

THE RECONCILIATION OF ALL THINGS IN CHRIST

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ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL METAPHORS of salvation in Scripture is the concept of reconciliation. Reconciliation is chiefly a Pauline idea, as Paul is the only author in the New Testament who used the *καταλλάσσω* word group to speak of reconciliation in a redemptive context.¹ Reconciliation in a salvific sense refers to God's work in which He acts out of His love to bring about harmonious relations between Himself and others.² This work of reconciliation is necessary because of the disruption that sin has caused in the relationship between God and His creation.³ God reconciles through Jesus Christ, on the basis of His work (Rom. 5:9–11; 2 Cor. 5:18–21).⁴

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¹ Paul did so in Romans 5:10–11; 11:15; 2 Corinthians 5:18–20; Ephesians 2:16; Colossians 1:20, 22. This of course does not mean that Paul was the only one in the New Testament to speak of reconciliation, for the concept can be found where the word is not, as in the idea of “making peace.” See Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 237–44. For an overview of Paul's theology of reconciliation see George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed., ed. Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 492–98; I. Howard Marshall, “The Meaning of Reconciliation,” in *Unity and Diversity in New Testament Theology: Essays in Honor of George E. Ladd*, ed. Robert A. Guelich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 117–32; Ralph P. Martin, *Reconciliation: A Study of Paul's Theology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981); Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 214–50; John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 189–99; David L. Turner, “Paul and the Ministry of Reconciliation in 2 Cor. 5:11–6:2,” *Criswell Theological Review* 4 (1989): 77–95; and John F. Walvoord, “Reconciliation,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 120 (January–March 1963): 3–12.

² Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 249–50.

³ As Ladd states, “The very idea of reconciliation suggests estrangement. Reconciliation is necessary between two parties when something has occurred to disrupt fellowship and to cause one or both parties to be hostile to the other. Sin has estranged humankind from God” (*Theology of the New Testament*, 492).

⁴ For an explanation of Jesus Christ as the agent of reconciliation see Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 195–97.

Scripture makes it clear that all believers, those who have put their faith in Jesus Christ, are reconciled to God. Romans 5:10 states that those who are reconciled were reconciled by Christ's death while they were enemies, and being reconciled they will be saved by Christ's life. Those who are saved by Christ's life are the same people as those who have been justified by Christ's blood (v. 9).⁵ Colossians 1:22 states that those who are reconciled through Christ's death have been reconciled so that they will be presented as holy, blameless, and beyond reproach before Christ at the judgment, and this will happen only to believers.⁶

In addition Scripture also presents the concept of reconciliation in universal terms. Second Corinthians 5:19 states that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself." This raises the question of who is included in the term "world." Colossians 1:20 goes even further and states that God reconciled all things to Himself through Christ, "whether things on earth or things in heaven."

This concept of universal reconciliation raises the question of what exactly it means to say that all things are reconciled to God. Is everyone reconciled through Christ's death? If the answer is yes, then what is the difference between the reconciliation of believers and the reconciliation of unbelievers?⁷ If all people are not reconciled through Christ's death, then what does it mean that "all things" are reconciled? What is the nature of this universal reconciliation? Advocates of universal salvation appeal to these verses to support the idea that all people, regardless of whether they have consciously placed their faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior, will be saved through Christ's atonement.⁸ They would then say that

⁵ "It is significant that in Romans 5:9–11, which is one of the four great passages on reconciliation in the New Testament, to be reconciled and to be justified are parallels" (*ibid.*, 190).

⁶ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 142–43.

⁷ The terms "believer" and "unbeliever" are both used throughout this article from an eschatological perspective. The term "unbelievers" in this context refers to those who are unbelievers at the eschaton, and therefore were unbelievers during their lives on this earth and will be unbelievers for all of eternity. They are those who are never saved, that is, the nonelect. The term does not refer to those who presently do not believe in the gospel but will one day be saved.

⁸ For example Thomas Johnson, "Wideness in God's Mercy: Universalism in the Bible," in *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate*, ed. Robin A. Parry and Christopher H. Partridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 77–102; Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 235–55; Thomas Talbot, "Christ Victorious," in *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate*, 15–31; and *idem*, "Universal Reconciliation and the Inclusive Nature of Election," in *Perspectives on Election: Five Views*, ed. Chad Owen Brand

there is no difference between the reconciliation of believers and unbelievers; all people are reconciled in the same way.⁹ On the other hand many evangelical theologians believe that only believers are reconciled by Christ's atoning death, and that unbelievers are in no way reconciled.¹⁰ They would then say that the concept of reconciling all things means that reconciliation is cosmic in scope, encompassing all of creation but not necessarily every human being within creation.¹¹ They also agree with universalists that if "all things" are truly reconciled to God, than all people would be saved.

Both of these understandings, however, seem deficient. The Bible clearly rules out universalism, but it also teaches that all things created by God are reconciled to God through Christ's death. Therefore the Bible teaches *universal reconciliation, but not universal salvation*. In order to establish this thesis, this article first examines the two passages of Scripture that seem to present reconciliation in universal terms: 2 Corinthians 5:18–21 and Colossians 1:19–20. In examining these passages the focus is on what they teach about the extent of reconciliation and the fact that they avoid universalism. Second, this article seeks to explain what it means to say that all things are reconciled. The nature of reconciliation will be examined as it pertains to believers, unbelievers, and the creation itself. It will be seen that all things, including all people, are reconciled to the Father through Jesus Christ, that this reconciliation will ultimately take place at the end of time when Christ delivers up His kingdom to God the Father (1 Cor. 15:24–28; Eph. 1:9–10), and that believers, unbelievers, and the creation are all reconciled in different ways. There is no need to restrict the scope of reconciliation to avoid universalism.

(Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2006), 206–61.

⁹ "It seems to me without question, therefore, that Paul envisioned a time when all persons would be reconciled to God in the full redemptive sense" (Talbot, "Christ Victorious," 25).

¹⁰ For example Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Scribner's, 1872–1873; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 3:871; Rienk B. Kuiper, *For Whom Did Christ Die?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 18–19; Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ*, *Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 233; Marshall, "The Meaning of Reconciliation," 126–27; John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 62–64; Walvoord, "Reconciliation," 8; and Paul Wells, *Cross Words: The Biblical Doctrine of the Atonement* (Fearn, UK: Christian Focus, 2006), 212–15, 236–46.

¹¹ See, for example, Herman Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, vol. 3 of *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 474–75; Kuiper, *For Whom Did Christ Die?* 95–100; Letham, *The Work of Christ*, 198–202; and Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1935; reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000), 100–106.

THE EXTENT OF RECONCILIATION

2 CORINTHIANS 5:18–21

This passage begins by noting that all the benefits of being in Christ, described in 5:16–17 as having a new attitude and being a new creation, are from God (v. 18a).¹² The rest of the passage describes how God is able to bestow these salvific benefits on believers.¹³ God is able to do this because He is the one “who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation” (vv. 18–19). God saves people because of Christ’s reconciling work on the cross. Reconciliation is first an objective act; it is something that God has done for humanity in the cross of Christ. As George Ladd states,

A close examination of the passages in Romans 5 and 2 Corinthians 5 leads to the inescapable conclusion that reconciliation is not primarily a change in humanity’s attitude toward God; it is, like justification, an objective event that is accomplished by God for humanity’s salvation. Reconciliation was wrought first by God for human beings, not in human beings. It is while we were enemies that we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son (Rom 5:10). The death of Christ itself accomplished a reconciliation while we were in a state of enmity to God. The same thought is earlier expressed in different words: “While we were yet sinners Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8).¹⁴

Reconciliation is also a subjective act because human beings must themselves subjectively experience the reconciliation that God has wrought in order to have fellowship with Him.¹⁵ Both the

¹² “Although τὰ πάντα can mean ‘the universe’ (e.g., Phil. 3:21; Col. 1:16–17), there is nothing in the immediate context to suggest that Paul is here affirming the divine origin of the cosmos. Rather, ‘all this’ (RSV, REB, NRSV), ‘all these consequences’ (Barrett 162), looks back to the new attitudes of v. 16 and the new creation of v. 17, that is, the new order (καινή, v. 17), all the benefits of the Christ-event” (Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005], 435).

¹³ I *id.*

¹⁴ Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 493.

¹⁵ “Until God’s offer of objective reconciliation has been received in an attitude of glad surrender, no person is in fact reconciled to God; she or he is still a sinner and in the last day will suffer the full and awful outpouring of the wrath of a holy God. The content of reconciliation, therefore, while first of all the objective act of God, is also the affirmative reaction of people to the proffer of reconciliation. Only then does reconciliation become effective for the sinner; only then is he or she reconciled to God” (*ibid.*, 496).

objective and the subjective aspects of reconciliation are present in 2 Corinthians 5:18–21.

Second Corinthians 5:19 repeats and amplifies the thoughts of verse 18.¹⁶ The objective work of reconciliation appears at the beginning of each verse, in that God has reconciled “us” (v. 18) or “the world” (v. 19) to Himself. The need for a subjective receiving of God’s reconciliation is then highlighted at the end of each verse, as Paul wrote of the ministry and message of reconciliation.¹⁷ This ministry and message is clarified in verse 20. In light of God’s reconciling act and consequent entrustment of the message of reconciliation to Paul, he described himself (and others who follow after him)¹⁸ as Christ’s ambassador. God makes His appeal through His ambassadors, and people need to believe this appeal in order to be reconciled to God; they need to experience subjectively the objective reality of God’s reconciliation in order to have a relationship with Him.¹⁹ Second Corinthians 5:21 returns to the objective idea of rec-

¹⁶ “Paul now [in v. 19] replays in essence what he asserted in v. 18. The sentence thus has the effect of reinforcing and explicating the ministry of reconciliation—both Christ’s and Paul’s—that was set forth there” (Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997], 305). See also Marshall, “The Meaning of Reconciliation,” 122; and Turner, “Paul and the Ministry of Reconciliation in 2 Cor. 5:11–6:2,” 84).

¹⁷ The message and the ministry of reconciliation are the same. As Harris remarks, “τὸν λόγον τῆς καταλλαγῆς is clearly parallel to διακονίαν τῆς καταλλαγῆς (v. 18). The ministry is the proclamation of the message. Whether God is said to ‘give the ministry of reconciliation’ (v. 18) or ‘to entrust the message of reconciliation’ (v. 19) to Paul and others, the emphasis is on the privilege and obligation of the task of proclaiming that reconciliation” (Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 445).

¹⁸ The phrase “δι’ ἡμῶν, ‘through us’ (= by our mouth/word), certainly includes Paul and his fellow apostles but probably also all proclaimers of reconciliation. Whoever declares ‘the message of reconciliation’ (v. 19) is both a delegated representative of Christ and an actual spokesperson for God” (ibid., 447).

