

A Purpose Set Forth in Christ: God's Mission of Reconciliation in Ephesians 1–2

The logo for the Evangelical Missiological Society (ems) is located in the top right corner. It consists of the lowercase letters "ems" in a bold, orange, sans-serif font, set against a dark blue circular background.

PHILIP CROUSE

Vol 3:1 2023

Philip Crouse Jr. (PhD) is the pastor of Germanton Baptist Church in Germanton, North Carolina.

The story of Scripture is the story of God's mission of reconciliation. After the fall, sin brings death and destruction into God's world causing enmity and separation in human relationships and God's relationship with humanity. Because of sin, humanity is dependent on God to take the initiative in bringing about peace through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Therefore, God's mission of reconciliation is His purposeful action to bring peace to everything in creation affected by sin.

No biblical author expounds on the beauty of God's mission of reconciliation as frequently or deeply as the Apostle Paul. No discussion of reconciliation is complete until the letters of Paul are considered. The concept of reconciliation is essential to Pauline soteriology and his understanding of the *missio Dei*. Some theologians even see it as the center of his theology. Paul's teaching on reconciliation is vast, encompassing more than peace between God and humanity as he applies God's mission of reconciliation to humanity's relationship with God (Col 1:21–22), mankind's broken relationships (Eph 2:11–22), and even the brokenness of creation (Rom 8:20–21). The reconciliation of all things in Christ is God's purpose set forth in His Son (Eph 1:9).

Although Paul's writings are not overflowing with uses of *καταλλάσσω* (to reconcile), *ἀποκαταλλάσσω* (to reconcile), and *καταλλαγή* (reconciliation), the concept of God's mission of reconciliation is a central theme in his letters. As Leon Morris (1976, 186) argues, throughout Paul's writing "it is clear that the concept of reconciliation is sometimes present when the actual word itself does not occur." Within Paul's corpus, Romans 5:1–11, 2 Corinthians 5:11–21, Ephesians 2:11–22, and Colossians 1:20–22 receive the most attention in discussions on reconciliation, and rightfully so, as each of these passages contains clear teaching on God's reconciling work. However, I contend that Ephesians 1–2, though containing few uses of the terms peace and reconciliation, is one of Paul's most important passages on God's mission of reconciliation. Paul beautifully expounds and applies God's mission of reconciliation throughout Ephesians 1–2 in ways not found in other passages on reconciliation.

To understand the importance of Ephesians 1–2 in Paul’s theology of reconciliation, it’s helpful to understand the makeup of Ephesians 1–2 and what Paul says about God’s mission of reconciliation in his other letters. It is also necessary to examine the opening chapters of Ephesians to see specific ways Paul emphasizes reconciliation as a part of God’s mission. In these chapters, Paul celebrates 1) blessing and God’s mission of reconciliation, 2) the trinitarian nature of reconciliation, and 3) reconciliation between peoples.

Ephesians 1–2

Few books in the Bible compare to Ephesians in terms of theological depth and clarity. Like no other Pauline letter, Ephesians focuses on the breadth, depth, and trinitarian nature of God’s mission of salvation. “Cosmic reconciliation and unity in Christ” is the major theme throughout Ephesians (O’Brien 1999, 58). God’s mission is a connecting theme in the different sections that make up the first two chapters of Ephesians. More specifically, Paul emphasizes the overall goal of God’s mission: the reconciliation of all things affected by sin.

After his typical greeting in Ephesians 1:1–2, Paul praises God for the abundance of spiritual blessings Christians experience in Christ (Eph 1:3–14). This section focuses on God’s salvific mission and how each person of the Trinity participates in the work of reconciliation. The following section contains Paul’s reasons for thanksgiving and prayer, including the inheritance of the saints, God’s power towards His children, and God’s exaltation of the Son, who has been raised from the dead, seated at the right hand of the Father, given the name above all names, and made Lord over all creation and head of the church (Eph 1:15–23). In Ephesians 2:1–10, Paul reminds the Ephesians that they once were alienated from God because of their sin and disobedience, but in mercy, God rescued them and made them alive together with Christ through faith. In these verses, Paul focuses on how individuals are saved by grace through faith. The following section—Ephesians 2:11–22—shifts to a corporate focus where Paul celebrates the victory of God’s mission of reconciliation, which has not only brought the Gentiles near to God, but also reconciled the Gentiles and Jews into one body in Christ. The closing verses provide a climax: God’s reconciling work forms Jews and Gentiles into a holy temple, “a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (Eph 2:22, ESV). Ephesians 1–2 contain few explicit references to reconciliation or peace, and yet, the concept of reconciliation is the driving thought within these chapters.

