

# Towards a Theology of Reconciliation

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Justification by grace through faith for Christ's sake is the chief doctrine of the Christian religion (*Formula of Concord, SD 3.6 and Apology 4.1-3*). This comforting doctrine assures us that in Christ all our sins have been forgiven, and that we have peace with God – that the separation caused by sin has been removed, and the broken relationship has been restored. It is comforting because it is all the result of Christ's work, and does not depend on our works or merit. It is comforting because Christ work of redemption is full and complete, lacking nothing.

Justification is at the heart of God's Word, it is the center of the gospel, as well as the center of our prayer and worship. It is out of the proper understanding of the doctrine of justification that we speak of the theology of reconciliation. We begin in this way; while the justification of the sinner before God is an accomplished fact because of Christ's work of redemption. It is also correct to speak of our reception of this grace of God which is still by grace through faith, and occurs in and through confession and absolution. For until we confess our sins, that is, we acknowledge that we have acted in a shameful and wicked way, and that our thoughts words and deeds have separated us from God and earned for us God's wrath, His just punishment, and eternal death; we see no need of a Savior, and no need for forgiveness, and have no desire for the grace and mercy of God. But having seen our sins, we hunger and thirst for mercy, grace, forgiveness and peace with God; and we joyfully receive the good news that all this is ours in the blood of Jesus Christ.

In treating reconciliation, the 5<sup>th</sup> Petition of the Lord's Prayer is central – "***And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.***" The catechism focuses on the justification of the sinner before God, and rightly so, for this is something we need to hear often. One could argue that we do not even need to hear the second half of the petition, because those, whose sins are forgiven, will be so grateful for this mercy that they will willingly look for ways to show their appreciation of this great treasure and gladly forgive, even without this commandment, so Luke 7:47. God, knowing the old adam, and the power of pride, not only adds the clause to 5<sup>th</sup> petition, but expands it in the verses which follow: Matthew 6:14-15 "***For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.***" And God illustrates the proper reconciliation (*as well as the improper*) in the parable of the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18:23-35.

The reason why the doctrine of justification is so important, is it keeps us from trying to earn forgiveness from God by our forgiveness of our neighbor. We desire forgiveness from God, and from our neighbor, but we cannot forgive as we ought. God can forgive and forget (*Jeremiah 31.34*), remove our sins as far as the east is from the west (*Psalms 103.12*) and the fullness of this forgiveness is of great comfort. The question is how can we forgive as God has forgiven us?

At this juncture one might expect a 7 step program showing how we might forgive as God has forgiven us. There are several problems with that approach, first – if we don't understand how God has forgiven us, we will never know if we are truly forgiving as God has forgiven us, and that doubt will end up driving us to despair. A second problem stems from the do it yourself mentality, we might be tempted to look at any plan as a way we can make peace with God and earn our own salvation. I believe we will discover, on learning how God has forgiven us – that by ourselves, it is impossible to forgive as God in Christ has forgiven us. And that brings us to the third problem, for what we are speaking of is something that only Christians can do (we cannot forgive, if we have not experienced forgiveness), and it is only

possible because of the grace God has given us (which has made us a new creation through the forgiveness of sins), that is, it cannot happen apart from Word and Sacrament.

As soon as we turn to Word and Sacrament, we are in the world of the church, that is, the body of Christ, and the communion of the saints. The church is a community, and we become part of that community by the act of God, He claims us to be His children, He gives us His name, He makes us a new creation.

Just as God has not left us by ourselves, so God has not commanded us to do things which are impossible, but by this command he calls us again to rely on his grace and live by faith, knowing that just as God has worked faith in our hearts, so also God will work in our hearts, that we might forgive as fully and as freely as God in Christ has forgiven us. For the doctrine of justification teaches us that all of the glory goes to God, and though we may speak of our works, the credit goes to God.

So, the real question is, how may the Christian, in the church, relying on the grace of God, begin the forgiveness we are commanded to practice? The answer is found in examining the words in the New Testament which speak of forgiveness.

Therefore we begin with ἀφιημι which is the verb used in the Lord's Prayer, in both Matthew and Luke, as well as in Matthew 6:14-15, which is used 143x in the New Testament, here is a sample of those which may be helpful, 16x's it is used ἀφιημι . . . ἀμαρτία.

