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A P R I L

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BRIEF STUDIES

“RECONCILE,” 2 COR. 5:18-20

The word *reconcile* in 2 Cor. 5:18-20 had troubled me for a long time, and I gradually came to the conviction that “reconciling the world unto Himself” in this passage is a mistranslation.

When its object is a person, the verb *reconcile* in everyday English, it seems to me, is understood as meaning to cause a person to dismiss from his heart the enmity, the hatred, the dislike, he felt against a fellow man. When two persons are the object, reconciling them means to bring about that change in the heart of both. When, e. g., the pastor reconciles Mr. Smith and Mr. Jones, both give up their enmity against each other and become friendly to each other. It is therefore, strictly speaking, not in agreement with the facts when Charles Wesley and we with him sing that through the birth of the newborn King God and sinners are reconciled (Hymn 91:1). The world is as full of hatred against God today as it was in the time of Noah.—When it is said that John has been reconciled to George, the change was brought about in John, not in George; the sentence says nothing about the attitude of George; it says that John has forgiven George and is now kindly disposed towards him.

Therefore for a person who is not acquainted with the Christian doctrine the Authorized Version rendering of 2 Cor. 5:19 will mean that the world has been induced to give up its enmity against God (which, we know, is not the case, the carnal mind still being enmity against God); and one cannot blame that uninformed person if, when he gets to v. 20, he asks, Why does the Apostle in v. 20 appeal to his readers to be reconciled to God after having said in v. 19 that God *has* reconciled the world to Himself; that, therefore, all men *are* reconciled to God? Of course, we are ready to tell him, perhaps in the words of Francis Pieper, that the reconciliation of the world to God consists in a change of mind, not on the part of men, but on the part of God; that through the sacrifice of Christ, God’s wrath against the world is appeased; that through the active and passive obedience of Christ God is reconciled to men (*Christliche Dogmatik*, II. 409, 405, 410, 411). But can we blame that person if he replies, “That is not what 2 Cor. 5:19 says.” We must admit that he is right as far as the English version is concerned: The English version of this text

does not warrant the interpretation that God has been reconciled to men. By the way, neither does the German translation, "versoehnete die Welt mit ihm selber," as we have it in our German Bible, though I would not say the same of Luther's original translation "versuehnete die Welt mit ihm selber," which, I think, can be understood as meaning, "er leistete sich selber Suehne fuer die Welt."

But if "reconciling" is not a correct translation of *καταλλάσσω* in 2 Cor. 5:19, how shall we translate it? Thayer, after having stated that *καταλλάσσειν* means reconcile, says: "In the New Testament God is said *καταλλάσσειν* εαυτῷ τινα, to receive one into His favor, 2 Cor. 5:18 sq. . . . (where in the added participles two arguments are adduced that God has done this); *καταλλαγήναι* τῷ θεῷ, to be restored to the favor of God, to recover God's favor, Rom. 5:10." Accepting as correct the statement of Thayer (Fritzsche) that *καταλλάσσειν* and *διαλλάσσειν* are used promiscuously, we may add (Matt. 5:24) *διαλλάγηθι* τῷ ἀδελφῷ and translate: "Be restored to, regain the favor or friendship of thy brother." It is plain that not the person addressed in these words, but the "brother" "who hath ought against thee" (because he has been wronged or offended) needs to be reconciled or appeased.

Moreover, it will not do to take *καταλλάγητε* in v.20 (a passive form of *καταλλάσσειν*) in the sense attributed to it in the foregoing, which would give us, "Be received, or restored, to God's favor, or grace"; for if we did take it in this sense, we should have an admonition to do what according to v.19 has already been done. But there is nothing to prevent us from taking this passive form in the sense of reconcile and translate as the Authorized Version does: "Be reconciled." The translation suggested by Thayer: "Allow yourselves to be reconciled with God" is not identical with the simple passive, but we need not object to it. However, his version "Do not oppose your return into His favor" we must reject for the reason that we should have an admonition to permit what has already been done.

Perhaps there is another way of approaching the form *καταλλάγητε*. Have we in it, perhaps, what Kaegi calls a *Medial-Passivum*? In that case, I suppose, we should have to translate *καταλλάγητε* τῷ θεῷ "Reconcile yourselves to God." Either this translation or "Be reconciled to God" makes excellent sense. Having shown his readers the marvelous love bestowed upon them by God in restoring them to His grace through the sacrifice of His Son, not imputing their trespasses unto them, thus pardoning them, the Apostle appeals to them to desist from

enmity against God, which will follow spontaneously if they believe what he has told them about God.

