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The Office that Preaches Reconciliation

Reconciliation (*reconciliatio*) is seldom discussed in the New Testament, and this discussion occurs almost exclusively in Paul and in the deutero-Pauline literature. At first blush this comes as a surprise, given the importance this concept enjoys in our theological tradition. But the few pieces of relevant evidence can be gathered quickly. We find the substantive καταλλαγή in Romans 5:11; 11:15 and in 2 Corinthians 5:18f; the verb καταλλάσσειν in Romans 5:10; 1 Corinthians 7:11 and in 2 Corinthians 5:18-20. In addition, the two-part-compound ἀποκαταλλάσσειν is employed in Colossians 1:20-22 and in Ephesians 2:16, which is dependent upon the corresponding text in Colossians. In the Greek literature one also encounters the verb διαλλάσσειν, which appears only once in the New Testament, in Matthew 5:24. This overview demonstrates immediately that statements about reconciliation primarily occur in Romans 5:10f and 2 Corinthians 5:18f, being otherwise absent from the New Testament.

Our surprise at the minimal treatment of reconciliation in the New Testament stems from the fact that we often mix statements concerning atonement with statements concerning reconciliation, and construe these two kinds of statements as mutually interpreting. Martin Luther's Bible translation renders not only Old Testament ἱλασμοί-occurrences but also New Testament occurrences of καταλλαγή and ἵλασμός along with λύτρον κτλ-statements (*redemptio*) with the terms "reconciliation (*Versöhnung*)" or to "reconcile (*versöhnen*)."¹ This practice, however, is extremely problematic. Admittedly, both atonement (*Sühne*) and reconciliation (*Versöhnung*) stem from the same Old High German root. These two translated terms, however, refer, in the Greek language, to completely different semantic fields, whose meanings are unrelated. Statements in which ἵλασμός (1 John 2:2; 4:19), ἱλάσκεσθαι (Luke 18:13; Hebrews 2:17), ἱλαστήριον (Romans 3:25; Hebrews 9:5) occur are properly translated with the terms "atonement," "to atone," and "means of atonement" or "place of atonement." To provide an introductory indication of where my argument is headed, let me state the following: "Sowohl διαλλάσσειν als auch καταλλάσσειν bezeichnen in klassischen und hellenistischen Texten ein versöhnendes Handeln im politischen, gesellschaftlichen und familiären Bereich ohne eine religiöse oder kultische Komponente. Semantisch muss zwischen καταλλάσσειν und ἱλάσκεσθαι, versöhnen und sühnen, differenziert werden, denn beide Begriffe entstammen verschiedenen Vorstellungsbereichen. Während καταλλάσσειν den Vorgang zwischen-menschlicher Versöhnung beschreibt, bezeichnet ἱλάσκεσθαι einen Vorgang im sakralen Bereich."¹ In several publications Cilliers Breytenbach has rendered the service of making us aware of this fundamental distinction in the history of the Greek language and drawing out its implications for the interpretation of Paul's theology.² Breytenbach emphasizes

¹ Udo Schnelle, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, Göttingen 2007, 230.

² Cilliers Breytenbach, *Versöhnung. Eine Studie zur paulinischen Soteriologie*, WMANT 60, Neukirchen 1989; ders., *Versöhnung, Stellvertretung und Sühne: Semantische und traditions-geschichtliche Bemerkungen am Beispiel der*

the fact that the syntactical configurations in which statements about reconciliation occur are significantly different from statements about atonement in the LXX, in which the priest performs a cultic rite of atonement on behalf of a person and her sin.³

As an aside, I would like to register that, for Breytenbach, the motif of cultic atonement plays a marginal role in the New Testament. The few instances in which it arises – as far as texts in Paul, one could name, at most, Romans 3:25 and a pre-Pauline tradition – obviously constitute a strong argument for its peripheral status. Schnelle, too, markedly minimizes Paul's conception of atonement, while identifying a productive Christological model in his conception of reconciliation.⁴ Thomas Schmeller, however, argues more cautiously. According to him 2 Corinthians 5 should only be utilized for Pauline soteriology with great caution.⁵

