

5 – The Gospel of Reconciliation

The Means of Reconciliation

We have already looked at the accounts of Paul's Gospel preaching in the Acts, but we get more detailed insight when we look at his letters.

In his second letter to the Corinthians Paul describes the Gospel as the message of reconciliation:

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. ... All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor 5:14-21)

This passage looks much more like the Four Spiritual Laws; the death of Christ is prominent, restoration of our relationship with God is the goal, and the means of our forgiveness is explained.

There is something about this passage which is entirely different from all the others we have looked at so far. This passage focuses on explaining *how* reconciliation is possible. All the other Gospel presentations include reconciliation with God, but the accounts we have looked at so far do not include any explanation of how reconciliation is made possible. For example, John simply says:

"If we walk in the light ... the blood of Jesus purifies us from all sin."

Does this passage show us that Paul's Gospel preaching was focussed on our sin and Jesus' substitutionary death as the means of forgiveness? I don't think so. The passage above is Paul explaining how confident we can be in the message of reconciliation: "... we are convinced..."

We must distinguish between how Paul explained the Gospel to believers and what he preached to unbelievers. Paul goes to great lengths to explain the means of salvation when writing to the churches, but all the evidence points to the fact that Paul preached the Gospel of the Kingdom, just as Jesus did, when preaching to unbelievers.

The Cross in Paul's teaching

The cross is a recurring theme in Paul's letters. But when we look more closely at how he uses the cross we may be surprised! There is little evidence to suggest the cross was central to Paul's preaching of the Gospel!

He refers to the cross only twice in 1 Corinthians (1:17-18) describing it as "foolishness to those who are perishing". His three references in Galatians are similar (5:11, 6:12-14) where he describes it as "the stumbling block" to the Jews. Phil 3:18 likewise speaks of the legalistic Jews as "enemies of the cross".

Paul's other reference to the cross in Philippians simply describes it as the means of humiliating Jesus (Phil 2:8).

That leaves just three passages where Paul touches on the role of the cross in salvation:

His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. (Ephesians 2:16)

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Col 1:20)

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. (Col 2:13-15)

Paul points to the cross as the means of our reconciliation with God. Notice, however, that these letters are written to believers and are not necessarily how Paul shared the Gospel with unbelievers.

The Blood of Jesus in Paul's teaching

Paul sometimes referred to the cross implicitly by talking about the blood of Jesus:

"This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe ... who are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith." (Rom 3:22-25)

"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!" (Rom 5:8-10)

"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace." (Eph 1:7)

"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ." (Eph 2:13)

In these passages Paul continues his celebration of the reconciliation that Jesus has made possible through his death on the

cross. But for the most part, Paul offers no explanation as to how the cross reconciles us to God. However, on four occasions Paul clearly describes Jesus' death as a substitute for ours (Rom 3:25, 1 Cor 15:3, 2 Cor 5:21, Gal 3:13).

Conclusion

We have seen that when Paul writes to believers about the work of Christ, he makes frequent reference to our reconciliation with God, and he points to the cross as the means of our reconciliation. Paul goes into much more detail in exploring our reconciliation with God than we see in the Gospels or the Acts. It is consequently very easy to explain the Four Spiritual Laws using passages from Paul's letters.