

## 2 Corinthians – The Ministry of Reconciliation

*by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle*

### Prayer of Illumination

Lord God, we believe. Help our unbelief. Amen.

### Background

Saul was a Jew from Tarsus of Cilicia. He was a Pharisee who studied at the feet of the most respected rabbi of the day, Gamaliel. Saul was well-versed in not only Jewish thought, but also Greek thought as well. However, he was none too pleased with the burgeoning movement of followers of the crucified Christ. In fact, Saul ruthlessly pursued and persecuted them—until his famous Damascus Road experience.

"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

"Who are you Lord?" asked Saul.

The answer came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." Acts 9:4-5

The infamous enemy of Christians now became the most prominent promoter of Christ.

It was ironic—God had called a strict Jewish Pharisee to be the Apostle to the Gentiles. God's reconciliation melting away hatred and bringing people together.

Saul is more commonly known by the Latin version of his Hebrew name, Paul. 13 of the 27 books of the New Testament are said to be written by Paul. More than half of the book of Acts is devoted to telling stories of Paul's ministry and missionary journeys. Next to Jesus, Paul is the most important figure in our understanding Christianity.

Paul was bi-vocational—meaning he funded much of his missionary expenses through his trade of being a tentmaker, which was basically a leatherworker or tanner. He went on at least three missionary journeys in his life traveling 7000 miles. Paul was a martyr for his faith—and was executed in Rome in the mid-60s AD.

A party spirit continued to run amuck in Corinth—division and dispute, factions and fighting, both spiritual and shocking behavior all bundled up together. Paul was exasperated.

"I belong to Paul." "I'm with Peter." "Well, I'm aligned with Apollos."

We have our own version of Corinthian polarization today.

"I'm with Sean Hannity."

"I belong to Rachel Maddow."

"I'm an ambassador of Ann Coulter."

"Well, I'm a follower of Bill Maher."

24-7 we obsessively consume our personally customized news to our own specific political views.

In 1960, pollsters asked Americans, "Would you be disappointed if your child married a person from the opposing political party?" 4.5% of Americans said yes.

In 2010, even before the contentious 2016 election, pollsters asked Americans the same question. Their answer: 45% of Americans said they would be disappointed if their child married someone from the "opposing" political party.

Many Christians have come to think that the kingdom of God is the Republican party platform or that the kingdom of God is the Democratic party agenda. My fellow Christians—we make up approximately 75% of the American population. Plain and simple, the church is guilty of furthering the divide, rather than sharing and showing the message of reconciliation.

Paul in 2 Corinthians sets us on a much higher spiritual path, reminding us that our ultimate identity is in Christ—more specifically, the crucified Christ. Be informed and engage in politics—but keep it humbled and constrained under Christ's authority. "We are Christ's ambassadors," says Paul. Not our political party's ambassadors. They are not the same thing. An ambassador doesn't represent themselves—they represent their leader, and their country. Christ is our King and the Kingdom of God is our residence.

I like how New Testament scholar William Barclay puts it, "Here is the Christian's proud privilege and almost terrifying responsibility. The honor of Christ and of the Church are in the hands of each one of us."

This is the paradox of the cross— it's a power made perfect in weakness. The power of God is manifested in us through the crucified Christ's humility, forgiveness, self-giving love, and bridge building. As reconciled reconcilers we broadcast the news—the good news, the true news, of reconciliation and transformation found in Christ Jesus. We read in the book of Romans, written several years after Corinthians, that Paul's strained relationship with the church of Corinth was eventually reconciled.

### **Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:17-21 (NRSV)**

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.***

## SERMON – 2 Corinthians - The Ministry of Reconciliation

Paul has just reminded us of something very important:

God has entrusted us with the ministry of reconciliation.

In Christ Jesus, God not only reconciles the world, but God can even reconcile red and blue. Yes, God is God of the impossible. My God is a God of miracles! God can transform our tired, old, predictable ways of: blaming, bickering, and bitterness and bring renewal, restoration, and reconciliation between individuals and parties. We can learn a lot of from each other if we sit down and listen. We need each other. Conservatives—you need liberals. Liberals—you need conservatives.