¹⁹ Many commentators understand the appeal in verse 20 as directed toward the Corinthians believers who were antagonistic toward Paul and whom Paul was therefore calling on to turn back to him. This is seen as an immediate application of God’s reconciling work. See Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 310–12; David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1999), 298–300; and Martin, *Reconciliation: A Study of Paul’s Theology*, 109.

It is better, however, to understand this appeal as the summation of the message of Christ’s ambassadors. This interpretation understands “reconciliation” in its soteriological sense, which is what Paul was referring to in this passage. It also allows for a broader application for being an ambassador for Christ, whereas the former view limits being an ambassador to only Paul. Paul made his specific appeal to the Corinthian believers in 6:1, not 5:20. See Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 447–49; and Marshall, “The Meaning of Reconciliation,” 123–24.

conciliation and describes how God accomplished reconciliation in Christ by making Him “to be sin on our behalf.”²⁰

Recognizing the difference between the objective and subjective aspects of reconciliation helps clarify the extent of reconciliation in this passage. Second Corinthians 5:19 states that it was the “world” that God reconciled in Christ. Some understand the term “world” in this context as referring to all believers, since only believers are actually reconciled and do not have their trespasses counted against them.²¹ Similar to this understanding is a second view, namely, that Paul, in his use of “world,” was enlarging on the word “us” in verse 18, which refers to “Jews,” and that “world” refers to Gentile believers.²² A third possibility is that Paul used “world” to refer to all of creation (cf. Col. 1:20).²³ A fourth option views the term “world” as referring to all of humanity.²⁴ The fourth option seems the best in light of Paul’s emphasis on the objective and subjective aspects of reconciliation. The first two options above, which understand the term “world” to be referring to believers only, do not fit the context of the passage.²⁵ Only those “who

²⁰ “This verse [2 Cor. 5:21] explains how God did not count the trespasses against us (5:19) and made possible our reconciliation” (Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 300).

²¹ Kuiper, *For Whom Did Christ Die?* 36; Gary D. Long, *Definite Atonement*, 3rd ed. (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2006), 121–30; Roger Nicole, “The Case for Definite Atonement,” *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 10 (1967): 205; John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1959), 227–28; and Tom Wells, *A Price for a People: The Meaning of Christ’s Death* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1992), 119–20.

²² Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 396; Colin Kruse, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 127; William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (reprint, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1980), 2:480; William Symington, *The Atonement and Intercession of Jesus Christ* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1863; reprint, Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2006), 221–22; and Terrance L. Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved? Reassessing Salvation in Christ and World Religions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 487.

²³ Barnett, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 302; Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 158; and Turner, “Paul and the Ministry of Reconciliation,” 85.

²⁴ Lewis Sperry Chafer, “For Whom Did Christ Die?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137 (July–September 1980): 313; Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation: The Doctrine of Salvation*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1997), 190; Norman F. Douty, *The Death of Christ: Did Christ Die Only for the Elect?* (Irving, TX: William & Watrous, 1978), 106–10; Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 293–94; Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 443; Robert P. Lightner, *The Death Christ Died: A Biblical Case for Unlimited Atonement*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), 65–66; Marshall, “The Meaning of Reconciliation,” 123; and Walvoord, “Reconciliation,” 3–5.

²⁵ Also the suggestion that Paul was referring to Gentiles in distinction to Jews

live” (2 Cor. 5:15) and those who are “in Christ” (v. 17) are subjectively reconciled to God through faith. But everyone is objectively reconciled to Him.²⁶ Paul was also clearly referring to humanity in this passage with the pronouns “their” and “them,” and with his reference to “transgressions.”²⁷ God did not count the transgressions of humanity against them, but instead reconciled them to Himself in Christ, thereby making forgiveness available to all people (this is essentially the same thought as in v. 21).²⁸ This language rules out understanding “world” in a cosmological sense. Second Corinthians 5:18–21 presents Christ’s reconciling work as extending to the entire human race, both believers and unbelievers.

The distinction between the objective and subjective aspects of reconciliation in this passage also demonstrates how universal salvation is avoided. Christ’s death accomplished reconciliation for all people, but not all people are saved because not all people subjectively appropriate what Christ has done for them.²⁹ In order to ex-

has no basis in the context, as the word “us” in verse 18 includes the Corinthians, who were not all Jews. Whether one takes the word “us” in verse 18 as referring to believers only or to all of humanity, it certainly includes the Corinthians. The church at Corinth did not consist exclusively of Jews (Acts 18:1–17).

26 “God reconciles the world to himself” thus means: God acts in Christ to overlook the sins of mankind, so that on his side there is no barrier to the restoration of friendly relations. The message of the Christian preacher is a declaration of this fact. It is first and foremost a gospel, a declaration of the good news of what God has done. Hence it can speak of ‘reconciliation’ as an accomplished fact. But at the same time the indicative forms the basis for an imperative. Now people are commanded: ‘be reconciled to God.’ In view of what God has already done, this cannot be understood to mean that they must render God amenable to them by appropriate action. Rather God and Christ appeal to them to accept the fact that reconciliation has been accomplished and to complete the action by taking down the barrier on their side – the barrier of pride and disobedience and hatred of God. Let them put away their feelings against God and enter into a new relationship with him” (Marshall, “The Meaning of Reconciliation,” 123).