Let us remain for a moment with the use of καταλλαγή and καταλλάσσειν in the Greek literature. This word cluster is applied most frequently to relationships between states but also to relationships between human beings and to familial matters. This terminology is at home, then, in the arena of diplomacy and refers, in this context, to putting an end to enmity. It is seldom employed in religious contexts, being used only by Greek speaking Jews (Philo, Josephus, Joseph and Aseneth, 2 Maccabees) and not in the pagan literature. The terminology of reconciliation is in no way inherently religious.⁶ The verb is also used in the sense of reconciliation between human beings in 1 Corinthians 7:11 and Matthew 5:24. When it is employed to make religious statements, as in the few occurrences in Jewish texts and in Paul, the original character, emerging from diplomatic contexts, is preserved. For Paul, too, the term has to do with putting an end to enmity and the reconciliation of human beings. Other words belonging to the semantic field of καταλλαγή and καταλλάσσειν include εἰρηνεύειν and εἰρηνοπευεῖν (to bring to peace, to make peace), συμβιβάζειν (to bring together, unite), πρεσβεύειν (to be an ambassador, to act as ambassador), whose meanings are related, but also concepts of opposition such as ἔχθρα (enmity), ὀργή (wrath), and πόλεμος (war). Paul deploys precisely this terminology in Romans, 2 Corinthians and in Colossians 1:20-22 along with καταλλαγή and καταλλάσσειν.

It is important to note a significant difference, however. In those texts in the wider Greek literature that contain a religious use of reconciliation language, God is always in a passive role.

paulinischen Briefe, NTS 39, 1993, 59-79; ders., Art. Versöhnung, TBLNT II, 2000, 1777-1780; ders., ‚Christus starb für uns‘. Zur Tradition und zur paulinischen Rezeption der sogenannten Sterbeformeln, NTS 49, 2003, 447-475; ders., Grace, Reconciliation, Concord. The Death of Christ in Graeco-Roman Metaphors, NT.S 135, Leiden 2010; ders., ‚Christus litt euret wegen‘. Zur Rezeption von Jes 53 LXX und anderen frühjüdischen Traditionen im 1. Petrusbrief, in: Jörg Frey/Jens Schröter (Hg.), Deutungen des Todes Jesu im Neuen Testament, Tübingen ²2012, 437-454; ders., Interpretationen des Todes Christi, in: Friedrich W. Horn (Hg.), Paulus Handbuch, Tübingen 2013, 321-331. Daneben ist als wesentliche neue Literatur zu dem gesamten Thema zu nennen: Christina Eschner, Gestorben und hingegeben "für" die Sünder. Die griechische Konzeption des Unheil abwendenden Sterbens und deren paulinische Aufnahme für die Deutung des Todes Jesu Christi, WMANT 122/1+2, Neukirchen 2010.

³ Breytenbach, Versöhnung, Stellvertretung (s. Anm. 2), 61.

⁴ Schnelle, Theologie (s. Anm. 1), 228.230.

⁵ Thomas Schmeller, Der zweite Brief an die Korinther, EKK VIII/1, Neukirchen 2010, 340.

⁶ Breytenbach, Art. Versöhnung (s. Anm. 2), 1779.

He is to be reconciled through prayers and rites of worship. In Paul, in contrast, God plays the active role, since he gives the gift of reconciliation by overcoming enmity.⁷ “Dies ist das theol. Novum gegenüber dem spärlich belegten ‚religiösen‘ Gebrauch in einigen wenigen hell.-jüd. Texten, die die Gottheit lediglich als Objekt des versöhnenden Tuns der Menschen kennen.”⁸ To repeat, this all has nothing to do with sin and atonement.

I would like to present the two passages in which Paul speaks of reconciliation.

a) 2 Corinthians 5:18-20

In addition to the literature already referenced, I here refer to Jens Schröter’s investigation of this passage⁹ and to the recent commentary on 2 Corinthians by Thomas Schmeller.¹⁰

18 τὰ δὲ πάντα ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ
τοῦ καταλλάξαντος ἡμᾶς ἑαυτῷ διὰ Χριστοῦ
καὶ δόντος ἡμῖν τὴν διακονίαν τῆς καταλλαγῆς
19 ὡς ὅτι θεὸς ἦν ἐν Χριστῷ κόσμον καταλλάσσειν ἑαυτῷ
μὴ λογιζόμενος αὐτοῖς τὰ παραπτώματα αὐτῶν
καὶ θέμενος ἐν ἡμῖν τὸν λόγον τῆς καταλλαγῆς
20 ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ οὖν πρεσβεύομεν ὡς τοῦ θεοῦ παρακαλοῦντος δι’ ἡμῶν
δεόμεθα ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ
καταλλάγητε τῷ θεῷ

18 All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation;

19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

20 Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

In this passage, Paul speaks of reconciliation for the first time in his letters. It is possible that conflicts with other missionaries in Corinth and the connected attacks against Paul’s person motivated him to turn to the theme of reconciliation at this point. The subject of reconciliation in verse 18f is God in both cases. The object is ἡμᾶς (we) in verse 18 and ὁ κόσμος (the world) in verse 19. Paul has already expressed the same idea in the preceding verses as he gradually broadens the scope of his argument. So also here. First he speaks in the so called “apostolic we” of himself, that is of the reconciliation of Paul with God, which he likely means to suggest was accomplished in his calling as an apostle. Then he speaks of the reconciliation of the world.

