I understand the apostle correctly, he describes in a still more poignant way in Romans 7 the spiritual struggle of the man beyond Christ, the struggle of one who is indeed enslaved to sin, but who still knows the law, who knows and wants a better life, and who therefore wrestles with the help of the law and of moral ideals for real humanness and for a better world. And yet he always fails because he wants to be saved through that law and through those ideals and not through grace.

We also have to keep those things in mind when we speak of the extent of reconciliation and of the kingship of Christ in the world and in history. The world is not without hope, not without messianic longing, even though it does not know the name “under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). This is also an important indication for the church as to how it should stand in the world. It does not exist to

condemn all that is in the world. For in this world, the light of God, the light of the sun, of truth and justice also shines. It shines with interrupted rays, because it is always obscured by the clouds of sin and unbelief. Nevertheless, we should not underestimate that light. The world itself witnesses unknowingly in all sorts of ways that it is not of the devil but of God. This is no little thing; on the contrary, it can and may be a tremendous help in the struggle for a better world, for peace, and for righteousness. It can help prepare and open the way to Christ himself.

But *here, in Christ*, is where the great decision lies for man and for the world. That which is good and beautiful and true in the world cannot by itself open up the way to the kingdom, nor can it bring history to its completion and fulfilment. Paul does not speak about it in that way either. He instead points in a surpassing way to the bankruptcy of all the attempts of human persons and of the world, of Israel and the nations, to find the way to the future by way of human idealism or legalistic diligence or pagan humanism. Indeed — more strongly put — even that which is best and most noble in man clearly reveals that the world cannot save itself; for *Christ* is the light of the world, and the way of that light is the way of the cross. *Via lucis, via crucis*. There is no other name. That is the stumbling-block of the gospel: reconciliation is in him and from him, and all other ways to realize the messianic dream are dead ends.

In a certain way this is a harsh truth, and the church always is being tempted to abandon something of it. But it has no other choice than to confess that name which is above all names, because every knee must bow before him. The reconciliation of all things is not anonymous, the kingdom is not an *it*, an ideal, a dream, but it is a *he*. That is how God deals with us. Ultimately it is a matter of our subjection, of bowing our knees before him. For reconciliation is from above and not from men; it is out of grace and not by works. If the church were to practice *this* in the sight of the world, it would do more than it could do by anything else. The church does not exist to condemn the world. But its solidarity with the world can never go so far that it no longer confronts the world with the choice, with the decision, with respect to the cross and to that one name which is given under heaven.

With that message of reconciliation the church was once sent into history; and that is still its task in history until the present day. The church got no timetable from the Lord by which to read the hour of history, nor did it receive a divine plan about the course history would follow. But the task of the church is quite clear. Not to remain where it is, nor to remain self-involved, but to go forth, meeting the future, until he comes and history is discharged into the kingdom of God and the full reconciliation of all things.

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