27 “Paul can also use κόσμος of the world of human beings (e.g., 1:12; Rom. 3:6; 5:12–13), a sense that seems demanded here [2 Cor. 5:19] by the αὐτοῖς and αὐτῶν that follow (in a construction *ad sensum*) and by the reference to παραπτώματα. The movement from ἡμᾶς (v. 18) to κόσμον (v. 19) with regard to the objects of reconciliation is not a movement from the anthropological to the cosmological, but from the narrower to the wider anthropological focus” (Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 443).

28 *Ibid.*, 444.

29 “The objectivity of the Atonement is clearly affirmed in the New Testament. Christ does not simply offer reconciliation and redemption, but he also accomplishes what he sets out to do (cf. John 17:4; Rom. 5:6, 8; 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:19). Christ not only died for all but in Christ all died. . . . Yet we must appropriate what Christ has done for us in faith. It is not enough to see Christ from afar, but the ‘morning star’ must rise in our hearts (2 Pet. 1:19). His reconciliation needs to be fulfilled in the

perience the reconciliation Christ has accomplished, one must be “in Christ” through faith. As Shedd wrote, “Atonement in and by itself, separate from faith, saves no soul. . . . It is only when the death of Christ has been actually confided in as atonement, that it is completely ‘set forth’ as God’s propitiation for sin.”³⁰ All people are objectively reconciled to God, but not all people are subjectively reconciled to God, and therefore not all people are saved.

COLOSSIANS 1:19–20

These two verses expand on the extent of reconciliation described in 2 Corinthians 5:18–21. Colossians 1:19–20 concludes what is generally considered a hymn focusing on the supremacy of Jesus Christ in all things (vv. 15–20).³¹ The hymn begins in verses 15–16 by extolling the supremacy of Christ in creation; all things in creation were created by Christ, through Christ, and for Christ.³² The middle of the hymn transitions from Christ’s supremacy in creation to His supremacy in redemption (vv. 17–18a). Christ is not only the firstborn over creation, but He is also the head of the church and the firstborn from the dead, which means that He has first place in everything, from creation to redemption to consummation (v. 18b).³³ Colossians 1:19–20 describes why Christ is supreme not only over creation, but also over redemption and consummation. “For it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven.”

Jesus Christ is supreme over all things for two reasons. First, all the Father’s fullness dwells in Him (2:9). This means that all of

experience of redemption made possible by the Holy Spirit” (Donald G. Bloesch, *Jesus Christ: Savior and Lord*, Christian Foundations [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997], 162).

³⁰ Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 2:477.

³¹ Whether Paul composed this hymn or used an existing hymn for his own purposes is not significant to the findings of this article. Either way the theology is clearly Pauline and needs to be understood in its present context. See F. F. Bruce, “The ‘Christ Hymn’ of Colossians 1:15–20,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 141 (April–June 1984): 99–100; Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 108–10; and Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 32–37.

³² Paul called Christ the “firstborn of all creation” to indicate His supremacy over all creation (Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 120).

³³ Bruce, “The Christ Hymn of Colossians 1:15–20,” 106–7; and Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 129–30.

God's divine essence and glory are found in Christ.³⁴ Second, the Father has reconciled "all things" to Himself through Christ's atonement.³⁵ The extent of Christ's reconciliation in this passage depends on what the phrase "all things" means. One option is to say it refers only to believers, those who are actually reconciled.³⁶ Another option is to understand "all things" as referring only to the cosmic powers, and not to the world of humanity.³⁷ Both of these views, however, are problematic. The phrase "all things" occurs five other times in Colossians 1:15–20, and each refers to the entire created universe, making it extremely likely that it refers to the same thing in verse 20.³⁸ The reconciliation of "all things" by the blood of Christ in this passage is coextensive with the creation of "all things" by Christ mentioned in verses 15–16.³⁹ The phrase "all things" is as broad as it possibly can be, as it is also described as "things on earth or things in heaven." This means that the work of reconciliation is as broad as it can be, for it is on the widest possible scale; all things everywhere are reconciled to God through Christ's death.⁴⁰ The phrase "all things" cannot be limited to a certain part of creation, but must include everything in creation.

Also supporting this understanding of Colossians 1:19–20 is the truth that Christ's lordship over all His creation, as described

³⁴ O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 53. See also Bruce, "The Christ Hymn of Colossians 1:15–20," 108; and Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 132–33.

³⁵ This is seen in the phrase "through the blood of his cross." With this phrase "Paul affirms that this universal reconciliation has been brought about, not in some other-worldly drama, but through something done in history, the death of Jesus Christ upon the cross" (O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 56).

³⁶ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:871; Kuiper, *For Whom Did Christ Die?* 18–19; Marshall, "The Meaning of Reconciliation," 126–27; and Walvoord, "Reconciliation," 8.

³⁷ Lars Hartman, "Universal Reconciliation (Col. 1:20)," *Studien zum Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt* 10 (1985): 109–21; and Heinrich Schlier, *Principalities and Powers in the New Testament*, *Questiones Disputatae* 3 (Freiburg: Herder, 1961), 14–15.

³⁸ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 134–35.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 135. See also F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, *New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 74.