Now, according to what has been said the Apostle uses the word *καταλλάσσειν* in two different meanings: (1) to reconcile and (2) to receive, or to restore, into favor, or grace (*restore* seems preferable to *receive*, as it gives us a more convenient and expressive noun for *καταλλαγῆ*, though, of course, *restore* would really be *ἀποκαταλλάσσειν* in Greek). But how is it possible that *καταλλάσσειν* should have both meanings? Well, this will not seem so impossible if we bear in mind the literal and basic meaning of this Greek verb, which, according to Thayer, is *to change*, according to Grimm, *permutare*, to change thoroughly. *καταλλάσσειν τινά τινι* literally means to change one's relation to another. But this general meaning usually assumes, according to circumstances indicated by the context, a specific significance, as words having a general meaning often do. If the object of *καταλλάσσειν* is a person who is angry with another because he has been wronged or offended by him, the verb acquires the meaning of changing his relations to the other in such a way that he forgives him, is friendly to him again, is reconciled to him. If, however, the object of *καταλλάσσειν* is a person who has wronged or offended another, the verb assumes the meaning of changing his relation to the other in such a way that he is again in favor or grace with the offended one.

Now, it seems to me that if we, retaining as much as possible the vocabulary of the Authorized Version, render the passage 2 Cor. 5:18-20 thus: "All things are of God, who hath restored us to His grace by Jesus Christ and hath given us the ministry of the restoration to grace, to wit, that God was in Christ, restoring the world to His grace, not imputing their trespasses unto them [thus pardoning them] and hath committed unto us the word of restoration to grace [perhaps the word of pardon]. Now, then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, Be ye reconciled to God," a considerable part of the difficulty of understanding this passage correctly has been removed.

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EDITORIAL NOTE: The same attention to detail manifested in this brief study characterized all the work of the late Rev. Forster as member of the Editorial Department of Concordia Publishing House. For years he faithfully served the church at large and CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY in particular by conscientiously "reading copy and proof" not only for typographical errors, but also for historical, exegetical, and dogmatical slips. The publication of this brief study is a small tribute to him and the "unsung" laborers whose work is performed in the obscurity and anonymity of the publisher's editorial chambers.

ἔγνω, 2 TIM. 2:19

In 2 Tim. 2:16-18 the Apostle addresses several admonitions to his beloved disciple which stress that teaching must be sound. He points to men whose doctrine was false and was going to spread like gangrene, among them Hymenaeus and Philetus, who denied that there would be a resurrection of the body. Apparently these men held that the resurrection of which Christ had frequently spoken occurs at the time when a person is converted, for then he enters upon a new life. That this is merely a part of Christ's teaching involving use of the term *resurrection*, they refused to see. Through this insidious error some people had lost their faith. But while these errorists constituted a real peril, Paul was not dismayed. Triumphantly he says, v. 19: "However, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal: 'The Lord did know (ἔγνω) those that are His,' and: 'Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.'"

The general meaning of this sentence is clear. The foundation of God (i. e., that which God has founded, the Church) will not be overthrown, the destructive work of the false teachers will not succeed; God's structure stands. Two things are said about this structure: God "knew" those who belong to Him and His Church, and these people have the characteristic as well as the obligation to depart from every form of wickedness, including doctrinal errors. It is not my intention to investigate all the details of this statement of the Apostle, but merely to examine the precise meaning of ἔγνω. The translations that I have examined all, like the A. V., render this aorist with the present tense, the R. S. V., Luther, Moffatt, Goodspeed, Knox (Roman Catholic), and the Twentieth Century New Testament. It is my opinion that the present tense is wrongly used here by the translators and that a different word from "know" should be employed. Let me present my arguments.

While Paul does not say that he is quoting, the words that he uses are found in the LXX rendering of Num. 16:5, where Moses is reported as saying: ἐπέσκεπται καὶ ἔγνω ὁ θεὸς τοὺς ὄντας αὐτοῦ καὶ τοὺς ἁγίους καὶ προσηγάγετο πρὸς ἑαυτόν. καὶ οὓς ἐξελέξατο ἑαυτῶ προσηγάγετο πρὸς ἑαυτόν. A fairly literal translation of these words reads: "God has looked down, and He 'knew' those that are His and the saints and brought them to Himself; yes, those whom He chose for Himself He brought to Himself." The story of the rebellion of Korah is told in this chapter of the book of Numbers. A group of people led by Korah was dissatisfied because Moses and Aaron exercised leadership; apparently they themselves desired to have the

positions at the head of Israel. Moses addressed the dissatisfied people and spoke the words given in v. 5. According to the Hebrew original, Moses points to the future. The A. V. gives a correct translation: "And he spake unto Korah and unto all his company saying: Even tomorrow the Lord will show who are His and who is holy and will cause him to come near unto Him, even him whom He hath chosen will He cause to come near unto Him." The LXX translators either had a different text (which is not likely), or they misunderstood the unpointed Hebrew. For our understanding of 2 Tim. 2:19 their mistranslation is not a vital matter. Paul merely employs Old Testament words that fittingly express what he wishes to say.

That the LXX translators thought that Moses referred to something in the past is evident from their rendering of v. 5. They use the aorist indicative a number of times. Now and then the Greek aorist translates a Hebrew perfect, and we in our English idiom use the present tense to give the meaning, but that is not the case in this instance because the Hebrew original contains a future, not the perfect tense. It might be thought that the aorist ἔγνω was intended by the translators to be the gnomic aorist, which in our idiom we usually render with the present. But that is impossible in this case; as mentioned before, v. 5 contains a number of aorists; the others are historic in meaning, and ἔγνω must belong to the same class, and hence we are not permitted to assume that the translators wished to express a general truth.

