

Receiving the Reconciliation

The apostle Paul spoke of salvation from sin as something that is possible only because we can be “reconciled” to God in Christ: “For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation” (Rom. 5:10,11).

One of the difficulties of life in a secular society is taking adequate account of the reality of God. On the down-to-earth plane of everyday living, we tend to conduct ourselves as “practical atheists,” people who acknowledge the existence of God but live as though the question were not very important. When we do take God into consideration, we often make another mistake: we assume that all will be well between ourselves and God in the long run, regardless of how we have lived in the short run! We suppose that our relationship with God will somehow turn out to be the good one that common sense says should exist between God and His people. We appear to believe that, if anything needs to be done, God will take care of it without a need on our part to do even so much as pay attention. Time heals all wounds, we think, including this one.

But mere time will not repair the breach between us and God. This very real estrangement is the result of sin — sin in which we have rejected the controls of God’s sovereignty over our conduct and violated His will. “Death” is the word the Bible uses to describe the consequence of sin (Gen. 2:17; Rom. 6:23), and more is involved here than the death of our physical bodies. Indeed, the penalty of physical mortality is the least of our problems. Apart from God, we are dead spiritually, no matter how long it may take for us to die physically. Deprived of the fellowship with God that we were created to enjoy, we are no more “alive” than the beasts of the field. The truth is this: in sin we are alienated from our God. What we most desperately need is to be reconciled to Him.

It happens that God has done what only He could have done to make this reconciliation possible. He made the vicarious sacrifice of Himself that allowed Him to justify us (Rom. 5:6-9). But the reconciliation that has been effected is one that must be “received” (Rom. 5:10,11) — and it must be received on God’s terms, not ours (Mk. 16:15,16; Ac. 2:37-39; Rom. 10:9,10; etc.). Even after one has initially been reconciled to God, there is the possibility of forfeiting it by attitudes and actions that are inconsistent with fellowship with God. Paul wrote to Christians in Corinth, “We plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain” (2 Cor. 6:1).

As modern people, taught to believe in the self-sufficient mastery of our own destiny, it takes swallowing our pride to admit that we need Jesus Christ to reconcile us to a God from whom we have alienated ourselves by sin. But that is exactly what the gospel of Christ asks us to admit. And the sooner we acknowledge the seriousness of our alienation, the sooner we will be ready to appreciate the magnitude of what God has done to recover fellowship with us.

Gratitude for the undeserved nature of this reconciliation is what moves us to receive it and appreciate it. When Jesus was criticized for allowing a sinful woman to wash His feet with her tears, He said, "Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little" (Lk. 7:47). If the gift of God's forgiveness is to be enjoyed at all, it must be received. Proud people have a hard time receiving gifts and being thankful for them, probably because they do not like to think of themselves as needing anything that anybody else can give. But "empty" people who recognize their own spiritual poverty are willing to receive the gift of God.

If we are to be saved from sin, we must admit our neediness before God and be willing to receive what He offers. Without God's gift, we are hopelessly lost. Humbly and reverently, we must cease from our pride and thankfully accept the reconciliation that God, and God alone, has made possible. That affirmation may go against the doctrine of humanism, but it is clearly the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 5:3). It is this same Jesus "through whom we have now received the reconciliation" (Rom. 5:11).

Gary Henry