Reconciliation in Paul's Theology

What is reconciliation, and what part does it play in God's mission of salvation? According to Porter (1993, 695), "Reconciliation is the Pauline concept in which enmity between God and humanity, or between human groups, is overcome and peaceful relations restored on the basis of the work of Christ." This definition is a good starting point for thinking about reconciliation as it acknowledges the problem, presents the solution, and explains how reconciliation takes place. Because humanity is sinful and God demands holiness, there is enmity between God and mankind (Morris 1976, 196). However, God, in love, takes the initiative in reconciliation, forgiving sin to establish peaceful relations through the cross of Christ. Outside of his writing in Ephesians, the concept of reconciliation in Pauline theology is best understood by examining three passages: Romans 5:1–11, 2 Corinthians 5:17–21, and Colossians 1:20–22. As Paul explains God's mission in terms of reconciliation throughout these passages, common themes are used. Recognizing these common themes is important as they also appear in Ephesians 1–2, despite Paul not using explicit reconciliation language in these chapters.

Romans 5:1–11

Paul begins Romans 5 by bringing together two soteriological concepts: justification and peace. Paul writes, "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 5:1). Peace and justification are not synonymous, but they are closely related concepts. As Murray (1968, 158–159) explains, "The background of [justification] is condemnation and subjection to the wrath of God and it contemplates our acceptance with God as righteous. The background of [peace] is our alienation from God and it contemplates our instatement in the favour of God and in the light of his countenance." Because of sin, mankind is alienated from God, but through faith in the work of Jesus Christ, believers are declared righteous, their sins forgiven, enmity removed, and reconciliation with God takes place. This verse demonstrates the relationship between justification and reconciliation in Pauline thought.

In Romans 5:8–11, God's mission of reconciliation takes center stage. Similar to 5:1, Paul connects multiple soteriological themes as he explains God's mission to reconcile.

But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were still 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. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation (Rom 5:8–11).

Paul's main emphasis is God's reconciling work through Christ. It was not mankind that took the first step towards God, but God who initiates reconciliation by sending His Son to die. Beale (2011, 541) explains, "The implicit idea is that Christ experienced God's hostility and wrath at the cross so that those who believe in Christ and become identified with his death are considered to have also experienced God's eschatological wrath, so that they can now come into a peaceful relationship with him." Sinners who are alienated from God and stand condemned to the wrath of God are justified by the blood of Jesus and reconciled to God. As we will see, Paul connects these same soteriological terms and concepts in Ephesians 1–2.

2 Corinthians 5:17–21

Another passage that is essential for understanding reconciliation in Paul's writings is 2 Corinthians 5:17–21. First, Paul connects a believer's union with Christ to the reconciling work of God. He writes, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:17–18). Those united to Christ in His death and resurrection are new creations, meaning, the old self and old ways defined by sin and alienation are no more. How exactly do sinners find favor with God through Christ? Paul explains in verse 21: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." In order to reconcile sinners, the spotless Lamb of God became a substitute for sinners, taking on sin and punishment while imputing His righteousness to sinners who require it. As Martin (1989, 101) explains, "The sinless Christ took our condemnation, that for us there might be condemnation no more . . . the happy result of this 'transaction' is that as Christ in his sinlessness took responsibility for our wrongdoing, we are gifted with that entity ('the righteousness of God') that permits our acceptance with God." Like Romans 5, Paul emphasizes justification and reconciliation here in 2 Corinthians.

Colossians 1:19–22

Colossians 1:19–22 also deepens our understanding of reconciliation in Pauline theology. Paul writes,

For 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 by the blood of the cross. And you, who were once alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.

Here in Colossians, there are similarities to the passages in Romans and 2 Corinthians, and Ephesians 1–2. Paul once again emphasizes that reconciliation is only possible through what Jesus has accomplished on the cross—He died and shed His blood for humanity. There is also the acknowledgment that the reconciled were once alienated from God and hostile in mind.

But there is one new element that Paul emphasizes from God’s mission of reconciliation in Colossians 1:19–22: the reconciling of *all things* in Christ. While Romans 5 and 2 Corinthians 5 highlight humanity’s reconciliation to God in Christ, Paul expands God’s mission of reconciliation to everything affected by sin in Colossians 1. Schreiner (2001, 224) writes, “Reconciliation embraces the entire universe, so that nothing is excluded from its orbit.” Colossians 1:15–22 exalts Jesus Christ as Creator, head of the church, firstborn of the dead, and reconciler of all things. All things are reconciled “in his body of flesh by his death” (Col 1:21), as Jesus makes “peace by the blood of his cross” (Col 1:20). Moo (2008, 134) points out, “Though created through him and for him, ‘all things’ no longer bear the relationship to their creator that they were intended to have. They are therefore in need of reconciliation.” Paul also emphasizes the vastness of God’s mission to reconcile all things in Ephesians 1:10, although he uses the language of: “a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.”