What, then, did they mean to express in the aorist ἔγνω? I think that Kittel's *Theologisches Woerterbuch zum Neuen Testament* (s. v. γινώσκω) is right when it in reference to this passage, where God is the subject of the statement, says that γινώσκω means *erwaehlen*, to choose, to elect. "Im Sinn von erwaehlen findet sich das Wort am deutlichsten 2 Tim. 2, 19 (= Num. 16, 5; vgl. auch Matth. 7, 23; aber auch 1 Kor. 8, 3; 13, 12; Gal. 4, 9)." W. Bauer in the *Preuschen-Bauer Dictionary* says that γινώσκω, if God is the subject, may mean "als zu sich gehoerig anerkennen, ausersehen, fast erwaehlen (Am. 3, 2; Hos. 12, 1); 1 Kor. 8, 3; Gal. 4, 9." (Bauer does not list 2 Tim. 2:19 among the passages where γινώσκω has this special meaning. He places it among those where the verb simply means "to know." It seems to me that he has not classified the passage correctly.)

One circumstance that shows that the LXX translators had the meaning "choose," "elect," in mind is that they use the word ἐξελέξατο in the parallel statement. What they think of is not merely intellectual knowledge, but a knowledge *cum affectu et effectu*, a knowledge

that included a loving apprehension of the person on whom God had fixed His eye. Passages where this meaning is demanded are those alluded to above, f. i., 1 Cor. 8:3; Gal. 4:9. These LXX translators, then, understood Moses to say that God had chosen those that were his, among whom were included Moses and Aaron.

The great question, of course, is: How does Paul wish ἔγνω to be taken? I should like to submit that the aorist compels us to agree with Kittel. To render: The Lord knew those that are His, brings us nowhere; it is a rather meaningless statement. God knew everything; a reference to His "past omniscience" pertaining to the Christians does not furnish consolation. But if we translate: "God elected those that are His," then we have a satisfying significance and, moreover, one that fits the context beautifully. What Paul says is: The Church will not be overthrown, God's children, those that are really His, in spite of the defection of some people, will not be carried away by soul-destroying error, for God has chosen them to be His own.

That ἔγνω should be given this rendering need not surprise anyone. Γινώσκω is a word that has an inchoative connotation; it means really: to come to know, *er-kennen*. But "come to know" indicates point action; it has a "punctiliar" significance. Hence, for the aorist a verb denoting this kind of action is the proper rendering, and we have it in "He chose," "He elected."

But why do the translations render the verb with the present tense? As a rule they do not tell us. Commentators, too, are strangely silent on this grammatical phenomenon. Robertson is one of the exceptions. In *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, IV, p. 620, he says that in our passage we have "the timeless aorist active indicative." He adds that here there is a quotation from Num. 16:5. Evidently he regards the aorist as being the so-called gnomic aorist. That must be the view of the translators too. The grammars, I must add, as far as I have been able to check, do not list this passage as containing this kind of aorist. It is well known that the aorist at times is used to express a general truth where we in English employ the present tense, a point briefly alluded to above. Instances of this kind are rare in the New Testament. They occur so seldom that Winer, as Robertson (disagreeing with him) states, holds there are no cases of the gnomic aorist in the New Testament (cf. *Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*², p. 836). Radermacher, as Robertson in the same connection remarks, likewise thinks that Hellenistic Greek was not hospitable to the gnomic aorist. Lenski properly contends for the view that ἔγνω is the historical aorist and that it points back to

eternity. He does not render it "elected," "chose," and hence does not go far enough in his explanation of the passage, but he agrees that 2 Tim. 2:19 should be placed into the same category as John 10:28. The old German commentator J. T. Beck, in *Erklaerung der zwei Briefe Pauli an Timotheus*, published 1879, p. 292, voices a view which is not far removed from the one I advocate: "ἐγνώ, cp. John 10:14 and Num. 16:5. It is a word of Moses in which over against the mob of Korah the separation between true and alleged servants of God is traced back to the divine γινώσκειν. But this is a real coming to know, which has the character of an actual calling and thus gets to be a selection, a holy separation, Amos 3:2; Rom. 11:2. For that reason the preterite tense [i. e., aorist. A.] is used quite suitably for the meaning of the Apostle: The Lord has recognized His own as such and made them manifest through electing them out of the world in an act that was as gracious as it was holy." With interest one notes that the Formula of Concord looks upon this passage as referring to Election. It speaks of the consolation given in the doctrine of election that we know that our salvation is not placed in our own hands, "but in the gracious election of God which He has revealed to us in Christ, out of whose hand no man shall pluck us, John 10:28; 2 Tim. 2:19" (*Trigl.*, 1039, 90). Viewed thus, this passage does not speak of the invisibility of the Church, but of its indestructibility and permanence.

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