

Reconciling Everything

Colossians 1: 19-23

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It was one of those now or never moments. Professor Torrance had agreed to meet me for lunch. In fact he was treating me. And he wanted me to talk theology. This was my chance to ask my questions straight out. Here's one I asked. "So, how can it be that Jesus' death on the cross 2000 years ago affects us now? I mean, how can what one man did long ago and far away affect every single person in this moment?" Maybe it's a question you've wondered about too. Why does Jesus' death and resurrection work for each of us now? After all, lots of people died on crosses. But no one else's death took away the sins of the world. Some people save others by giving their lives, maybe even save hundreds by an act of heroism, but that's only for that moment that it matters. Heroic deaths remain inspirational. Todd Beamer on United flight 93 still inspires me 17 years later. But many people have forgotten his name. Lots of people will hardly notice on Tuesday that it's the anniversary of the 9-11 attacks. And no one thinks that Beamer's heroic sacrifice affects the spiritual status of the human race. Christianity makes a big claim when our gospel says that Jesus' death on the cross takes away my personal sins 2000 years later. Even though I'm a minister of the gospel, I don't understand how that works. So that day at lunch, I thought I'd just risk humiliation and ask the master.

Professor Torrance didn't hesitate. His answer came straight out of Colossians 1. "Because," he said, "Christ stands in Creator relation to every person he has made." I'll paraphrase what he went on to say. What Jesus did as man, he also did as God. The man Jesus of Nazareth is also the eternal Son of God through whom all things were made. The Father, Son and Spirit were each and together involved in our Creation. The Father spoke his Word and brought creation into being. Jesus is the eternal Son of the Father. He is the Word. The Father brought forth creation through the Word of his Son in the power of his Spirit. So we can

say that Christ created each one of us. He sustains each one of us in life. He can act toward each and every one of us because he is the Creator God. He is the Creator God who came to us as a particular man. And that's what makes the life, death and resurrection of Jesus so significant. What he did as a particular man, he also did as God, and so all he said and did as one of us becomes powerful and potent for every one of us. He was the man on behalf of all men and women. Precisely because he relates to every man, woman and child as their Creator God.

“OK,” I said, rather weakly. I knew I'd be contemplating that answer for the rest of my life. Indeed, nearly two decades have passed and I'm still thinking about it. Especially as we study together Paul's great worship hymn in Colossians. Paul soars into heights of praise as he describes Jesus. Last week, we heard Paul sing, “He is the image of the invisible God...By him all things were created, in heaven and on earth... all things were created through him and for him...and in him all things hold together.” That's a lot to say about a man who walked among us in an ordinary body, eating, drinking, working and speaking like the rest of us. This man is also Creator God. In verse 1 of this worship song, we hear that Jesus is Creator.

This week, we hear more. “In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace through the blood of his cross.” In verse 2 of this worship song, we hear that the man Jesus reconciles all things to God his Father. Jesus is the peacemaker. He brings together what has been estranged. The creator creates again. He creates the grounds for restored relationship between God and man.

I hope a visual will help us meditate on this wild and wonderful reality. If I had to use only one picture to communicate the essence of what I believe it would be this one. From the church of San Clemente in Rome.



Apse mosaic

A 12th century mosaic. We only have time to explore a few aspects of this masterwork. Take a look at the whole scene just to get an impression of it. In the center is Jesus on the cross. Below the cross is a green,

flowering plant. It's a vine whose tendrils stretch in swirling spirals across the whole scene.



Now let's look more closely at the center.

Above the cross is a hand coming down out of the heavenly realm. It looks like the hand is dangling the cross into the world. Or is it thrusting the cross down into the earth beneath? Either way, where the cross is planted, new life is growing. We get a sense that heaven and earth are connected by Jesus upon the cross. That heaven has sent down the cross, the instrument of death, to bring the world back to life.

Now let's take a closer look at an image from the side of the mosaic.



It's a woman feeding chickens. Doing ordinary life. The workaday chores that sustain our living. There are other scenes of men keeping flocks and families with children. They are all going about their daily business under the shelter of the great vine that grows and spreads around them. The whole world is being renewed by the vine that grows from the foot of the cross. All life in the world is taken up and included in the renewal that grows from the sacrifice of Jesus. The killing cross is the Tree of Life. Paradise is open again.

On one side of this scene, the artist depicts the prophet Isaiah, reading from his book, "I saw the LORD, sitting upon the throne, high and lifted up" (6:1). Christ rules from the cross. His exalted throne is the rough wood of the cross. The Son of

God became Son of Man so that he who could not die found a way to die. And in dying he brought the world back to life. This affects everything. Because the man on the cross is the Creator Son of God. As Paul wrote elsewhere, “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not counting our sins against us...So we entreat you: be reconciled to God! (2 Cor. 5: 20-21).