Summary

Understanding reconciliation is essential for understanding God’s mission. Furthermore, understanding reconciliation is essential for understanding Pauline theology. R. P. Martin (1993, 94) puts it best, “Reconciliation provides a suitable umbrella under which the main features of Paul’s kerygma and its practical outworking

may be set.” Throughout these central passages on reconciliation, Paul explains God’s mission by pointing his readers to different salvific realities, including justification, forgiveness, peace, and the sacrifice of Jesus. These important salvific realities of reconciliation are also found throughout Ephesians 1–2, even when Paul does not use explicit reconciliation language.

Blessings and God’s Mission of Reconciliation

The language of blessing is found throughout Scripture. God pronounces blessings over His creation (Gen 1:22, 28), Abram (Gen 12:2–3), and Israel (Deut 28:1–14). In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus begins each beatitude with blessing (Matt 5:3–12). While God loves to bless, God’s blessing comes through relationship. As Osborne (2020, 22) contends, “In the Bible, God is the fountainhead and source of all blessings. But God’s act of blessing does not just entail the giving of things; it necessitates a right relationship between the two parties—God and his creation. To be blessed by God is to be in right standing with him.” Therefore, it should come as no surprise that Paul emphasizes blessing as an aspect of God’s mission of reconciliation.

The first place in Ephesians where we begin to see reconciliation language and similarities with other passages on reconciliation is Ephesians 1:3–14. In the text, Paul blesses God for the spiritual blessings received in Christ, but he explains blessings in their relationship to God’s mission of reconciliation. Ephesians 1:3 reads, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.” This opening verse sets the stage for what is to follow by establishing two central truths about blessing and God’s mission of reconciliation. First, “God has blessed his people by virtue of their union with Christ” (Arnold 2010, 79). For Paul, spiritual blessings are a reality for those reconciled and joined to Christ. Second, the blessings believers receive through their union with Christ are spiritual in nature. Paul’s focus in 1:3–14 are the vast spiritual blessings planned by the Father, accomplished by the Son, and applied by the Spirit. The heart of these verses is how believers have been blessed as a result of God’s mission of reconciliation. The following section will explore three main themes of reconciliation: union with Christ, adoption, and redemption.

Union with Christ

Paul refers to union with Christ as the means by which the reconciled receive and experience every spiritual blessing from the Father. In God’s mission of reconciliation,

believers are chosen in Christ (1:4), adopted through Jesus Christ (1:5), redeemed in Him (1:7), united in Him (1:10), obtain an inheritance in Him (1:11), and are sealed with the Holy Spirit in Christ (1:13). Throughout this section, Paul uses the phrases “in Christ,” “in Him,” or their equivalent eleven times. Clearly, in Paul’s theology, “the sphere within which the divine blessing is bestowed and received is the Lord Jesus Christ” (Stott 1979, 34). Not only do believers participate in the divine blessing through union with Christ, they also experience communion with God through Christ because of God’s reconciling work.

Many commentators have recognized the importance of union with Christ in Ephesians, specifically in 1:3–14. In Paul’s theology, “Union with Christ involves the participation of believers in the events of Christ’s narrative, including the death and burial, resurrection, ascension, and glorification” (Campbell 2012, 408). Moreover, union with Christ involves a change of location for believers—from alienation to under Christ’s lordship—a change of identity—from the old man to a new creation—and incorporation into a “community that is founded, shaped, and directed by Christ” (Campbell 2012, 408–09). Throughout Ephesians 1:3–14, Paul applies the blessings of reconciliation to those united in Christ. This same application is also found in Romans 5, 2 Corinthians 5, and Colossians 1, but the emphasis is greater in Ephesians 1.

Adoption

In *Knowing God*, J. I. Packer (1988, 206; emphasis original) argues that adoption “*is the highest privilege that the gospel offers.*” Understanding the weightiness of his claim, Packer (1988, 206–207; emphasis original) explains his reasoning:

Justification is the *primary* blessing, because it meets our spiritual need . . . Adoption is a *family* idea, conceived in terms of *love*, and viewing God as *father*. In adoption, God takes us into his family and fellowship—he establishes us as his children and heirs. Closeness, affection and generosity are at the heart of the relationship. To be right with God the Judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the Father is greater.

