Exegetical paper

2 Corinthians 5:14-21

The Ministry of Reconciliation

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Biblical Interpretation course

Neil Trollip
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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. So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us this message 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 this 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 was no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might be the righteousness of God.

- 2 Corinthians 5:14-21 (NIV 2011)

1. Introduction

It would be difficult to find a passage in Paul’s letters which has more significance for our understanding of the Christian faith than 2 Corinthians 5:14-21. It has been described as “one of the most important expositions of the meaning of Christianity in the Bible”¹ and as presenting “the clearest, most concise summary of the substitutionary atonement of Christ to be found anywhere in scripture.”²

God’s saving grace is described in this text in terms of reconciliation. This concept has assumed a more central place in Christian theology than might be expected from its limited use in the New Testament. Various reasons have been put forward for the appeal of understanding God’s work in Christ in reconciliation terms, most of which are constructs of the modern society in

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¹ Beasley-Murray, 1971, p36
² MacArthur, 2006, p1729
which we live. By and large, people nowadays do not relate to the traditional terms and concepts used to describe the saving work of God. The concept of redemption speaks of release from bondage, which many in our world have no sense of in the way that the Israelites in captivity would have had. Justification is legal language and there is little sense nowadays of guilt before God which would require such activity. The concept of atonement misses the mark with modern society for similar reasons, and sacrifice conjures up, for many, images of barbaric rituals that they do not associate with modern society.³

Yet, the prospect of reconciliation resonates with a society tired of conflicts and hostilities. This is true at the level of nation states as well as in personal relationships, and is summarised in the observation that “of all the concepts used to explain the effects of the cross, reconciliation is the one, together with forgiveness, which belongs most clearly to the sphere of personal relationships”.⁴

I am learning to appreciate the value of my relationship with God and His people more and more. I have also experienced how people separated from God long for authentic relationships (whether they admit it or not), and how disciples of Jesus desire better and closer relationships. I chose 2 Corinthians 5:14-21 as the topic of this exegetical study with the objective to better understand Paul’s concept of reconciliation and to identify the principles that can be applied to help the church in Port Elizabeth become more effective in our communal life in Christ. This includes how we demonstrate God’s love and reconciling power in our relationships with one another, as well as how we teach and help others receive the reconciliation offered by God.

³ Gloer, 1996, pii-iii with adaptation
⁴ Ibid, pii
2. Historical, cultural and relational setting

2.1 The City of Corinth

The Greek city of Corinth was completely destroyed by the Romans in 146 BC and inhabitants who were not killed were sold into slavery. In 44 BC Julius Caesar re-founded Corinth as a Roman colony, settling the city with freed slaves from Rome as well as with people from other nations including Syrians, Egyptians and Jews. In 27 BC Corinth was made the capital of the province of Achaia and became the place of residence of the Roman governor. Culturally and religiously Corinth was a very diverse city, accommodating not only people from various nations, but also a wide variety of pagan cults as well as a Jewish settlement. In the middle of the first century, a Christian community was added to the city.\footnote{Talbert, 1989, pxvi}

Corinth was a wealthy city, mainly due to its unique geographical position on a narrow isthmus on the main trade route between Asia and Italy. The city derived its main income from the exchange of merchandise, duties on goods transferred across the isthmus and from the Isthmian games which were held every two years. The city also attracted numerous ambassadors wishing to meet with the Roman governor, and many travellers between Greece and Asia. Corinth also became a centre for banking and finance in the Roman world.\footnote{Barnett, 1997, p2-3} This strategic city has been called “the San Francisco of the ancient Mediterranean world” and its population is estimated to have numbered about 750 000 by the middle of the first century.\footnote{Dever, 2005, p192}

2.2 Paul’s relationship with the Corinthian church

Paul established the Corinthian church over a period of about 18 months in AD 50-52,\footnote{Barnett, 1988, p13} and visited them again in 55 or 56 for what he called a “painful visit” in order to deal with an emergency disciplinary problem. Paul wrote 2 Corinthians while in Macedonia in the north of

\begin{itemize}
  \item \footnote{Talbert, 1989, pxvi}
  \item \footnote{Barnett, 1997, p2-3}
  \item \footnote{Dever, 2005, p192}
  \item \footnote{Barnett, 1988, p13}
\end{itemize}
Greece to prepare the church for his third visit which he undertook in 56 or 57 AD, staying with them for three months.⁹

