

The Ministry of Reconciliation

*“All things are of
God, who hath
reconciled us to
himself by Jesus
Christ, and hath
given to us the
ministry of
reconciliation.”*

—II Corinthians 5:18

THE NECESSITY FOR A ministry of reconciliation lies in the fact that the human race is estranged from God on account of sin. The original sin which alienated mankind from God was committed by Father Adam. Through him the whole world came under

condemnation to death because, through heredity and by continuing in the wrong course, they also are sinners. (Rom. 3:23) The basis for reconciliation is in the redemptive work of Christ. Through him God is “reconciling the world unto himself.” (II Cor. 5:19) That we have been made ministers, or servants of reconciliation, as stated in our opening text, means that we are coworkers with God.

The grace of God manifested in extending the honor of being coworkers with him is beyond human comprehension. Were the matter not so clearly stated in the Scriptures we would be presumptuous indeed to aspire to such an exalted position in the divine

arrangement. This ministry belongs both to the present and to the future. Its present aspect is largely that of sacrifice, service, and at times, suffering, but while laying down our lives in the divine service now, we are inspired to zeal and faithfulness by the hope of the glorious future ministry to follow.

The sacrificial phase of the ministry of reconciliation was begun by Christ, our High Priest, foreshadowed by the high priests of Israel, and it is participated in by the entire "royal priesthood." (Heb. 4:14,15; I Pet. 2:9) All the prospective members of this priesthood share in the sacrificial work which has progressed throughout the present Gospel Age. Paul writes, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, ... that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice." (Rom. 12:1) This is indeed a high honor! The apostle further states, "No man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron. So also Christ glorified not himself to be made an high priest."—Heb. 5:4,5

Just as Jesus was invited to this high station in the divine program of reconciliation, so his footstep followers, the under-priesthood, have likewise been called of God. "Holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling," writes the apostle, "consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus." (Heb. 3:1) Writing concerning the same great honor of being coworkers with God, the apostle says, "Such trust have we through Christ to Godward: Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God."—II Cor. 3:4,5

We gladly acknowledge that "our sufficiency is of God." To begin with, we were "by nature the

children of wrath, even as others.” (Eph. 2:3) We were in sore need ourselves of being reconciled to God before we could be called and accepted by him as coworkers in the great project of reconciling the world of mankind. We were unable, however, to bring about our own reconciliation. We had nothing with which to commend ourselves to God. He was the one who made provision for us. As our text relates, he “reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ.” Truly then we should recognize that our sufficiency comes only from God.

THE FUTURE WORK

The major work of reconciliation so far as the world of mankind is concerned belongs to the next age, to the time when Christ and the church will rule together and serve as the world’s High Priest to dispense blessings of enlightenment, health and life. It will be in that future age, with Christ and the church as ministers of the New Covenant, that the knowledge of the Lord will be caused to cover the earth “as the waters cover the sea.” Then, none will need to say to his neighbor, know the Lord, “for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest.”—Isa. 11:9; Jer. 31:31-34

This is a glorious prospect, a joy set before us in the Scriptures, which helps us to bear the cross and despise the shame connected with the present privilege of sacrifice. (Heb. 12:2) However, let us not suppose that the entire ministry of reconciliation belongs to the future. There is a present ministry of reconciliation to which we are called, and it is our faithfulness to this privilege that demonstrates our worthiness of the future opportunities in glory.

This is as it should be. Whoever receives the Spirit of sonship, is impelled to begin this ministry of reconciliation at once. God has made provision for such zealous ones to manifest their love for him and their joy in his plan by engaging in that work with him. Indeed, it is for this very purpose that he has, at the present time, reconciled us to himself through Jesus Christ, so that we can be of comfort and encouragement to others.

THE LOVE OF CHRIST

In his introduction to the subject of reconciliation the apostle writes, "The love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one [Christ] died for all, then were all dead." (II Cor. 5:14) Judging this matter correctly we come to the conclusion, Paul explains, that we should not henceforth live unto ourselves, "but unto him which died, ... and rose again." (vs. 15) It is well to examine our hearts at this point. Have we been so stirred by the love of God and the gracious provision he has made for us through Christ, that henceforth we desire to live only and fully for him?

It is not enough that we conclude to serve God to some extent and serve self whenever we feel like it. Quoting the words of a familiar hymn, "Some of self, and some of thee" is not true consecration, nor will "Less of self, and more of thee" be fully acceptable to God. Not until we appreciate God's love to the point where we can say from the heart, "None of self, and all of thee," are we in the attitude of heart that God will use and bless us to the highest degree. It is this that Paul has in mind when he says that we "should not henceforth live unto ourselves," but unto Christ.