As Packer reads Paul, adoption is a glorious blessing of God’s mission to reconcile sinners. Sinners who are alienated from God, not only find forgiveness and restoration in Christ, they also find acceptance into God’s family through adoption.

Paul writes in Ephesians 1:4–5, “In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will.” Before reconciliation takes place, sinners are spiritually dead, condemned, and following Satan (Eph 2:1–2). But adoption is an important aspect of Paul’s soteriology that signifies “the *transfer* of a son (usually an adult) as he is taken out of one family and placed in another with all its attending privileges and responsibilities” (Burke 2006, 40). Therefore, in God’s mission of reconciliation, sinners are not only saved *out of* sin, they are saved *into* God’s family through adoption.

Redemption

In Israel’s exodus out of Egypt, “God [establishes] a paradigm, the pattern, for understanding the salvation of all his people, including Israel and the nations, through Jesus the Messiah” (Morales 2020, 5). God’s mission of salvation continues to be described in terms of redemption throughout the rest of the Old Testament and into the New.

In Ephesians 1:7, Paul explains the spiritual blessing of redemption. He writes, “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace.” Redemption is “release or freedom on payment of a price, deliverance by a costly method” (Douglas 2008, 452). In His mission of salvation, God redeems sinners out of slavery to sin and death through the blood of Jesus. In the New Testament, the ransom paid to deliver sinners out of bondage is the blood of Christ. Cole (2009, 132–33) states, “Jesus’ sacrifice satisfies the divine holiness because he offers himself as a lamb without spot or blemish to God in our place. Holiness requires no less.” Therefore, redemption is the work of God whereby sinners are forgiven of their sins and delivered out of slavery to sin and death through the blood of Christ.

However, redemption is not the end goal of God’s mission of salvation, reconciliation through adoption is (Scott 1992, 174). Reconciliation with God is made possible through redemption, as the alienating sinfulness is removed through forgiveness and sinners are once and for all delivered out of bondage and into freedom (Gal 5:1). Here in Ephesians 1, Paul brings together adoption (1:5) and redemption (1:7) to explain the blessings of God’s mission of reconciliation. Similarly, in Colossians 1, Paul writes of redemption (1:14) and God’s work of reconciliation (1:20).

Synthesis

How exactly is Ephesians 1:3–14 about reconciliation if Paul never uses explicit reconciliation language? The answer lies in Paul’s combining of different theological concepts in order to explain God’s mission. A believer’s union with Christ, adoption, and redemption are insufficient in themselves to fully explain reconciliation. However, when Paul uses them together, these soteriological concepts form the basis of reconciliation. Sinners who were once alienated from God are redeemed out of slavery to death and adopted into God’s family through Christ as their sins are forgiven. Paul does not use *καταλλάσσω* (to reconcile), *ἀποκαταλλάσσω* (to reconcile), *καταλλαγή* (reconciliation) in this passage, and yet, the concept of reconciliation is there. Paul explains God’s mission of salvation in terms of reconciliation.

The Trinitarian Nature of Reconciliation

There are different emphases found in treatments of reconciliation. Some highlight the extent of reconciliation. Others focus on the relationship of reconciliation to other soteriological and Christological themes. An often-underappreciated aspect of reconciliation is its trinitarian nature. Known as “the Trinitarian letter” (Hoehner 2002, 106), Ephesians is the perfect place to examine the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit’s work in bringing about reconciliation. The clearest example of the trinitarian nature of reconciliation is found in Ephesians 1–2.

The Father

The Father’s work in reconciliation is clearly perceived in the opening chapters of Ephesus as Paul intentionally delineates the specific work of each person of the Trinity. While there are numerous references to the Father’s involvement in reconciliation in Ephesians, this section will highlight two main sections: Ephesians 1:3–6 and 2:4–7.

In Ephesians 1:3–10, Paul highlights the relational or familial side of reconciliation. God is not only “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,” He also adopts sinners “as sons through Christ Jesus” (Eph 1:3, 5). Therefore, “creatively God may be the Father of all humankind . . . but salvifically God is the Father only of those who are in Christ and are his sons and daughters by adoption and grace” (Burke 2006, 89). Those alienated from God are reconciled because the Father “chose” (Eph. 1:4) them before the foundation of the world to “be holy and blameless before him” (Eph. 1:4). God’s mission of

reconciliation is described by Paul as the purpose, mystery, and plan of the Father to unite all things in heaven and earth in Christ (Eph. 1:5, 9–11), a theme he also emphasizes in Colossians 1.