⁴⁰ "Things on earth . . . things in heaven" thus denotes everything in God's universe" (Curtis Vaughan, "Colossians," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 11 [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981], 186). See also Bruce, "The Christ Hymn of Colossians 1:15–20," 109; Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 135; and O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 55.

in verses 15–18, has been disturbed by sin.⁴¹ Creation itself looks forward to its freedom from sin's bondage (Rom. 8:19–23).⁴² Sin negatively affected everything in God's created universe, necessitating the reconciliation of all things in the universe.⁴³ To accomplish this restoration of all creation, God reconciled all things to Himself through the work of Jesus Christ on the cross.⁴⁴

Even though Colossians 1:19–20 makes it clear that everything in the universe is reconciled to God by Christ's atonement, including all people, the context of the passage prevents an understanding of universal salvation. Verses 12–14 describe what the Father does for believers. He qualifies them to share in the inheritance of the saints (v. 12), He rescues them from the domain of darkness (v. 13), and He transfers them to the kingdom of His Son

41 "In speaking of the reconciliation of all things to Christ, the 'hymn' presupposes that the Lordship of Christ over all things (vv. 15–18) has somehow been disrupted. 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" (Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 134). See also O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 53; and Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 192–93.

42 Commenting on Romans 8:21, Morris states, "Paul looks forward to a time when the total effect of sin will be done away and creation will stand forth in all its glory as God intends it to be. It will be set free from 'the slavery of corruption' which is so characteristic of the physical world: 'Change and decay in all around I see.' But Paul does not regard this as permanent. Creation will in due course be freed from the bondage to decay. It will share in some extent in 'the liberty of the glory of God's children'" (*The Epistle to the Romans*, 322).

43 "It is clearly stated after all, that God reconciled all things (*ta panta*), that is, not only people or angels, but all created things, the whole creation, the world, the universe, more fully described as 'all things either on earth or in heaven,' that God reconciled the whole creation by Christ, not to itself, but to himself, to bring all things together and into unity in him. . . . Now this creation as a whole, conceived organically, was brought by sin into a position of hostility against God, and internally torn apart and devastated. Implied here is not that the good angels, personally and individually, needed reconciliation, nor that Christ had to suffer and die for irrational creatures. Basic to these passages [Eph. 1:10; Col. 1:20], however, is the premise that sin modified and disturbed the relation of all creatures to God and to one another" (Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation*, 472).

44 "Since the liberty of the children of God is procured by the redemptive work of Christ, the release of creation from its bondage to decay is assured by that same redemptive work" (Bruce, "The Christ Hymn of Colossians 1:15–20," 109). Also Ephesians 1:10 teaches the reconciliation of all things in Christ. Andrew T. Lincoln states, "Christ is the one in whom God chooses to sum up the universe, in whom he restores the harmony of the cosmos. Earlier, 'in Christ' has functioned to indicate Christ's being the elect representative in whom believers are included, but now it can be 'seen that God's comprehensive purpose goes beyond simply humanity to embrace the whole created order. This part of the *berakah* helps believers to recognize that to be incorporated into God's gracious decision about Christ is also to be caught up in God's gracious purpose for a universe centered and reunited in Christ" (*Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary [Waco, TX: Word, 1990], 34).

(v. 13), in whom they have redemption and forgiveness of sins (v. 14). At the very least these verses imply that the Father does something for believers that He does not do for others, namely, putting them in His Son.⁴⁵ Verses 21–23 are even clearer in this regard. Paul had just proclaimed that Christ reconciled all things through His cross (v. 20), and now he explained how the Colossians themselves were reconciled as believers.⁴⁶ Though the Colossians were sinners apart from God (v. 21), they were reconciled through Christ's death so that they could be presented holy before God (v. 22), and this reconciliation took place because of the Colossians' faith in the gospel that Paul preached (v. 23).⁴⁷ There is clearly a difference between the reconciliation accomplished by Christ in verse 20 and the reconciliation of the Colossians in verses 21–23 and the redemption of the Colossians in verses 12–14. Universal salvation is never implied by Paul's idea of universal reconciliation.

THE NATURE OF RECONCILIATION

Second Corinthians 5:18–21 states that all people, believers and unbelievers, are reconciled by Christ's atonement. Colossians 1:19–20 goes even further and states that all things, including all people, are reconciled by Christ's atonement. Both of these passages, however, rule out universal salvation. In light of this truth it is necessary to explain the nature of reconciliation as it pertains to believers and unbelievers. Since all things are reconciled as well, and not

⁴⁵ "Brought" translates *metestesen*, a word that was used in secular literature in reference to removing persons from one country and settling them as colonists and citizens in another country. It might be rendered 'reestablished.' The tense of the verb points to the time of conversion. The 'kingdom' (rule) is not to be interpreted eschatologically. It was for the Colossians a present reality (cf. John 3:3–5)" (Vaughan, *Colossians*, 180).

⁴⁶ Commenting on Colossians 1:21, Bruce states, "The central purpose of Christ's peacemaking work, however, is seen most clearly in those men and women who have heard the message of reconciliation and willingly rendered their submission, gratefully accepting the amnesty which the message holds out. This indeed is the prior aspect of reconciliation in Paul's thinking. The introduction of the Christ-hymn before this point means that here personal reconciliation must be mentioned after cosmic reconciliation, which is celebrated in the final strophe of the hymn, but it is far more likely that, for Paul, cosmic reconciliation was a corollary of personal reconciliation" (*The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 76–77).