In Allen Hilton's wonderful new book, *A House United—How the Church Can Save the World*, he talks about the movement of reconciliation rumbling in the church today.

You don't hear about it much in the news, but it's going on.

Pastor Stu

Pastor Jim

Stu Kerns pastors Zion Presbyterian Church in Lincoln, Nebraska. Zion is definitely a "red" church—they're part of a conservative branch of Presbyterians known as the PCA. They don't ordain women or recognize same-sex marriages.

Then there's Jim Keck, who pastors First Plymouth Congregational Church in downtown Lincoln—a true blue and progressive church in the red map of Nebraska. Plymouth Church was one of the early pioneers in affirming gay Christians in membership, ordination, and same-sex marriage. It would be so easy for Stu and Jim to throw "red and blue meat" to their prospective choirs. But they don't do that. In their own distinctive ways, Stu and Jim prefer constructive engagement and courageous conversations as they carry out each of their unique callings as ambassadors of Christ entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation.

Stu hosts a local radio show each Saturday morning on KLIN 1400 AM called Friendly Fire. Stu's been the pastor at Zion for over 30 years and he's cultivated strong relationships with many other pastors in Lincoln, and frequently hosts them on his show. His goal is to bring a wide array of Christian perspectives into friendly conversation with one another on hot button issues of the day.

Jim is different—very progressive, but he preaches like an evangelical—talking about conversion and being in relationship with Jesus. This liberal church hosts good old-fashioned revivals. They've even brought in a black Pentecostal preacher from Chicago.

Ladies and gentlemen—liberals aren't supposed to have revivals. Revivals are too emotional, too spooky, too narrow-minded, too evangelistic. Jim begs to differ.

And Stu and Jim aren't supposed to get along either. Our culture and especially the church tells us Stu and Jim are supposed to be opposing generals leading their armies in a bloody and protracted uncivil war between the blue and the red.

But Jim, Stu, and most importantly Jesus disagree.

Instead the two have a warm friendship—with Stu often inviting Jim on his radio show. They have pulpit exchanges—a liberal UCC pastor preaching at a PCA church and a conservative PCA pastor preaching at a UCC church. The two laugh and joke together about their differences. They respectfully disagree as brothers in God's forever family. But they know Jesus is so much bigger, so much more defining, so much more important than their differences.

This is the ministry of reconciliation and what a beautiful thing this is—this is what the church needs, this is what society needs, what our world needs. Our unity in Christ in a time of division is a powerful witness and example to the world of God's love. The old ways are passing away. God is doing a new thing. I want to do what God is doing.

The crucified Christ has the power to crumble the walls of hostility and animosity that divide us. In Christ Jesus, God was and God is reconciling the world. We are in Christ, and Christ is working in us and through us to reconcile the world to God. As Christians we have a calling in our lives to be appealing, not revolting. Christ is appealing through us: Be reconciled to God! But how can we invite others to be reconciled to God if we can't be reconciled with others who are made in God's image? Are we really reconciled to God?

Immanuel, Christ is on the move and Christ is at work today and it isn't business as usual.

Study church history and Christians have been from all different kinds of governments and from different political stripes and plaids. This is the radical thing—no matter your affiliation, Christ wants to work in us and through a people to bring other people together and to build them up, not tear them apart, and tear them down. Jesus is about the Kingdom of God, and we should be about the Kingdom of God too. Don't settle for less.

The ramifications are staggering for all of us: Instead of quarreling and bashing "the enemy" or "the other side," we open up our lives to Christ's love and we extend Christ's love to all. We don't engage in culture wars, rather we engage in the ministry of reconciliation and wage peace. The love of Christ compels us to heal our differences and bridge our divides and continue Christ's ministry on earth. This will take some changes for us all.

The Oxford Dictionary defines an echo chamber as:

An environment in which a person encounters only beliefs or opinions that coincide with their own, so that their existing views are re-enforced and alternative ideas are not considered.

