The Social Significance of Reconciliation in Paul’s Theology, With Particular Reference to the Romanian Context

by

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ABSTRACT

Traditional exegetical scholarship has treated Paul’s presentation of reconciliation as referring to reconciliation between people and God, and has primarily focused its attention on key κατάλασσω καταλλάγη, passages in the Pauline corpus. The present study challenges this view and argues that Paul has a more complex understanding of the concept and uses a rich symbolism to describe reconciliation as a multifaceted reality that encompasses reconciliation with God and reconciliation between human beings, forming together an inseparable reality. The discussion is placed within Paul’s overall religious, social and political contexts, showing that an analysis of the social dimension of reconciliation in his thought is both plausible and necessary. It is argued that the social meaning of reconciliation is to be understood within Paul’s comprehensive vision of reconciliation: a vision grounded in the story of Christ and Paul’s own reconciliation experience, substantiated by the Isaianic vision of cosmic peace, and given form and expression in a rich symbolism of reconciliation.

Having established this framework of reference, the study offers an analysis of two major sections of Romans, respectively chapters 5-8 and 12-15, using primarily insights from a narrative reading of Paul. A special emphasis is placed on Paul’s use of the story of Jesus Christ for community formation, for the shaping of identity, values and practices of the community. In Romans 5-8 we find that Paul shows the inseparability of the horizontal and the vertical dimensions of reconciliation. By describing the complex dynamic of the incorporation of the believer “in Christ,” through baptism, Paul draws his readers into the same story of Christ, thus reminding them that they are an integral part of, and active participants in, the ongoing story of God’s reconciling the world through Christ. In this way, God’s reconciling initiative, shown in the very act of Christ’s death on the cross, is not only the pronouncement of God’s reconciling the world, but also the ground and model for reconciliation among people. Similarly, in Romans 12-15 we find that Paul expresses the social dimension of reconciliation in various ways: as genuine love for one another and for enemies, as welcoming the weak and powerless, as affirming the other, as blessing one’s persecutors, as overcoming evil with good and living at peace with all. These, we argue, are practices of reconciliation which are anchored in, and presuppose, the story of Christ as both the ground and paradigm for a reconciling way of life. Thus, by placing these practices within the larger horizon of God’s reconciliation of the world in Christ, Paul provides an unshakable foundation for both the possibility and the actuality of social reconciliation. So then, Paul’s ultimate vision of the reconciliation of all things in Christ gives assurance and hope, and an irresistible impetus to the believer’s ministry of reconciliation in all its forms and manifestations.

We conclude with several suggestions for how the churches in Romania can build on a Pauline understanding of reconciliation as presented in this research. We suggest that communities of believers could make a contribution to the public arena by offering and maintaining a sense of fundamental values for human life in the world; by discerning, unmasking and resisting any form of totalitarianism and absolutism; and by offering a framework of hope, and a vision of life, that will enable people not only to cope with “otherness” and “difference,” but also to promote a culture of peace and justice, of freedom and love, of forgiveness and reconciliation, i.e., a culture of life.