Of all the churches founded by Paul, his relationship with the Corinthians proved to be the most demanding. Numerous problems, both between themselves and in their relationship with him, caused him to write not only the two letters we have, but two others which have not survived. In his first letter to the Corinthian church, Paul addressed major problems of behaviour including divisions, gross immorality, lawsuits between believers and unkindness to the poor amongst them. We can also tell from the first letter that not all the Corinthians acknowledged Paul’s authority as an apostle, some preferring the ministry of Apollos, others the ministry of Peter. Those supporting Apollos were fascinated by intellectualism and oratory skills, and were not impressed with the apparently limited speaking abilities of the manual worker Paul.¹⁰

Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians reveals a wide range of emotions in the author, from being overjoyed and proud of them, to being deeply hurt that they withheld their affection. They had been willing to believe a range of criticism about him, including that he was not an impressive speaker, lacked inner strength, was an imposter and a fool, or even mad.

Before writing 2 Corinthians, Paul wrote his “severe letter” to them (unfortunately lost to us) and then experienced regret at its severity. Their response to this letter contained a mixture of good and bad news for Paul. There was news of repentance, at least by a portion of the church that had previously supported Paul’s opponents.¹¹ However, not all the news was encouraging. For example, some in the church took the view that Paul’s vacillation about his travel plans showed him to be worldly and that he was inadequate in ministry. A section of the church also remained entangled in immoral and cultic practices.

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⁹ 2 Corinthians 13:1 and Acts 20:3
¹⁰ Barnett, 1988, p15
¹¹ 2 Corinthians 7:8-16
Of greatest concern to Paul, though, was the recent arrival of certain “false apostles” whose identity we do not know with certainty. These newcomers tried to persuade the Corinthian church that Paul’s theology was in error and that he was personally and morally deficient in various ways. Second Corinthians was written to prepare the way for Paul’s pending visit to them, with a major part of the letter dedicated to addressing the accusations levelled against him by these false apostles, and the “different gospel” they were spreading.

The passage of scripture that is the focus of this exegesis is central in Paul’s defence of his character, ministry and doctrine.

3. Literary analysis

2 Corinthians was written to the church in Corinth, as well as to the wider audience of the other churches through the province of Achaia (2:1). Paul therefore considered his letter to be relevant to other Christians, while addressing specific problems and concerns in the Corinthian church.

The authorship of 2 Corinthians is not disputed, although the integrity of the letter is. Arguments have been put forward that 2 Corinthians is really a collection of letters put together later as a single letter. There is a particular view that chapters 1-7, 8-9 and 10-13 were originally written as separate letters. However, there appear to be even stronger arguments for the integrity of the letter.14

At the highest level, the letter can be divided into three main parts corresponding with the integrity debate - in chapters 1-7 Paul defends his ministry, in chapters 8-9 he discusses a collection to support poor Christians in Jerusalem, and he launches a fresh defence of his apostleship in chapters 10-13.

12 2 Corinthians 10 : 12 – 11 : 15
13 2 Corinthians 11 : 4
14 Barnett, 1997, p17-25
A more detailed structure is provided by Wallace:\(^{15}\):

1. Salutation (1:1-1)
2. Defence of Apostleship: Answering the critics’ charges (1:12-7:16)
   2.1 Defence of Paul’s conduct (1:12-2:13)
   2.2 The nature of a true apostle (2:14-7:16)
3. Exhortation to give (8:1-9:15)
5. Final exhortation and greetings (13:11-14)

Considering the challenging situations in the church referred to earlier, and Paul’s need to defend himself and his beliefs, it is no surprise that the main section of his second letter to the Corinthians (chapters 1-7) is written in the form of judicial speech, seeking to bring about a judgement relating to the accusations against him. The structure of his speech fits a classic judicial outline:\(^{16}\):

1. Proem (1:3-7)
2. Narration (1:8-2:13)
3. Proposition (2:14-17)
4. The Proof (3:1-6:13)
5. Epilogue (7:2-16)

It should be noted that the scriptural focus of this study is a key part of Paul’s defence in the judicial proof section of his speech, and is based on a three-fold proposition that he established in 2:14-17, namely that true apostles are “people of sincerity”, are “commissioned by God” and “in the sight of God, speak in Christ.”\(^ {17}\).