Paul uses more of a judicial point of view in Ephesians 2:1–10 to describe how sinners are reconciled to God. The Ephesians were dead in their trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1, 4), and therefore, estranged from God. But the Father was rich in mercy and “made [them] alive together with Christ” (Eph 2:4–6). By grace, the Ephesians were raised up from their former state and seated “in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:6). In his usage of *in Christ* and *with Christ*, Paul reminds the Ephesians that the Father has not only saved them out of their former state of sin and death, He saved them into union with Christ. Moreover, the Ephesians are the “workmanship” of God, “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which the Father prepared beforehand” (Eph 2:10).

The Son

Much of what Paul writes about God’s mission of reconciliation in Ephesians relates to the work of the Son. It was the Father’s purpose, “which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph 1:9–10). In Ephesians 1:3–13 and 2:11–17, Paul explains the Son’s role in God’s mission of reconciliation.

In 1:3–13, there are four main themes that shed light on the importance of the Son in God’s mission of reconciliation. First, Paul uses reconciliation language when he emphasizes the Christian’s union with Christ. Believers are blessed by the Father with “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” *in Christ* (1:3). Christians are adopted as sons *through* Jesus Christ (1:5). The Father blessed the Ephesian Christians *in the Beloved* (1:6). It is *in Him* that redemption takes place through His blood (1:7). God’s overarching mission to reconcile all things is set forth *in Christ* (1:9–10). Believers are “sealed with the promised Holy Spirit” *in Him* (1:13). Rather than only describing salvation in judicial terms—sin has been removed by the blood of Jesus so that sinners are no longer guilty—Paul connects the atoning work of the Son to the peaceful relationship His work establishes for sinners.

Second, in Ephesians 1:7, Paul explains how the atoning work of the Son brings forgiveness. Paul writes in 1:7, “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses.” In God’s mission of reconciliation, the Son offers His life as an atonement for sin so that through His blood, sins are forgiven and peace between

God and humanity is possible. Reconciliation is only possible because of the sacrifice of the Son on behalf of sinners.

Paul also summarizes the ultimate purpose of God's mission in Ephesians 1:7–10 as the uniting of all things in Christ. There is an eschatological dimension to Paul's understanding of reconciliation, whereby, through the death, resurrection, and ascension of the Son, God has already started the work of reconciliation, a work that has not yet reached its fulfillment. Lincoln (1990, 33) connects this passage to Colossians 1:20 and argues that Paul is referring to the reconciliation of all things in heaven and earth. He writes, "Both passages appear to presuppose that the cosmos had been plunged into disintegration on account of sin and that it is God's purpose to restore its original harmony in Christ" (1990, 33). One of the main similarities between Ephesians 1:7–10 and Colossians 1:19–20 is Paul's emphasis on the work of Christ.

Finally, Ephesians 2:11–22 provides readers with a fuller understanding of reconciliation by explaining how the Son brought peace to the Gentiles and the Jews that climaxes in the new reconciled body becoming a dwelling place for God. While humanity's ultimate need is peace with God, biblical reconciliation also involves peace in the restoration of broken human relationships. In verse 12, Paul emphasizes the Gentiles' separation from Christ and alienation from Israel. Therefore, the Gentiles need reconciliation in two directions: vertical and horizontal. Although the Gentiles were far off from God, they were "brought near by the blood of Christ" (2:13). Even more, Christ kills the hostility between the Gentiles and Jews by becoming their peace, reconciling "both to God in one body through the cross" (2:14–17). This new reconciled body made up of Jews and Gentiles is built upon Christ Jesus the cornerstone into a dwelling for the Lord (2:20–22). The work of Jesus Christ on the cross means Jew and Gentile have complete access to God and peace with one another.

The Spirit

While Galatians and Romans contain more comprehensive teaching on the Spirit's part in reconciling believers, Paul makes it clear that there is no reconciliation without the work of the Spirit in Ephesians. Two important passages that help readers recognize the importance of the Spirit in reconciliation are Ephesians 1:13–21 and 2:18–22.

After explaining the role of the Father and Son in reconciling the Ephesians, Paul clarifies what part the Holy Spirit plays. He writes in Ephesians 1:13–14, "In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance

until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.” According to Paul, the Holy Spirit functions as a seal and down payment of a future inheritance for Christians when they are reconciled to God.