⁴⁷ "In verse 23 Paul implicitly states the terms on which reconciliation becomes a reality: it depends upon faith and the acceptance of the gospel preached by Paul. If the Colossians are urged to continue in faith and hope, the implication is clearly that their reconciliation began with their act of faith and hope" (Marshall, "Meaning of Reconciliation," 126).

just humanity, it is also necessary to explain what it means to say that creation is reconciled by Christ's atonement, including the good and evil personal elements of creation (angels and demons).

THE RECONCILIATION OF BELIEVERS

Believers are salvifically reconciled to God when they accept His objective reconciliation through faith, resulting in salvation. This truth is clearly expressed in Romans 5:10. "For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life" (cf. Col. 1:21-23). This verse mentions both aspects of reconciliation, objective and subjective. First, human beings as sinners, the enemies of God, were reconciled through Christ's death. Second, those who have been reconciled, those who have been justified by faith (Rom. 5:1), will be saved by His life.⁴⁸ As Marshall states, Paul "identifies the death of Jesus for sinners, by virtue of which they are justified, with the reconciliation of God's enemies by the death of his Son. The death of Christ is the basis for God's act of justification which takes place when men believe in Christ, and it is itself the act of reconciliation which becomes effective for men when it is preached to them and they accept it."⁴⁹

The reconciliation of the believer that comes through faith in the gospel results in an intimate, loving relationship with God during this life and the life to come. Reconciliation as a metaphor of salvation emphasizes the believer's peace with God (Rom. 5:1) and with others (Eph. 2:14-16), adoption into God's family (John 1:12-13; Rom. 8:14-17; 1 John 3:1-10), and unhindered access to God (Eph. 2:17-18; Heb. 10:19-22; 1 Pet. 3:18). For believers to have peace with God in this sense means they are no longer under God's wrath, but are in Christ.⁵⁰ Salvific reconciliation means they are now part of God's family through Christ and able to enjoy active communion with God the Father.⁵¹ Reconciliation with the Father

⁴⁸ "It would seem that the verb ['reconcile'] is again used in two senses, first in verse 10a of God reconciling men to himself (passive, of men), and second in verse 10b of men who have actually entered into the state of reconciliation. The contrast is the same as that between 'Christ died for us' and 'being now justified.' No doubt the slight shift in meaning is awkward, but it is by no means intolerable. It is supported by the use of 'we have received the reconciliation' in verse 11, which suggests an existing gift to be received by us" (Marshall, "The Meaning of Reconciliation," 125).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 124. See also Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 496; Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 198; and Walvoord, "Reconciliation," 4.

⁵⁰ Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 497; and Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 190.

⁵¹ Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 191.

in this life also means that believers can be assured of reconciliation with the Father throughout eternity (John 10:27–30; Rom. 8:31–39).

THE RECONCILIATION OF UNBELIEVERS

The reconciliation of unbelievers is vastly different from the reconciliation of believers. While believers are subjectively reconciled to God during this life at the moment of their salvation, unbelievers never experience this aspect of reconciliation. They are objectively reconciled in the present only in the sense that God has postponed the full display of His judgment toward them (just as He has done for believers as well) so that they might be saved. This can be seen in that God did not instantly condemn the human race when Adam and Eve fell into sin, but instead He postponed His judgment on the basis of Christ's atonement.⁵² Romans 3:25 also states that Christ's atonement and the justification of sinners on the basis of it demonstrates God's justice in showing patience toward sinners.⁵³ God's objective reconciliation of the human race expresses His desire for all people to enter a saving relationship with Him and experience salvific reconciliation. As 2 Peter 3:9 teaches, God lovingly delays His judgment because there are people still to be saved.⁵⁴

Those who never experience this saving relationship will, however, have a future experience of reconciliation with God. There is an eschatological reconciliation in which all people will partici-

⁵² As Robert Culver remarks, "This 'reconciliation' [Christ's atonement for the world in 2 Cor. 5:19] in part, affects God's treatment of the sons of Adam from Eden onward. If God had 'imputed' (KJV) 'their trespasses against them' fully the full execution of death would have put an end to the human race. Now, since Calvary, it is clear why. The reconciliation in promise only (Gen 3:15, the *protoevangelion* [*sic*]) became fulfillment at Calvary" (*Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical* [Fearn, UK: Christian Focus, 2005], 585).

⁵³ "The saving act did many things, one being that it showed that God is just. The point is that God is a forbearing God. He does not hurry to punish every sinner, and the sins committed before hand unpunished (cf. Acts 17:30) present a problem for the person who has a firm grasp on the truth God is just. When God does not punish the sinner, that might well show him to be merciful or loving. But just? It would mean that God condones evil. Justice demands that the guilty be punished just as it demands that the innocent go free. So God might be accused of being unjust. Not any more, says Paul. The cross shows us God's inflexible righteousness in the very means whereby sin is forgiven" (Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 182–83).

⁵⁴ "The divine 'longsuffering' was naturally associated with the opportunity for repentance (e.g. Joel 2:12–13; Jonah 4:2, cf. 3:10; Rom 2:4; Herm. *Sim.* 8:11:1; Clem. *Hom.* 11:7:2; cf. Wis 11:23), and also with eschatology; only God's patience with sinners can account for the fact that he does not immediately intervene with eschatological judgment" (Richard Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary [Waco, TX: Word, 1983], 312).

pate.⁵⁵ At the eschaton unbelievers will be reconciled as God restores cosmic peace to His creation. While believers freely accept this peace and enjoy eternal life with God, peace is imposed on unbelievers by God. For this reason Bruce calls this aspect of reconciliation “pacification.”⁵⁶ There is no glad surrender to the will of God by unbelievers, who are suffering in hell as the just punishment for their sin, even though they now realize that they ought to worship God and were wrong to sin against Him. Instead God’s reconciliation of unbelievers means that they have been decisively subdued to the will of God and can do nothing but serve His purposes.⁵⁷ As Philippians 2:9–11 teaches, all things in heaven and earth and below the earth will bow before Jesus Christ and acknowledge Him as Lord.⁵⁸ Unbelievers in hell will be reconciled in that they are no longer able to sin against God and because they will acknowledge Jesus for who He is.