⁷ Breytenbach, Art. Versöhnung (s. Anm. 2), 1779; Schnelle, Theologie (s. Anm. 1), 230f.

⁸ Breytenbach, Art. Versöhnung (s. Anm. 2), 1779.

⁹ Jens Schröter, Der versöhnte Versöhner. Paulus als Mittler im Heilsvorgang, TANZ 10, Tübingen und Basel 1993.

¹⁰ Schmeller, Der zweite Brief an die Korinther (s. Anm. 5).

The initiation of verse 19 with the conjunction ὡς ὅτι has an exegetical function, that is, it further develops and clarifies. Here it does not work to conceive of the beginning of the sentence conceptually as a Christological pronouncement (God was in Christ). Rather, ἡν ... καταλλάσσω should be held together periphrastically so as to convey that “God reconciled (was reconciling) in Christ.” This adverbial specification “in Christ” (v. 19) is parallel to the other in verse 18. Both adverbial specifications will first be addressed in verse 20. Paul speaks of an exchange: Christ enters the realm of sin, believers receive righteousness. What is the benefit, or, of what does the reconciliation in or through Christ after this exchange consist? God does not impute transgressions. Reconciliation was also understood as an act of conscious forgetting of transgressions or past wrongs in Greco-Roman antiquity.

2 Corinthians 5:18 and 19 are closely related to each other and differ only slightly in their basic claims.

18a.b:	ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ	<u>τοῦ καταλλάξαντος</u>	ἡμᾶς	ἐαυτῷ	διὰ Χριστοῦ
19a:	θεὸς	ἐν Χριστῷ	κόσμον	καταλλάσσω	ἐαυτῷ
18c:	καὶ δόντος	ἡμῖν	τὴν διακονίαν	τῆς καταλλαγῆς	
19c:	καὶ θέμενος	ἐν ἡμῖν	τὸν λόγον	τῆς καταλλαγῆς	

Verse 19 now adds an important consequence for the apostolic office to these remarks: God has put the word of reconciliation into action among us human beings. The verb τίθημι can indeed be translated this strongly. This word of reconciliation, on the other hand, is not conveyed further by all Christians but only by those called to do so. With his own person in mind, Paul speaks of the διακονία τῆς καταλλαγῆς, that is of service to (the Word of) reconciliation. Thereby he has already slipped into the role of the ambassador or the diplomat, and in verse 20 he incorporates decisively diplomatic terminology (προσβεύειν), when he speaks of himself as of a πρέσβυς, προσβευτής or legate. As a rule such an ambassador represented the imperial power and acted with the emperor's full authority. Paul, then, steps in on God's behalf and presents the offer of reconciliation in that he urges and implores (v. 20). This also implies, however, that the reconciliation that took place in Christ must be proclaimed, conveyed, heard and accepted. The addressees of this message now have nothing else to do but to receive this offer of reconciliation. The text, however, goes beyond the limitation of this event of reconciliation to the church and describes a universal event of peace. Reconciliation applies to the cosmos, to the whole creation. This thought is then picked up in Colossians 1:20-22.

Breytenbach nonetheless stresses: “Ich möchte keineswegs behaupten, daß Paulus sein Apostolat grundsätzlich von der antiken προσβεία her verstanden hat. Ich glaube aber, daß die Verbindung zwischen προσβεύειν und καταλλάσσεσθαι in 2 Kor 5.20 am besten erklärt werden kann, wenn angenommen wird, daß Paulus in 2 Kor 5.11-6.2 auf die Rolle des

πρέσβυς/πρεσβευτής im Rahmen des Versöhnungsgeschehens zurückgreift, damit er den Korinthern sein Apostolat verdeutlichen kann.“¹¹

b) Romans 5:10f

Here I refer primarily to Michael Wolter's study on Romans 5¹² as well as to the commentary on Romans by Robert Jewett.¹³

10 εἰ γὰρ ἐχθροὶ ὄντες
κατηλλάγημεν τῷ θεῷ διὰ τοῦ θανάτου τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ
πολλῷ μᾶλλον καταλλαγέμεθα ἐν τῇ ζωῇ αὐτοῦ
11 οὐ μόνον δε, ἀλλὰ καὶ καυχώμενοι ἐν τῷ θεῷ διὰ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν
Ἰησοῦ [Χριστοῦ], δι' οὗ νῦν καταλλαγὴν ἐλάβομεν.

10 always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you.