When the Ephesians heard and believed the gospel, they were reconciled to God in Christ and sealed with the Holy Spirit. Those who once were “dead in [their] trespasses and sins” (Eph 2:1) and “following the prince of the power of the air” (Eph 2:2) now have peace with God in Christ, and the proof that they belong to God is the Holy Spirit (O’Brien 1999, 120). This idea of the Holy Spirit serving as a seal and down payment of a future inheritance is also found in 2 Corinthians 1:21–22: “And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, and who has also put his seal on us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.” The concept of the Holy Spirit as a seal and guarantee relates to God’s mission of reconciliation in two ways. First, those who once were separated from God because of their sins, now belong to God because they have been redeemed by Christ. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit proves a person has been reconciled to God and now belongs to Him. Second, the idea of a guarantee or down payment connects back to Ephesians 1:5 and Paul’s use of the term adoption (υἰοθεσίαν). The Holy Spirit is the guarantee of a future inheritance because believers have been adopted as sons in Christ Jesus. As adopted sons, Christians are heirs. Therefore, the Holy Spirit indwells believers as a seal of their new position as a child of God and a guarantee of their future inheritance as adopted sons.

Although it is easy to overlook, Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians in 1:15–21 also grants a glimpse into the work of the Spirit in reconciliation. Paul prays that “the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your heart enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you” (1:17–18). Not only does the Spirit seal believers, the Spirit also grants wisdom and illumination so that believers become increasingly more aware of the salvific work that has taken place in their lives. The great mystery that Paul celebrates throughout the letter of Ephesians is “that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (Eph 3:6). It is this mystery that the Spirit continually reveals to believers so that they understand the reconciliation that has taken place through Christ.

In Ephesians 2:18–22, Paul proclaims two truths applicable to believers who have been reconciled to God. First, Christians—both Jews and Gentiles—now have access to the Father. Paul emphasizes the trinitarian nature of reconciliation in 2:18: “For

through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.” As Stott (1979, 103) writes, “For our access is *to the Father, through him* (the Son who made peace and preached it), and *in* or by *one Spirit*, the Spirit who regenerates, seal and indwells his people, who witnesses with our spirits that we are God’s children.” This new access to the Father is in the Spirit who indwells reconciled believers.

The other core truth in Ephesians 2:18–22 relates to the Gentiles’ new standing in Christ. The Gentiles “are no longer strangers and aliens,” but rather “fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (2:19). Furthermore, God makes His reconciled people into a holy temple, “a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (2:21–22). As God reconciles the Gentiles and Jews to Himself and one another, the Father builds them as stones (1 Pet 2:5) upon the cornerstone, Jesus Christ, into a temple where God dwells by the Spirit. Lincoln (1990, 162) writes, “The church is not only the place of reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles, it is also the place where reconciliation between humanity and God is experienced, where harmony between heaven and earth has been restored, and where access to the Father is enjoyed.” Hoehner (2002, 107) concludes, “The initiation and continuation of a human being’s relationship to God involves all three Persons of the Trinity. Paul speaks of the Father as the one who creates the new person into a holy temple, Christ the Son whose reconciliation is the cornerstone of this new temple, and the Holy Spirit who is the manner by which God dwells in this new structure (2:22).” God’s mission of reconciliation succeeds in creating a temple made up of God’s people that He indwells in the Spirit.

Summary

In Paul’s theology, God’s mission of reconciliation must be understood in trinitarian terms. Throughout Ephesians 1–2 Paul uses clear trinitarian language to help the Ephesians understand what God has done to reconcile them to Himself. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit work in unison to reconcile sinners which is God’s plan for the fullness of time. Ephesians 1–2 is arguably the clearest explanation of how the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit reconcile believers.

Reconciliation Between Peoples

Because of sin, broken relationships and estrangement cover the pages of Scripture. While reconciliation between God and humanity takes center stage in the grand

narrative of the Bible, there is also a desperate need for reconciliation between individuals and nations. Paul views God's mission of reconciliation in individual and corporate, horizontal and vertical horizons. In Ephesians 2:1–10, Paul celebrates the reconciliation of individual sinners. Even when sinners were alienated from God because of their disobedience and sinfulness, God displays His great mercy by forgiving them of their sins and making them alive together in Christ by grace through faith (Eph 2:1–10). In Ephesians 2:11–22, Paul's focus shifts from individuals to a group of people: the Gentiles. God's mission to reconcile encompasses both Gentile and the Jew. The Gentiles needed peace with God and the Jews. Ephesians 2:11–22 explains how God reconciled the Gentiles to Himself and the Gentiles and Jews into a new body. The mystery of Christ to reconcile Jews and Gentiles to God and one another (Eph 3:4–6) is a central aspect of God's purpose set forth in Christ (Eph 1:9).