Matt 5:24 leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

Matt 5:40 and if any one would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well;

Matt 6:12 And forgive us our debts, As we also have forgiven our debtors;

Matt 6:14 For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you;

Matt 6:15 but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Matt 7:4 Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye?

Matt 9:6 But that you may know that the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins" -- he then said to the paralytic -- "Rise, take up your bed and go home."

Matt 12:31 Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.

Matt 12:32 And whoever says a word against the Son of man will be forgiven; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

Matt 18:21 Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?"

Matt 18:32 Then his lord summoned him and said to him, You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you besought me;

Matt 18:35 So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

Mark 11:25 And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against any one; so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses."

Luke 7:47 Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little."

Luke 11:4 and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive every one who is indebted to us; and lead us not into temptation."

Luke 17:3 Take heed to yourselves; if your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him;

Luke 17:4 and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, and says, I repent, you must forgive him."

Luke 23:34 And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments.

John 20:23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Acts 8:22 Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you.

Romans 4:7 "Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered;

James 5:15 and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

1 John 2:12 I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his sake.

The general idea is that of “letting go.” But just letting go, while a first step, is certainly not all there is to forgiveness and does not work reconciliation. For example, there is a great difference between being released from the interest obligation of a debt, and being released from the debt.

This is where the parable of Matthew 18:25ff comes into play, there one is released (ἀπολυω) and forgiven (ἀφιημι) the debt, is not just the interest – but the entire debt! ἀπολυω is used 66x in NT, sometimes it is used to speak of divorce, it is also used of dismissing the crowds, or releasing prisoners; so forgiveness also may be spoken of as a release, here is a sample:

Matt 18:27 And out of pity for him the lord of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.

Matt 19:8 He said to them, "For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.

Matt 27:21 The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barab'bas."

Luke 2:29 "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word;

Luke 6:37 "Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven;

ἐπικαλυπτω used once in NT, tells us that sins which are forgiven are covered, that is there is not longer any trace, because we are forgiven and made a new creation.

Romans 4:7 "Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered;

χαριζομαι (23x in the NT) particularly at Luke 7:42-43 adds to our understanding of forgiveness, by underscoring the gracious nature of the act.

Luke 7:42-43 When they could not pay, he forgave them both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, to whom he forgave more." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly."

Ephesians 4:32 and Colossians 3:13 reminds us that it is not optional.

Eph 4:32 and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Col 3:13 forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

It is not hard to imagine God being gracious, the question is, how me we act in a gracious manner? The answer is, that God's grace so overflows into our lives, that grace might flow from God through us, and on to our neighbor, and it is by that grace of God that we may show forgiveness to our neighbor. For true forgiveness is not pardoning the act, but demanding payment for the debt, it is not forgiving the interest, but demanding the principal – true forgiveness removes the obstacle. We know that sin separates us from God, and it also places an obstacle which prevents us from coming to God, forgiveness removes the obstacle. We can forgive, because God has forgiven us, and the debts we are owed, even that really wasn't ours, we are merely stewards of the treasures which God has entrusted us. So that when we forgive, we find that we do not have less [the debt we were owed] but we have more [by the grace of God]. We might be tempted to stop there, after all, we have forgiven the debt, and removed the obstacle – that is a lot of grace! But we have just begun the process of reconciliation.

In reconciliation, not only is the debt forgiven, the obstacle removed, but the relationship is renewed and restored. This comes to us in the New Testament through the cognates of λλασσομαι, all of which are about reestablishing friendly interpersonal relationships after they have been broken.

καταλλασσω – 6x in NT –

Romans 5:10 For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.

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1 Cor 7:11 (but if she does, let her remain single or else be reconciled to her husband) -- and that the husband should not divorce his wife.

2 Cor 5:18 All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation;

2 Cor 5:19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

2 Cor 5:20 So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

καταλλαγή – 4x in NT –

Romans 5:11 Not only so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received our reconciliation.

Romans 11:15 For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?

2 Cor 5:18 All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation;

2 Cor 5:19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

ἀποκαταλλασσω – 3x in NT –

Eph 2:16 and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end.

Col 1:20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Col 1:22 he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him,

συναλλασσω – 1x in NT –

Acts 7:26 And on the following day he appeared to them as they were quarreling and would have reconciled them, saying, Men, you are brethren, why do you wrong each other?'