\(^{15}\) Wallace, 1999, p7
\(^{16}\) Bailey and Vander Broek, 1992, p34-35
\(^{17}\) Bailey and Vander Broek, 1992, p34-35
Paul was extremely competent in his use of rhetoric, changing his style to deliberate rhetoric in chapters 8-9 in his desire to bring about behavioural change, and to epideictic rhetoric in chapters 10-13, heaping blame and condemnation on his opponents (the flipside of the more common praise epideictic speeches in the other Pauline letters).

A detailed analysis of literature form and techniques is considered beyond the scope of this assignment, but it adds value to the study to mention the “ambassador” metaphor used by Paul in 5:20 to describe his mission to the Corinthian church. As mentioned previously, Corinth was home to the Governor of the province of Achaia, and it would have been common for ambassadors of other nations to visit Corinth or to at least pass through it on route to Rome. Ambassadors were envoys representing a nation or ruler and they came with the authority of their sender to secure his interests. Rejecting an ambassador was equivalent to rejecting the ruler whom he represented. Paul’s message is clear – if the Corinthians were to reject him they would be rejecting Christ, whose ambassador he was and on whose behalf he spoke. Another layer of meaning can be unearthed in this metaphor – ambassadors were fluent in all kinds of rhetoric, needing at different times to praise a ruler he was sent to (epideictic), argue for a particular course of action (deliberate) or defend a policy of his King (judicial). Paul was thus exhibiting ambassadorial command of rhetoric in this letter.

It is also interesting to note that Paul freely admits at the outset that his modus operandi is to persuade or use rhetoric (5:11) but he makes it clear that his primary concern is to please God who will be the ultimate judge of his character and ministry. Paul would thus avoid certain tactics and forms of rhetoric used by his opponents, such as those used to deceive.

With this background to the history and culture of first century Corinth, appreciation for Paul’s relational and doctrinal challenges in Corinth, some insights into the literary genre and devices

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18 Witherington, 1995, p392
employed by Paul, and the placement of the passage of interest in the broader structure of the letter, the ground has been prepared for a verse by verse exegesis of what has been described as “one of the most pregnant, difficult and important” passages in all of Paul’s letters.\textsuperscript{19}

4. Verse by verse exegesis

vs 14 : For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died.

In the three verses prior to this, Paul has indicated his desire to persuade men, literally meaning to win them over to his way of life. In 2:11 he indicates the fear of God as one of his motivations to try to win people over, and in this verse (2:14) Paul provides his other motivation, namely him being compelled by the love of Christ. The Greek word for compelled could also be translated as to be “constrained” or “controlled” - Paul was constrained from self seeking behaviour by this love.\textsuperscript{20}

Barnett explains how the two motives of the “fear of God” and the “love of Christ” are not contradictory. The fear of God is not cringing terror but awe-filled respect, and the full expression of the love of Christ is no sentimental thing but his sacrificial death. Acceptance of this love should go hand in hand with deep awe-filled respect.\textsuperscript{21} It is also important for Christians nowadays to experience the love of Christ as motivation for constraint – modern society readily seeks freedoms in Christ’s love that are not aligned with the will of God.

The second part of this verse has been hotly debated, but can be best understood by recognising Jesus as representative man. Paul expounds on this idea in Romans 5:12-21. Just as Adam can be seen as representative of fallen humanity, so Jesus (the last Adam) is representative of the

\textsuperscript{19} Barrett,1973, p117
\textsuperscript{20} Vine, 1976, p117
\textsuperscript{21} Barnett, 1997, p288
new humanity. All people die, the question is whether they die in their sin (Adam’s death) or whether they participate in the death of the sinless Christ. This death is available to all mankind through baptism, which provides not only participation in his death, but also in his burial and resurrection (Romans 6:3-10).

vs 15: 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.