The Gentiles Reconciled to God

While both the Jews and Gentiles needed reconciliation with God, Paul emphasizes the serious nature of the Gentiles' spiritual state because they were not God's covenant people. Paul writes, "Remember that you were at that time *separated* from Christ, *alienated* from the commonwealth of Israel and *strangers* to the covenants of promise, having *no hope* and *without God* in the world" (Eph 2:12; emphasis mine). In one verse, Paul paints a dark picture for the Gentiles, revealing the chasm between themselves and God, and their desperate need for reconciliation. The Gentiles were without hope and without God in the world (Eph 2:12).

Although the Gentiles were once "far off" from God, they had been brought near through reconciliation "by the blood of Christ" (Eph 2:13). The Gentiles who were dead in their sins and without hope are justified by the blood of Christ so that they "are no longer strangers and aliens, but [become] fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Eph 2:19). Schreiner (2001, 223) notes how Paul connects justification and reconciliation as "constituent parts of the Christ event." Through Christ, the Gentiles sins are forgiven and saved into God's family. God's mission of reconciliation changes everything for the Gentiles, especially their identity. But the cross of Christ also brought an end to the hostility between the Jews and Gentiles.

The Gentiles and Jews United into a New Body

Throughout the Bible, the world is regularly divided into two different groups: the Gentile nations and the Jews. There was a mutual animosity between the Gentiles and the Jews (Lincoln 1990, 142). These two groups were different on many levels, however,

the good news of God's mission of reconciliation is that in Christ, these two groups become a new people. In Ephesians 2:11–22, Paul desires for the Gentiles in Ephesus to understand how their reconciliation with God also impacts their reconciliation with the Jews.

God brings reconciliation to the Gentiles and Jews by killing animosity and making peace (Porter 1993, 698). Paul emphasizes that the new peace between these two groups is entirely the work of God. Because God “is our peace,” He is the one who joins the Gentiles and Jews into one body (2:14). While the Mosaic law functioned as a “dividing wall of hostility” that bred animosity between the two groups, on the cross, Jesus tore down the wall by “abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one man in place of the two, so making peace” (2:14–15). Applying Isaiah 57:19 to God's reconciling work in the Gentiles and Jews, Paul proclaims that Jesus came to preach peace to the Gentiles who were far off and to the Jews who were near (2:17). With the dividing wall broken down, “Jews and Gentiles are able to come together in Christ to form a new, third people, all of whom are at peace with God and therefore at peace with one another (Eph 2:15, 17–18)” (Thielman 2005, 402). God's mission of reconciliation not only demonstrates power in taking two formerly hostile peoples and forming them into one body, it also gloriously displays the love God had for all peoples.

In Ephesians 2:19–22, Paul describes the new reconciled people as “a holy temple in the Lord” and “a dwelling place for God.” This is similar to the language Peter uses in 1 Peter 2:4–6 to describe how all Christians are living stones “being built up as a spiritual house” upon Christ who is the cornerstone. Paul uses the body and temple metaphors together to emphasize that the Jews and Gentiles have been united into one body of which Christ is the head (Eph 1:22–23), and in Christ, this body becomes a holy temple for the Spirit of God (Eph 2:22). God's aim in reconciling the Gentiles and Jews into one body was to form a people He would dwell in. Paul's use of temple language connects back to the Old Testament temple and God's “glorious presence filling the temple” (Duvall and Hays 2019, 233). Now, through reconciliation, God's glorious presence was not just *among* His people, but *in* His reconciled people who had become a holy temple. In Christ, this new body is the holy temple on earth that points forward to the eschatological fulfillment found in Revelation 21–22 (Beale and Kim 2014, 102).

Conclusion

Few, if any, soteriological concepts encapsulate God's mission of salvation in Scripture as well as reconciliation. In reconciliation, God removes the alienating barrier of sin so that sinners are brought into peaceful relations through the work of Christ. Throughout the Bible, God reconciles sinners to Himself, brings reconciliation to broken relationships, and works to reconcile all things affected by sin. While God's mission of reconciliation fills the pages of Scripture, among biblical authors, no one writes about reconciliation in God's mission more than the Apostle Paul.

Within Paul's writings, three passages outside of Ephesians are considered to be the core of his theology on reconciliation: Romans 5:1–11, 2 Corinthians 5:11–21, and Colossians 1:20–22. However, Ephesians 1–2 should also be considered as an essential contribution to Paul's theology of reconciliation. Specifically, Paul's focus on God's mission in the opening chapters of Ephesians explains the blessings of God's mission to reconcile, the trinitarian nature of reconciliation, and the reconciliation of individuals and peoples. Despite containing few explicit references to reconciliation, Paul combines various soteriological concepts to emphasize the reconciliation emphasis of God's mission throughout Ephesians 1–2. By examining Ephesians alongside Romans 5, 2 Corinthians 5, and Colossians 1, readers can recognize the wonderful contribution Ephesians 1–2 makes to Pauline theology.