διαλλασσομαι – 1x in NT –

Matt 5:24 leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

Reconciliation is what God has done for us in Christ. What is instructive is that God always takes the initiative. God changes his feelings (the wrath is removed). God grants pardon. God reestablishes fresh relations characterized by peace. And God paid the full price (*Colossians 2:13-15*). All this was accomplished once, for all by Christ on the Cross. We welcome what God has done for us in Christ, and we are exceedingly thankful. We readily admit that we could not have done the least bit to accomplish what has been given to us by grace. And yet, this peacemaking, and reestablishing friendly relations may seem somewhat overwhelming. Perhaps we can forgive, and in time forget – but for us to reestablish a relationship with the people who wronged us may seem unreasonable and even foolish.

Which brings us back to the Lord's Prayer – "***And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.***" We certainly need the forgiveness and reconciliation that is ours in Christ, and that was paid for, while we were yet sinners. And if we can recognize that we need it, certainly everyone else needs it as well, how can we then deny this grace of God to others?

The centrality of the Gospel is undeniable, but the Word tells us (*2 Corinthians 5:18*) that the Gospel ministry is a ministry of reconciliation. How can we carry the Gospel, if we fail to practice the reconciliation that God has shown us [*and given us*] in Christ? This practice of reconciliation in the life of a Christian is so important, that it becomes the pivot point explaining how it is that we might be ambassadors for Christ, because God is making His appeal through us (*2 Corinthians 5:20*).

Even now, we are not quite done with the picture, for there is at least one more piece to our picture, many are familiar with the message of the Christmas angels (*Luke 2:14*)

***"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"***

The problem is that many misunderstand the nature of peace, for a message to shepherds about an end of warfare during a time known as the Pax Romana doesn't make much sense.

It makes even less sense in the case of the righteous and devout Simeon (*Luke 2:29*)

***"Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word;"***

It is important to note that the chief concern, even in the classical usage of the cognates of εἰρήνη is not the elimination of war, but it is rather an organization of the future towards goals of tranquility, and opportunities for happiness and prosperity.

In the Old Testament, peace, שָׁלוֹם is first of all the gift of God (*Numbers 6:24-26*)  
***“The LORD bless you and keep you: The LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you: The LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.”***

There is also found the future orientation of prosperity, security and tranquility (*Isaiah 66:12*) ***“For thus says the LORD: I will extend peace to her like a river, and the wealth of the nations like an overflowing stream; and you shall nurse and be carried on her arm, and dandled on her knees.”***

In the New Testament, we have already mentioned the peace εἰρήνη, that comes through the incarnation, the Peace of God that comes to man in Christ (*Luke 2:14*). It is an important concept, the noun occurs 92x. It is clearly tied to justification: (*Romans 5:1*)

***“Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”***

And it is a central concept of the Gospel: (*Acts 10:36*)

***“You know the word which he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace by Jesus Christ”***

as well as an attribute of all believers: (*Galatians 5:22*)

***“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,”***

It is something we bring with us wherever we go: (*Luke 10:5-6*)

***“Whatever house you enter, first say, Peace be to this house! And if a son of peace is there, your peace shall rest upon him; but if not, it shall return to you.”***

This peace is ours, because it is given us by Christ: (*John 14:27*)

***Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.***

This peace is ours because Christ has made peace εἰρηνοποιεω with God: (*Colossians 1:20*)

***“and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.”***

And so we are called to make peace: (*James 3:18*)

***And the harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.***

Christ plainly tells us that this will not always be easy: (*John 16:33*)

***“I have said this to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”***

Never the less, it will be something we will be working at: (*Hebrews 12:14*)

***“Strive for peace with all men, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.”***

Finally, peacemakers εἰρηνοποιος will be the name given to the child of God (*Matthew 5.9*),

and it is a noble calling, which again returns us to the grace of God, for it only through his grace that we may accomplish His work, and work with Him to build and extend His Kingdom just as we pray we might do when we pray the Lord’s Prayer.

***Our Father who art in heaven***

***Hallowed be Thy Name,***

***Thy Kingdom Come,***

***Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,***

***Give us this day our daily bread,***

***And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us,***

***And lead us not into temptation,***

***But deliver us from evil.***

***For Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory,***

***Forever and ever, Amen.***