It is the fully consecrated whom God begets and anoints with his Spirit, and who thus become “new creatures.” To these new creatures “in Christ,” Paul declares, “Old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.” (II Cor. 5:17) According to verse 18, these “all things” which have become new “are of God.” The apostle explains that they are the things concerned with the “ministry of reconciliation” which has been given to us as New Creatures in Christ.

Paul continues, saying, “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.” That is to say, God is reconciling the world to himself through Christ, and as consecrated followers of the Master, we are able to participate also in this ministry. Thus, God invites us to proclaim the message to the world, “Be ye reconciled to God.” —vss. 19,20

AN UNCHANGED MINISTRY

Thus we have presented to us by the apostle one of the unchangeable fundamentals of the Christian life. No changes of time or circumstance in any way reduce our privilege and responsibility toward this ministry of reconciliation. It was important in the seed-sowing time during the Gospel Age, and it is just as important now during the harvest at the end of the age. It is also essential with respect to individual Christians, and it is equally vital respecting the responsibilities of organized groups of Christ’s followers.

In the beginning of the age Paul said, “God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should

repent.” (Acts 17:30, *New American Standard Bible*) This message to the world was given through the Early Church, the members of which were ministers of reconciliation. It is still effective at the very close of the age, when the storm clouds of trouble and distress are hovering over humanity, when it is the church’s privilege to say to the world, “Seek righteousness, seek meekness: it may be ye shall be hid in the day of the LORD’S anger.”—Zeph. 2:3

Of his followers Jesus said, “Ye are the light of the world.” (Matt. 5:14) Certainly, God is able to use other means for proclaiming his truth. He can cause the stones to cry out if need be, but the Scriptures are explicit, nevertheless, that it is the responsibility of the church, the priestly class, to bear the message of reconciliation to all who mourn at this time. It is the faithful followers of the Master who are blessed with this privilege.—Luke 19:40; Isa. 61:1,2

It is well that we endeavor to have this great fundamental truth firmly established in mind and heart, and that we be prepared to meet the privileges it provides to us. If we are seeking to shirk responsibility, we will, no doubt, be able to find some method of human reasoning by which we can convince ourselves that God no longer wants us to be ministers of reconciliation, and that all he wants us to do now is to wait until he calls us into the kingdom to be with Christ.

However, any such viewpoint can be based only on human thinking. There is no hint in the Bible that the time would ever come when God would not want his faithful people of the Gospel Age to be engaged in his service as ministers of reconciliation. It is to this that we are called, and it is as faithful

ministers that we demonstrate our love for God and our appreciation of his grace in making it possible for us to be coworkers with him.

Satan is always ready to discourage the Lord's people whenever the opportunity presents itself. All of us are more or less influenced by our surroundings and through personal circumstances affecting us. At times, some might conclude that God's work in the earth is all done, simply because they are no longer able to be active in his service. This is but natural. Elijah thought he was the only one left in Israel who stood for the Lord, but he was assured otherwise—that there were yet seven thousand who had not bowed the knee to Baal.—I Kings 19:13-18

Indeed, there are those dear ones who have been long in the way, and who have used their time and strength faithfully until they have no more to use. Their life has been consumed in the service and work of the Lord, and as ministers of reconciliation. For those of us who follow such faithful examples of service, however, and as we have strength and opportunity, there is still work to do. The ministry of reconciliation is still to be carried on! No matter what our circumstances in life may be, let us try to get this larger viewpoint of God's will for his people. If we can do nothing more, let us pray for God's blessing upon those who are active in the Lord's vineyard.

THUS SAITH THE LORD

As consecrated followers of the Master, our guide to what constitutes God's will is what the Scriptures say. Whether many or few are coming into the body of Christ has no bearing upon what God has commissioned us to do. Even if there were no apparent

results from our efforts, this would not mean that we should cease our service as ministers of reconciliation. How we wish that the joyful message of reconciliation should bring a ready response in every place and from every hearer, but it does not. As a rule, the true ministry of Christ is mostly ignored or rejected. So far as large numbers are concerned, it has always been this way.

The prophet foretold that the message of reconciliation would not be generally accepted. Speaking for the priestly class, Isaiah inquires, "Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the LORD revealed?" (Isa. 53:1) In every part of the present age, the Gospel message has been accepted by only a few—one here and one there. The reason for the general rejection of the message of reconciliation is evident. It is because the world is steeped in sin and, therefore, the way of selfishness and pride is more appealing. The darkness hates the light, hence those in darkness reject the light-bearers.—John 3:19,20

Under these circumstances, with the results of sin still abounding in the world, is it any wonder that those who are faithful as ambassadors of Christ may at times suffer with him for righteousness' sake? The great High Priest, Christ Jesus, who through his ministry was the light of the world, was despised, rejected, and crucified by those who professed to love and follow righteousness. The apostles were similarly treated because of their refusal to compromise the message—the "word of reconciliation."