***Philip Crouse Jr. (PhD)** is the pastor of Germanton Baptist Church in Germanton, North Carolina. He is also an adjunct professor in the Piedmont Divinity School at Carolina University.*

Bibliography

- Arnold, Clinton E. 2010. *Ephesians*. ZECNT. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Baugh, S. M. 2016. *Ephesians*. Bellingham: Lexham Press.
- Beale, G. K. 2011. *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Beale, G. K. and Mitchell Kim. 2014. *God Dwells Among Us: Expanding Eden to the Ends of the Earth*. Downers Grove: IVP Books.
- Bird, Michael F. 2016. *Romans*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Burke, Trevor J. 2006. *Adopted into God's Family: Exploring a Pauline Metaphor*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.
- Campbell, Constantine R. 2012. *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Carson, D. A. 2010. *The God Who Is There: Finding Your Place in God's Story*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books.
- Cole, Graham A. 2009. *God the Peacemaker: How Atonement Brings Shalom*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.
- Denney, James. 1917. *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*. London, UK: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Douglas, J. D. and Merrill C. Tenney. 2008. *Zondervan Bible Dictionary*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Duvall, J. Scott and J. Daniel Hays. 2019. *God's Relational Presence: The Cohesive Center of Biblical Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Foulkes, Francis. 1989. *The Letter of Paul to the Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Hamilton Jr., James M. 2010. *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology*. Wheaton: Crossway.
- Hoehner, Harold W. 2002. *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

- Howell, Jr., Don N. 1994. "The Center of Pauline Theology." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151, no. 601 (Jan–Mar): 50–70.
- LeFebvre, Michael. 2011. *Our Triune God*. Wheaton: Crossway.
- Lincoln, Andrew. 1990. *Ephesians*. Dallas: Word Books.
- Martin, R. P. 1993. "Center of Paul's Theology." In *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*. Edited by Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.
- _____. 1989. *Reconciliation: A Study of Paul's Theology*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers.
- McKeown, James. 2003. "Blessings and Curses." *Dictionary of Old Testament Pentateuch*. Edited by T. D. Alexander, D. W. Baker. Downers Grove: InterVarsity.
- Merkle, Benjamin L. 2018. *Ephesians*. Wheaton: Crossway.
- Moo, Douglas J. 2008. *The Letters to the Colossians and Philemon*. PNTC. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Morales, L. Michael. 2020. *Exodus Old and New: A Biblical Theology of Redemption*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic.
- Morris, Leon. 1990. *New Testament Theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- _____. 1976. *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Murray, John. 1959. *The Epistle to the Romans*. NICNT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- O' Brien, Peter. 1999. *The Letter to the Ephesians*. PNTC. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Osborne, William. 2020. *Divine Blessing and the Fullness of Life in the Presence of God*. Wheaton: Crossway.
- Packer, J. I. 1993. *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs*. Wheaton: Tyndale House.
- _____. 1988. *Knowing God*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity.
- Plevnik, Joseph. 1989. "The Center of Pauline Theology." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (July): 461–478.

- Porter, S. E. 1993. "Reconciliation." In *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*. Edited by Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.
- Reymond, Robert L. 2006. *Paul Missionary Theologian: A Survey of His Missionary Labours and Theology*. Scotland: Mentor.
- Schreiner, Thomas R. 2001. *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic.
- Scott, J. M. 1992. *Adoption as Sons of God: An Exegetical Investigation into the Background of HUIOTHESIA*, WUNT 52.48, Tübingen: Mohr.
- Simpson, E. K. 1957. *The Epistles of Paul to the Ephesians*. NICNT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Stott, John R. W. 1979. *The Message of Ephesians*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.
- Thielman, Frank. 2005. *Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Thornhill, A. Chadwick. 2015. *The Chosen People: Election, Paul and Second Temple Judaism*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic.
- Tizon, Al. 2021. "Reconciliation and the Great (whole) Commission." In *International Review of Mission* 110, no. 1:16–26.
- Wright, Christopher J. H. 2007. *Salvation Belongs to Our God: Celebrating the Bible's Central Story*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic.
- Yarbrough, R. W. 2001. "Atonement." In *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Edited by T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.
- _____. 2000. "Forgiveness and Reconciliation." In *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.