This verse is closely connected with the previous, indicated by the initial “And”. New life is experienced by those who cease to live for themselves and begin to live for Christ. The resurrection of Jesus made this new life possible – when we consider the atoning work of Christ, we cannot separate his death and his resurrection. Paul himself wrote in Romans 4:25 that “He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.” Once we die to self, we rise to a new life which is lived for Christ as participants in the new creation which Paul goes on to describe in the next two verses.

This is summarised well by Barrett: “Because Christ, being the person he was, died and was raised there exists the universal possibility of a new kind of human existence, no longer centred on self but centred upon Christ.”

It should be remembered that Paul is writing in defence of his apostolic ministry. He has explained he is motivated by the fear of God and the love of Christ to die to self, and having experienced this death, he is no longer controlled by selfish desires. The same cannot be said, though, of his opponents who boast in their own accomplishments. Paul here and in the next few verses is masterfully inviting the Corinthians to judge for themselves who the true apostle is.

22 Barrett, 1973, p. 169
vs 16: So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer.

Being raised to new life in Christ provides a new kind of knowledge and indeed an entirely new worldview. Believers no longer judge people according to purely human considerations and worldly standards. In writing this, Paul has in mind his opponents in the Corinthian church who are judging him according to their own, human criteria. In the literary style he is using, Paul implies they have not been raised to new life in Christ.

Before his conversion on the road to Damascus, Paul viewed Christ in worldly terms as an imposter who did not live up to his zealous Pharisaic expectations of the Messiah. After his conversion he had a full, Spirit-enabled understanding of Christ and this knowledge caused him to regard others in ways controlled by the love of Christ. This transformation is available to all who die to self and are raised to new life in Christ. As Paul explained in his earlier letter to the Corinthians, true believers have the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16) referring to access to a new worldview formed by the character and priorities of Christ. We do, however, need to be willing to change how we think to initiate the transformation process and be able to know and do God’s will (Romans 12:1-2).

vs 17: Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!

As he has done in the previous verses, Paul is speaking here firstly of himself, and this verse has been described as “Paul’s autobiography and testimony in a nutshell”23. Love for others is now Paul’s controlling motive in place of self interest (vs 14), living for Christ has replaced living for himself (vs 15) and true understanding of Christ and his people has replaced worldly judgement.

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23 Barnett, 1997, p298
and ignorance (vs 16). But, as is the case throughout this passage, Paul is also speaking for all those who are in Christ, and the changed motives and behaviour described in the verses 14-16 provide a good summary of what it looks like to live as new creations in Christ.

This verse can only be understood properly in eschatological terms – those placed in the life of Christ have participated in his death, burial and resurrection, and therefore enjoy a foretaste of life in the Age to Come. Jesus is the first fruits of the Resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:20-23), paving the way for the general resurrection of believers into God’s fully redeemed and stored creation.

It is important to note that new creation in this verse does not only refer to individuals in Christ but to creation in its entirety. Wright describes this as follows: “The new creation refers both to the person concerned as well as to the world which they enter, the world which has now been reconciled to the creator.”24 Believers thus live in the present age as citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20) in an “already but not yet” tension, awaiting the final and complete coming of God’s Kingdom and the full restoration of the entire cosmos.

vs 18-19: 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.

Here, Paul reflects on the means by which new creation has been brought about. The focus until now has been on Christ, but in verse 18 it shifts to God. Our sin separates and alienates us from God (Isaiah 59:2), but He has taken the initiative to achieve reconciliation between us and Him – it is beyond our power or ability to be reconciled to God. This reconciliation is achieved through Jesus who can be understood as the agent of reconciliation. Reconciliation is closely

24 Wright, 2004, p64
linked to new creation, and is one of the realities of the Age to Come to be lived out now in the “already but not yet” reality that characterises the present age.

God’s need to reconcile the world to Himself arises from the fact of human alienation from Him. This is clear from the parallel passage in Romans 5:10: “For if, while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his son, how much more, having being reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!” God alone is the initiator of the process by which those who have alienated themselves from God, are reconciled to God. The concept of mediation is well known in modern society – the mediator is usually a third party called in to facilitate an agreement between two parties who are estranged in some way (for example in marriage or a work place). But God has chosen to act as mediator even though He is the main aggrieved party – God initiates and reconciles the self-alienated back to Him. The effect of this reconciliation by God is that he no longer counts our sins against us, removing that which separated us from Him in the first place (vs 19a).