The theory of sin forever flourishing ignores the message of Christ’s perfect victory over sin and all evil. *Every* knee shall bow and *every* tongue confess. . . (Phil. 2:10f), those of the lost included. It cannot mean mere outward, hypocritical, and forced agreement; what sense

⁵⁵ Moo helpfully points out how this eschatological note is present in the phrase “by making peace through the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:20). He states, “This language picks up the widespread Old Testament prediction that in the last day God would establish universal *shalōm*, ‘peace,’ or ‘well-being.’ . . . Through the work of Christ on the cross, God has brought his entire rebellious creation back under the rule of his sovereign power. Of course, this ‘peace’ is not yet fully established. The ‘already/not yet’ pattern of New Testament eschatology must be applied to Colossians 1:20. While secured in principle by Christ’s crucifixion and available in preliminary form to believers, universal peace is not yet established” (Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 136–37).

⁵⁶ “The peace effected by the death of Christ may be freely accepted, or it may be imposed. The reconciliation of the universe spoken of here includes what would now be distinguished as pacification” (Bruce, “The Christ Hymn of Colossians 1:15–20,” 109). See also Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 136–37; and O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 52–57.

⁵⁷ “Everything in the universe has been made subject to Christ even as everything was created for Him. By His reconciling work ‘the host of the high ones on high’ and sinful human beings on earth have been decisively subdued to the will of God and must subserve his purpose” (Bruce, “The Christ Hymn of Colossians 1:15–20,” 109–10).

⁵⁸ “Although all things will *finally* unite to bow in the name of Jesus and to acknowledge him as Lord (Phil 2:10, 11), it is not to be assumed that this will be done gladly by all” (O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 57 [italics his]). See also Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 76; Homer A. Kent Jr., “Philippians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 125; Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 612–14; and Russell D. Moore, “Personal and Cosmic Eschatology,” in *Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 900.

could there be in any outward show in the light of that Day; when all secrets shall be exposed (Rom. 2:16), before the God who is Spirit? Sinners are forced, then, to confess the truth, but they are forced by truth itself, but its overwhelming evidence and spiritual authority; they can no longer refuse to see, they cannot *think* otherwise. Through Christ, it has pleased God to reconcile, *apokataallaxai*, the whole universe, including all rebellious spirits (Col. 1:20).⁵⁹

Unbelievers will be consigned to the lake of fire with Satan, where they no longer will be able to rebel sinfully against God (Rev. 20:11–15).⁶⁰ As a result of Christ's work there will be peace even between God and those who never accept the provision of salvation He has made for them.

THE RECONCILIATION OF CREATION

The creation also experiences reconciliation with God. The evil personal elements of creation, Satan, and his demons, are reconciled in much the same way as unbelievers are. Through His atoning death for sin Christ has triumphed over all the evil cosmic powers that oppose Him (Col. 2:13–15).⁶¹ While Satan and his demons are now free to thwart God's will, they too will one day bow down be-

⁵⁹ Henri Blocher, "Everlasting Punishment and the Problem of Evil," in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 303 (italics his). This is not a "fourth position" concerning the relationship between hell and salvation (in addition to the traditional view, annihilationism, and universalism), as Stephen Williams posits in "The Question of Hell and Salvation: Is There a Fourth View?" *Tyndale Bulletin* 57 (2006): 163–83. It is a modification of the traditional view, as punishment in hell is eternal, but it is imposed on those who are eternally remorseful and ashamed, not those who eternally rebel against God. See Blocher, "Everlasting Punishment and the Problem of Evil," 304–12.

⁶⁰ The reconciliation of all things does not entail annihilationism. The biblical evidence is clear that hell is eternal. See Edward William Fudge and Robert A. Peterson, *Two Views of Hell: A Biblical and Theological Dialogue* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 117–81. While the eternally lost are no longer able to thwart God's purposes or rebel against Him in hell, neither will they ever long for a relationship with Him or repent from their sins (Moore, "Personal and Cosmic Eschatology," 900–901).

⁶¹ "In Col 2:13–14 we are told that in Christ we have been forgiven of all our trespasses in that by the very death of Christ on the cross, he cancelled the record of debt that stood against us and set it aside, nailing it to the cross. The thrust in vv. 13–14, then, is on expiation: the liability we owe before a holy God to suffer the penalty for trespassing his law is now removed ('forgiven' in 2:13; 'cancelled' and 'set aside' in 2:14) as Christ took upon himself our record of debt and nailed it to the cross. The substitutionary death Christ died, in which he cancelled out the debt of sinners, then, is the backdrop for the next glorious truth found in 2:15, where he disarmed the rulers and authorities, putting them to shame and triumphing over them. The death by which Satan is disarmed and put to shame, then, is a death that cancels our sin" (Bruce A. Ware, "The *SBJT* Forum: The Atonement under Fire," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 11 [2007]: 110–11).