11 For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you

These statements have a completely different context than those of 2 Corinthians 5:18-20. Preceding Romans 5:10, Paul had spoken of the death of Christ for sinners. It was a peculiar death, in that he was given to take the place of sinners. Someone might lay down her life for good people, but not for sinners. Precisely in the disproportionality of this death, however, God gave evidence of his love for human beings. Paul then links this claim with a conception of atonement since he is speaking of the blood of Christ (v. 9), which has effected the justification of believers. Verses 9-10, in turn, interpret and specify this claim by discussing what has been said with the help of reconciliation terminology. First Paul argues using the rhetorical formula εἰ γὰρ ... πολλῷ μᾶλλον in order to draw an inference from the transition from the lesser to the greater. If we, who were God's enemies, were reconciled with God through the death of Christ, by how much more will we, as reconciled, be saved through his (Christ's) life? Two timeframes are juxtaposed. Earlier, human beings were enemies of God, but were reconciled with God through the death of Christ. Two states of Christ correspond to these two timeframes: if Christ's death already lead to reconciliation, by how much more will the qualitatively superior life of Christ lead to the salvation of Christians in the end times? The original conceptual sphere of the concept of reconciliation is reflected in the reference to enmity.¹⁴ In accord with 2 Corinthians 5 it is again God who brings about reconciliation through Christ by overcoming the hostile condition of humankind.

¹¹ Breytenbach, Versöhnung, Stellvertretung (s. Anm. 2) 63f.

¹² Michael Wolter, Rechtfertigung und zukünftiges Heil, BZNW 43, Berlin 1978.

¹³ Robert Jewett, Romans, Hermeneia, Minneapolis 2007.

¹⁴ Jewett, Romans (s. Anm. 13), 365f., referiert die jüngere Forschungsgeschichte zur Frage der traditionsgeschichtlichen Ableitung der Versöhnungsvorstellung bei Paulus. Er selber erkennt für Röm 5,1-11 den Gegensatz von Scham (Röm 5,5) und Ruhm (Röm 5,2.3.11) als entscheidenden Rahmen, auf den sich die Versöhnungsaussagen beziehen.

In contrast to 2 Corinthians 5, however, there is no allusion to the service of a diplomat, who offers this reconciliation in the message he bears. A further significant difference in comparison to 2 Corinthians 5 is that in Romans 5 Paul connects his claim about reconciliation with the theme of justification, on which his argument has focused since Romans 3:21ff (more specifically: Romans 5:1,6,9). Justification and righteousness are two different means of describing the benefits of the work of salvation offered by God in Christ. The first has to do with belief in Christ (Romans 4:3), the second with putting an end to enmity.

Now I come to some results and conclusions. The source of reconciliation terminology is not religious but political and diplomatic. This terminology must be distinguished from statements about atonement, whose background lies in Old Testament cultic contexts. Terminology of reconciliation finds a very narrow use within Hellenistic Judaism. This usage can hardly be considered a significant basis of New Testament usage, however. It is Paul who in 2 Corinthians 5 and in Romans 5, and only here, introduces statements about reconciliation as one means among others of describing God's work of salvation in Christ. In stark contrast to the Greek-Hellenistic tradition, for Paul God is always the subject of the occurrence of reconciliation and not the object.¹⁵ God reconciles human beings. Human beings do not reconcile God. In this reconciliation the love of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:14) and the love of God (Romans 5.5) become efficacious and overcome all enmity that existed previously. Reconciliation is therefore a unilateral act of God in Christ and leads to freedom.

But why does Paul resort to this conception of reconciliation in the first place in 2 Corinthians 5? It is highly probable that this terminology, which emerged from a diplomatic context, was for Paul an excellent vehicle for clarifying the essence of his apostleship. Like an ambassador (πρεσβευτής, *legatus*) Paul transmits the message of reconciliation and makes petitions in the place of the one who sends him: be reconciled to God. In antique literature such diplomats or messengers were considered direct heralds of God. In the church at Corinth other apostles besides Paul had come onto the scene, who buttressed their authority with letters of recommendation from other churches and thereby called Paul's ministry into question (2 Corinthians 3:1). From the perspective of entitlement to authority, Paul is now superior to them in that God's offer of reconciliation cannot be conveyed at all without the appearance of a diplomat. One would be left, so to speak, in a condition of enmity. I close with a citation from Jens Schröter: "Es zeigt sich also, daß Paulus mit der Vorstellung von der von Gott kommenden Versöhnung, die eines Übermittlers an die Menschen bedarf, das Heilsgeschehen zwischen Gott und der Gemeinde so entwirft, daß sein apostolischer Dienst als ein unverzichtbarer Bestandteil dieses Vorgangs erscheint."¹⁶

¹⁵ Schröter, *Versöhner* (s. Anm. 9), 298: „Zum einen ist es charakteristisch, daß Versöhnung bei Paulus streng theozentrisch gedacht wird.“

¹⁶ Schröter, *Versöhner* (s. Anm. 9), 298.