It is important to remember that the broader passage is largely autobiographical and a defence of Paul’s apostolic office. Hence the “us” referred to in these two verses should be taken to refer in the first instance to Paul himself and other true Apostles. This is supported by a reading of 6:3 which clearly refers to the apostolic ministry and Paul’s desire that it should not be discredited. Once reconciled with God, Paul is called to be a minister of reconciliation. Receiving reconciliation from God places a responsibility on Paul to seek reconciliation with the Corinthian church.

But Paul also clearly has a broader ministry of reconciliation in mind, reflected in the words “reconciling the world” (5:19). Once the Corinthian church (and by implication the broader community of believers) accepts the message of reconciliation, they (and we) are called to take this message to the world. This implies not just speaking about reconciliation, but being role
models of reconciliation in how we interact with others in the community of believers. This is the example that Paul is setting for the Corinthians and for us to imitate.

Being God’s chosen ministers of reconciliation requires an attitude of humble servanthood, qualities which Paul demonstrated in his life. The Greek word for minister is *diakonos*, literally meaning a servant, attendant, minister or deacon.\(^{25}\) The image that Paul may have in mind here is that of a house servant preparing and serving up food, and it is useful to have this picture in mind when we humbly serve the Word of God to people in need of reconciliation with Him.

**vs 20:** 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.

Paul makes it clear that his ministry of reconciliation is of divine origin. The role of ambassadors was covered earlier in this paper – they represented and carried a message on behalf of their King or nation. Paul’s opponents boasted in “letters of recommendation” (2 Cor 3:1) but Paul was a direct representative of Jesus himself. This concept was well known in Rabbinic circles, captured in the dictum that “One who is sent is as he who sent him.”\(^ {26}\) Also, in that period of history, to reject an ambassador was to reject the one who sent him.\(^ {27}\)

Paul’s call for reconciliation to God can be understood at different levels. Consistent with his main objective in this letter, his appeal is first to the Corinthians. It does not imply that the entire church had been alienated from God, but Paul recognises that relationship is at the heart of reconciliation, and that relationships require ongoing commitment. This is as relevant for us today as it was in the first century church – as believers we need to die to our selfish ways on a daily basis and put aside regular and extended times with God in Bible study and prayer.

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\(^ {25}\) Vine, 1976, p410
\(^ {26}\) Beasley-Murray, 1971, p45
\(^ {27}\) Barnett, 1997, p310
As mentioned previously, Paul’s appeal for reconciliation with God is also an appeal for reconciliation with the community of believers. This principle is also found elsewhere in the scriptures, for example in 1 John 4:20: “If anyone says, “I love God”, yet hates his brother he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.” A believer’s reconciliation with God should be reflected in his/her relationships within God’s family.

**vs 21** : God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

This statement by Paul has been described as “the whole doctrine of the Atonement in a single sentence”. This passage of scripture thus concludes on a similar note to how it started, focusing on the death of Jesus (vs 14). God performs his reconciling work through the death of Christ. Until now, Paul has written firstly to his Corinthian audience, requiring the modern day reader to apply diligence to identify universal principles that apply nowadays. This verse however expresses a universal statement of belief that is central to the Christian faith and as relevant to the “here and now” as it was to the “there and then.”

The stand-alone, proverbial nature of this verse has led many scholars to believe that it has origins in an earlier creed, hymn or teaching. Whether that is the case or not, it is aligned with a Judaic belief that the merits of the righteous could be used for benefit of the sinful.

It is important to note that Paul does not say that Jesus became a sinner, but that he became sin for us. Jesus needed to be sinless so that he could be an acceptable sacrifice for us in our sinful nature. Related scriptures include Galatians 3:13 - “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree””

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28 Ibid, p143  
29 Barnett, 1997, p312  
30 Barrett, 1973, p180
and 1 Peter 2:24a - “He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live for righteousness”.