How are we to take in this majestic salvation? Once more, let’s invite Professor Torrance into our conversation. Look at these stunning statements:

In Christ, God turns himself to humanity
In order to turn humanity to God.

By becoming one with us, he keeps faith with us, so
Jesus represents the turning of God toward humanity.

By his faithfulness to his Father as a man,
Jesus represents the turning of humanity to God.

In himself, in his own person, Jesus brings God and man together.

Positively:

Jesus brings the love of God down to our midst and
Jesus offers the proper love of man back to God.

Negatively: Jesus takes on himself the wrath of man against God,
As he is rejected by those he came to save and crucified.

Jesus takes on himself the just wrath of God against man
As he absorbs God’s great No to sin on the cross.

On the cross, Jesus refused to let go of God—for *our* sake.
On the cross, Jesus refused to let go of us—for *God’s* sake.

Jesus penetrated into the abyss that divides us from God,
Stood in the gap between God’s wrath and human guilt, and
By enduring and offering as God and man all that was righteous and true,
He destroyed the barrier and effected reconciliation.

Jesus was God standing in our place and bearing the just judgement on our iniquity. He was also man, offering to God in our place what we could not offer, a perfect offering of obedience, faithfulness, thankfulness and praise.

This blessed exchange in identification lies at the heart of reconciliation,

God takes upon himself the sentence of rejection and bears it instead of mankind, then God takes all his own righteous enmity against sin and absorbs it in himself.

In the cross we have humanity's final rejection of God, and in that cross we have God's final rejection of humanity's sin. But in the cross we have behind it all the holy will of God to take upon himself human sin in rejecting God, and to take upon himself his own rejection of humanity, so that he makes the cross the most positive act of divine love. ¹

Jesus effected a great switch. An incredible swap. It's how we who deserve punishment get grace. It's how we who cannot offer the love and faith required get taken into the perfect love and faithfulness of Christ Jesus.

At its root, reconciliation means *exchange*. It's the costly settling up. The putting right of accounts. The true-up of the books. The making whole after wrongs done. All these images from finance and law help us grasp the concept. Jesus paid the debt. Jesus settled our account. That's all true. But I want always to remember that it's much, much more than laws and debts. It's about the very core of our being. Jesus remade human being from the inside out. The reconciliation between God and humanity occurs in his person. At the cost of his life's blood. At infinite cost to his personal being.

That's why Paul says, "And you who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death" (1:21). He was the man who could act on behalf of all men and women. Because he was also God, our very creator come to be one of his creation. So he overcame human hostility to God in his personal faithfulness. He overcame our estrangement from God by his unbroken fellowship with his Father. This he lived out in the midst of our weakness, lostness, frailty and limitation. Amidst our violence, our lusts, our greed, our grasping, Jesus remained faithful. We hated him for it, for being so bright in our darkness and we killed him. But he took the worst we could do to him and returned the best that God has for us. He rose. And in him we have new life.

So Paul tells us that Jesus will present us “holy and blameless and above reproach.” Not because I can generate such a faithful and good life in myself. But because I am included in Christ. In Christ alone, never in ourselves, we will be presented clothed with his righteousness.

Once you were hostile in mind towards God. You were a stranger to him. You were alone in the universe. You were angry. You were trying to figure it out on your own. You were filling up the emptiness with whatever you wanted to grab that you had power to get. And you were as lost as lost can be. Yet furious with anyone who would suggest you were not OK. But now you have entered the reconciliation that Christ created by his own blood. You have stepped into God’s life as you were joined to Jesus. Now you are back in alignment. You are included in the love of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. You can live out God’s purpose.

Paul then concludes our passage by saying, “if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven.” Paul has sung the praises of Christ. He has proclaimed this stunning reconciliation.

So stay connected. Don’t go back to thinking you can find a better life on your own. Don’t go playing with dead things. And don’t let anyone tell you that you need to add something to Jesus your reconciler. None of what you do makes him love you more. So you can love him freely. Just out of gratitude. Just because you know in his path is the path to life. It was never going to be one and done with Jesus, got heaven so let me get back to my best life now. No, my best life, my only life is in Christ now and every moment into eternity.

The cross has become the tree of life. The Creator has come to reconcile his creation. The exchange has been made. God took his own wrath against sin, refusing to take our No for a final answer. Instead he has come to us in Jesus to answer a resounding Yes from a human heart turned toward our Father in heaven. Christ has answered for you in life and in death. Live from his Yes. Live from the reconciliation he has already accomplished in himself. Live in the Kingdom of the Beloved Son!

¹ Thomas Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Robert Walker (Downers Grove: IVP, 2009), pp. 147-157.