Jesus said of all his followers, "Ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake," and again, they "shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for

my sake.” (Luke 21:17; Matt. 5:11) These experiences will not be true of any of us, however, unless we let our light shine. If we keep our light “under a bushel,” it is most likely that the world will not hate us, and if such be the case, it will not be true of us that “the reproaches of them that reproached thee are fallen upon me.”—Matt. 5:15; Ps. 69:9

What wonderful wisdom is displayed in the divine arrangement! It is while performing the present ministry of reconciliation, to which the Spirit of our anointing impels us, that we each recognize the privilege and responsibility of offering up ourselves as a living sacrifice. Indeed, it is in this ministry that we may find our chief opportunity for sacrifice. If, on the other hand, we give up this privilege, or esteem it as unimportant, we take our sacrifice in significant measure off the altar.

The extent of self-sacrifice and suffering for Christ endured by each of the consecrated ministers of reconciliation is not the same in every case, nor is it the same in every part of the world. Circumstances are different for each one, and in each place. The important point, however, is that each of us, as God’s ambassador, should be willing to suffer for Christ’s sake and the truth’s sake, if in God’s providence we should be called upon to do so.

Indeed, each ambassador of Christ should not expect to continuously suffer for the truth’s sake, nor are all called upon to suffer in the same manner or to the same degree. Paul speaks of those who were merely the “companions” of those who served and sacrificed in the forefront of the ministry. (Heb. 10:33) Even Jesus did not suffer every day, but he was willing to do so whenever it was part of his

Father's will. The main consideration is to be faithful to the ministry to which we have been called, to refuse to compromise the truth, and to tell it out far and wide through the various means available to us. Doing this, we can leave the results in the Lord's hands, knowing that he will be pleased with our sincere and diligent efforts in his service.

THE GRACE OF GOD

Paul continues his discussion of the ministry of reconciliation saying, "We then, as workers together with him, beseech you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain." (II Cor. 6:1) The privilege of being coworkers with God is a marvelous manifestation of his grace, or favor. How tragic it would be to have received the Heavenly Father's grace in vain through unfaithfulness in its use. The apostle references the Old Testament concerning the ministry which has been given to us, and in the quotation we are assured of divine help in this time when the better sacrifices of the Gospel Age are being offered: "In a day of salvation, have I helped thee."—Isa. 49:8; II Cor. 6:2, *Rotherham Emphasized Bible*

Then Paul writes, "Giving no offence in any thing, that the ministry be not blamed: But in all things approving ourselves as the ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, In stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in watchings, in fastings." (II Cor. 6:3-5) It is evident from this that faithfulness in the ministry will lead to various forms of trial. It is manifest also that divine help will be needed in order to endure the experiences through which an active ministry will lead us.

Further, we are to examine ourselves that we may be approved as ministers of God: "By pureness, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Spirit, by love unfeigned, By the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armour of righteousness on the right hand and on the left, By honour and dishonour, by evil report and good report: as deceivers, and yet true; As unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and, behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed; As sorrowful, yet alway rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things."—II Cor. 6:6-10

It will be noted that in this listing which Paul sets forth concerning the things necessary for an approved ministry, he mentions nearly every phase of Christian character development. This indicates that all of these important factors in Christian living constitute the background and basis of our ministry. It means that we should be patient, kind, pure, know the truth, have on the armor of God, be filled with his Spirit, and lay down our lives in his service. All of this should be with the thought in mind of giving no offense in anything, "that the ministry be not blamed," and that we "receive not the grace of God in vain."

Finally, the apostle reaches a grand climax in his argument, exclaiming, "Oh ye Corinthians, our mouth is open unto you, our heart is enlarged." (vs. 11) Indeed, Paul's heart had been enlarged by the truth, and the grace of God had permeated his very soul. The Spirit of God impelled him to faithfulness in his ambassadorship. The love of God in his heart caused him to yearn for the blessing of others—not a few only, but all he could possibly

reach. Whether God called him to Asia, Macedonia, Greece, Jerusalem or Rome, Paul was ready and anxious to go and to use his strength to spread far and wide the “word of reconciliation.”

Paul endeavored to emulate the example of the Master, and he bids us to follow him as he followed Christ. (I Cor. 11:1) Have our hearts been enlarged as was Paul’s? Is the truth to us merely a better religion than we ever heard of before, or is it active in our lives? Is it the power of God unto salvation, both our own and others, as we engage in the ministry of reconciliation? Have our hearts been enlarged by the Gospel, or have we permitted them to shrink simply because the results of our ministry seem meager, or because we are fearful of the message being rejected?

Let us not hide behind the fact that this is not God’s time to convert the world and use that as an excuse not to serve as ministers of reconciliation. We know that the world will not now be converted. However, we know too that God desires our faithfulness to the ministry of the truth, and to say on all suitable occasions, and to whomsoever will listen, “Be ye reconciled to God.” What a blessed privilege is ours, and how highly we are honored! ■