The suffering servant described in Isaiah 53 is likely to have influenced Paul’s writing of this verse, with Gloer\textsuperscript{31} pointing out striking parallels between these two passages. Thus, 2 Corinthians 5:21 speaks of a Christ who:

1. had done no wrong
2. was made an offering for sin in order that
3. we might come into a relationship with God through him

Similarly, Isaiah 53 speaks of a suffering servant who:

1. though he had done no wrong (vs 9)
2. gave his life as a sin-offering in order that (vs 10)
3. through his suffering many might be justified (vs 11)

When we are reconciled with God we become his righteousness. We are hidden with Christ\textsuperscript{32}, and so God sees Jesus rather than our sinful nature. There is no other way to be found blameless and be reconciled with God, except through participating in the death, burial and resurrection of the sinless one who became sin on our behalf. As mentioned previously, this reconciliation and righteousness before God is based on a relationship which needs to be continually nurtured through an ongoing willingness to put to death our selfish desires and spend regular time with God. Just as a healthy marriage requires self denial and big investments of quality time, so it is with our relationship with God.

This verse concludes the passage selected for this exegetical study and also serves as its foundation, pulling together and clarifying statements made earlier. It explains the extent of

\textsuperscript{31} Gloer, 1996, p156
\textsuperscript{32} Colossians 3:3
Christ’s love and how “the one” effectively “died for all” (vs 14-15), how this act inaugurates new creation in Christ (vs 17) and the means by which God reconciles Paul / His people to Himself (vs 18-19). It is also the basis for Paul’s heartfelt appeal to the Corinthians (and by extrapolation all believers) to “be reconciled to God” (20).

6. Application

Paul wrote this passage primarily to defend his character, apostleship and doctrine to a group of Christians in Corinth who had been influenced by false teachers and who looked down upon Paul. It is therefore largely autobiographical, and so Paul’s frequent use of the plural tense refers firstly to himself and others who were true apostles of Jesus. However, there are still clear principles and fundamental statements of doctrine that are relevant to us in this day and age.

Like Paul, our motivation to continually lay down our lives and take up the life of Christ should be based on the complimentary concepts of the fear of God and the love of Christ. Being “in Christ” involves speaking on his behalf the message of reconciliation. This message needs to be spoken not only to those in need of salvation, but also within the family of God to ensure that the church reflects God’s reconciling power in how we relate to one another in our diversity. This is a key lesson we must take from the context of Paul’s letter.

Being placed in the life of Christ also involves changing how we view the world and people in it, including other disciples. We should be constrained by the love of Christ to avoid thinking according to the patterns of the world. Instead we are to nurture a new worldview that embraces new creation and life in the Age to Come, and provides a foretaste (for disciples and those who we introduce to God’s family) of what life and relationships in that Age will be like.

Paul’s metaphor of being an ambassador of Christ, and the obvious need for all disciples to take up this role in the absence of apostles, is also very instructive for us. Understanding that
disciples represent the King and that those who reject us reject Christ, should motivate us to take our calling very seriously. We have a responsibility as ambassadors to correctly understand and be able to communicate the message we deliver on behalf of the King, and we are to do it as humble servants.

As mentioned in the introduction, the message of reconciliation should resonate well with a modern society beset by many challenges, particularly in relationships. These include conflicts, tribalism, factions, discrimination and failure in marriage and parenting. There is also widespread disillusionment with “church” which has generally failed to live up to its primary identity as God’s family - His community for nurturing a lifestyle of close authentic relationship with Him and His people, and thereby being “the light” in a world of darkness.

The message of the Gospel is also increasingly viewed as irrelevant or unattractive for many for various reasons, including the individualism that characterises the post-modern culture and the self-centredness that culture breeds. There appears to be a growing apathy and even resistance to receiving the message of God’s love and grace, leaving many unwilling to even consider changing their path in life. The narrow road appears to be less and less travelled.

In all of this, there is surely opportunity to communicate God’s love, purpose and plan in a different way to how it has typically been shared. Ultimately, however, we can take comfort in the fact that God is in control - hearing the Word builds faith and God’s Spirit brings people to points of conviction and surrender. And Paul’s ambassadorial metaphor accommodates partnering with one another and with the Spirit since ambassadors travelled and spoke as groups of envoys.

Finally, as Paul bracketed this uniquely important passage of scripture by reference to the cross of Jesus, our main motivation to live in Christ and act as his ambassadors and ministers of reconciliation, similarly needs to be drawn from that event.
Bibliography