fore Jesus and confess His lordship to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:9–11), forever submitting to His sovereign rule.⁶² At the end of the millennium, after Satan has attempted one final rebellion (Rev. 20:7–9), he will be thrown into the lake of fire along with the eternally lost (v. 10), where he will no longer be a threat to God's harmony and peace in creation.⁶³ Angels will also experience reconciliation with God, although Scripture nowhere hints at what this aspect of reconciliation might entail. They do not need reconciliation to God as human beings do, but as members of the creation that was estranged from God because of humanity's sin, they too will participate in the reconciliation of all things (Rom. 8:19–23).⁶⁴

Along with all of God's people the entire material creation will be renewed and cleansed from sin at the eschaton.⁶⁵ Believers will dwell in the new heavens and the new earth (Rev. 21–22) as Christ fulfills the cultural mandate and hands over His kingdom to God the Father (1 Cor. 15:24–28).⁶⁶ As Isaiah 60 and Revelation 21–22 describe, all of the sinful aspects of culture will be transformed so that they can eternally glorify their Creator.⁶⁷ God's transformed

⁶² "The purpose of Christ's exaltation is that all beings might bow in acknowledgement of the name that belongs to Jesus (v. 10), and confess that Jesus is Lord (v. 11). Because of what the name of Jesus represents, a time is coming when every knee shall bow before him in recognition of his sovereignty. The statement is built on the wording of Isaiah 45:23, a verse quoted by Paul in Romans 14:11 also (cf. Rev. 5:13). This universal acknowledgement will include angels and departed saints in heaven, people still living on earth, and the satanic hosts and lost humanity in hell" (Kent, *Philippians*, 125). See also Clinton E. Arnold, *Powers of Darkness: Principalities and Powers in Paul's Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 164–65; Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 76; Moore, "Personal and Cosmic Eschatology," 900; and O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 57.

⁶³ "The comprehensive scope of Christ's reign is strongly in view here [Eph. 1:10]; there is no part of the creation that will continue to work in open rebellion against Christ. His reign especially includes all principalities and powers" (Arnold, *Powers of Darkness*, 164).

⁶⁴ Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation*, 471–73; and Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 399.

⁶⁵ "With the fall of angels and humans, heaven and earth themselves sank to a level below that of their original state. The whole creation has been groaning and is experiencing the pains of childbirth. . . . Accordingly, as in the old covenant, the tabernacle and all its liturgical implements were sprinkled with blood (Exod 24:3–8; Heb 9:21), so Christ by his cross reconciled all things and acquired a new heaven and a new earth. The whole creation as one day it will stand perfect—without spot or wrinkle—in God's presence is the work of Christ, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Heb. 12:22–28)" (Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation*, 473).

⁶⁶ Moore, "Personal and Cosmic Eschatology," 912–16.

⁶⁷ For a description of this occurrence drawn from those two passages see Richard

people will dwell forever with God in His transformed place. All this will occur because all sin has been paid for, conquered, and vanquished by Christ's atonement, resulting in the reconciliation of all things. A day is coming when the entire universe, including those who are forever lost, will experience universal reconciliation.

CONCLUSION

As the concept of universal salvation becomes increasingly popular among Christians, it is necessary to explain exactly what the Scriptures mean when they refer to salvific ideas such as reconciliation in universal terms. Second Corinthians 5:18–21 and Colossians 1:19–20 do not limit the extent of reconciliation to believers, although these passages of Scripture are clear that only believers experience the reconciliation that results in a saving relationship with God. Unbelievers do not experience salvation, but instead await the time when they will be subdued by the overwhelming knowledge of God's glorious will and ways. They will spend eternity in a state of remorse, aware of God's rightful rule over His creation, but forever unwilling to repent of their sin and seek a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. The creation itself will also be reconciled, as it is cleansed from all the effects of sin and restored to a state where it can fully reflect the splendor of its Creator. This concept of the reconciliation of all things can rightly be referred to as universal reconciliation, in that everything in God's universe is put in its proper place by Christ's atonement for sin.

The concept of universal reconciliation has several implications that highlight the importance of this truth. First, it should create an even greater motivation for evangelism. God truly desires a relationship with all people, and He has sent Christ to accomplish reconciliation with humanity. Christians are the ambassadors of this great work of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:20).

Second, the idea of universal reconciliation presents a better way to think of an eternal hell. Those lost forever do not forever defiantly rebel against God's sovereign rule and peace, leaving sin as a "speck upon the infinite azure of eternity."⁶⁸ Instead those in hell vindicate God's honor and holiness as they agree with His

J. Mouw, *When the Kings Come Marching In: Isaiah and the New Jerusalem*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

⁶⁸ William G. T. Shedd, *The Doctrine of Endless Punishment* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1886; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1990), 159. See also Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:879; and Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1907), 1052.

righteous judgment.⁶⁹ This idea in no way diminishes the awful horror and tragedy of hell, but it does demonstrate how God vanquishes all sin.

Third, the idea of universal reconciliation offers assurance of Christ's cosmic victory over all sin. All creatures who challenge the sovereign grace of God have been defeated and pacified through Christ's atoning work, and believers can look forward to a day when God's peace will certainly triumph throughout the universe. One day, when all things are reconciled to Him through the blood of Christ and universal reconciliation has taken place, God will be all in all (1 Cor. 15:28).

⁶⁹ Blocher, "Everlasting Punishment and the Problem of Evil," 310.