Liberals and conservatives, traditionalists and progressives, reds and blues—Christ is calling you out of your echo chamber. Christ has unlocked your door so you can get out and get some air. You will suffocate in your silo. Come out and breathe deep the fresh air of the Holy Spirit and God's wide-open spaces.

My dear donkeys and elephants—remember that first and foremost we are all fish, ichthus in Greek. Ichthus is an acronym in Greek for Jesus Christ God's Son and Savior. The fish was the secret code for persecuted Christians to identify themselves.

We're also sheep—the Lord is my shepherd. And if you're a goat, in Christ be a G.O.A.T—greatest of all time.

As Christians we're different from the world. We're not only fish and sheep, we're birds—odd birds at that. And every bird has to get out of its shell to spread its wings and fly.

Let's get used to it—there are many kinds of birds in God's animal kingdom: Capitalists and socialists, lefties and righties and centrists, tea partiers and coffee drinkers, reds, blues, greens, purples, black & whites, gay and straight—whatever your feather—in Christ Jesus we can flock together and fly to God's glory. We need each other.

Get a new algorithm. Don't listen to the same old same old news feeds, rehashed talk shows and radio voices, predictable authors, websites, newspapers, and magazines. Shake it up with more liberal or conservative or moderate perspectives in all your reading. Variety is the spice of life and it will give you some creative dissonance and a broader and more measured perspective. And most importantly keep engaging with the Scriptures and listening to other people's engagement with Scripture.

Flee from the angertainment and the outrage machine found on the extremes of both sides—it's poison for your souls. And studies show it makes you depressed and no fun to live with.

Stop the demonization, polarization, partyism, and poop throwing in conversations and social media. How can the church in good conscience say, "Be reconciled to God!" when we regularly rip into others and tear them apart?

Don't assume all smart and ethical Christian people think the same way you do—get curious about why others think differently than you. You don't have to change. Unity isn't the same thing as uniformity. But then again, the Holy Spirit might change you in surprising ways. You might change the other person too when you're respectful and listening!

More importantly, get to know people that think and believe and live differently than you.

Instead of condemning them, seek community and understanding with them. You will both be enriched.

What I'm getting at here is that we have a calling to reconciliation—we don't have to consign ourselves into living in the D.S.A.—the Divided States of America. In Christ, the church should be a House United, not a House Divided.

We are the body of Christ. Each and everyone one of us have a circle of influence in our lives—a network of friends who are not actively involved with God or church—roughly 8 to 15 people studies show. For you maybe it's more, maybe it's less. Family, neighbors, fellow students, co-workers, friends, etc. I'm not talking about people far away, but people in your regular day to day life.

What if you saw yourself as being an ambassador of Christ engaging in the ministry of reconciliation with your 8 to 15? No matter who they are or what their politics or personality is—loving them, praying for them, encouraging them, listening to them, and extending the friendship of Christ with them, inviting them to church.

Look around the room—for each person here add another 8-15 people per person. If we multiply that by our number of members at Immanuel, it's roughly 2500 to 4650 people that we can extend God's reconciliation to. Wow!

I'd like to close with one of my favorite true stories. In 1981, less than three months after taking office, Ronald Reagan was hospitalized after being shot in an assassination attempt. The Speaker of the House at the time, Tip O'Neal, went to visit Reagan in the hospital.

Reagan and O'Neil were on opposite ends of the political spectrum—their differing views exasperated each other at times—BUT they were both Irishmen and Christians and they were friends—especially after 6:00 pm. Tip walked over to Reagan's bedside and knelt down. The Democrat and Republican joined hands. They began to recite Psalm 23 together.

"Thanks for coming, Tip," the Gipper managed to whisper.

After the Scripture reading, Tip rose, kissed Reagan on the forehead and said he didn't want to keep him from his rest—and left the room.

You are a new creation. Break the mold. Bust out of your cocoon. Cast off the stereotypes and vitriol of the passing world. See the world with new eyes. Think with a new mindset. Live differently. You are Christ's ambassador entrusted with the message of reconciliation. Everything old has passed away, behold everything has become new!

See it.

Believe it.

Be-live it.

**Amen.**

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