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The New Testament Foundations of Peace and Reconciliation¹

Peter Balla

The apostle Paul begins all his letters by wishing ‘Grace and peace...’ upon his readers. In my home church, the Reformed Church in Hungary, we begin all our worship services with this apostolic greeting. The term ‘peace’ can summarise the main content of the message of the Bible: people can find peace with God only from the grace of God, on the basis of the death of Jesus Christ on the cross that has brought salvation for humanity. Peace among human beings is possible on this same basis. On the basis of some important texts in the New Testament, we shall see that reconciliation is initiated by God himself, who reconciled the world to himself (2 Cor. 5:19), and who gave us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18). Thus reconciliation first means reconciliation between God and human beings; and from this flows reconciliation among human beings. In this paper, I should like to present and discuss some key texts of the New Testament in which Jesus and his apostles call for peace and reconciliation.

It is a matter of course that there are more texts that could be referred to – I shall discuss here only a few that should be seen as representatives standing for the many others in the New Testament. I shall confine my chapter to some texts from the Gospels, from the Pauline Epistles and from the First Epistle of John (with a short reference to the Letter to the Hebrews at the end).

1 I thank the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation for their support that enabled me to carry out research at the University of Heidelberg between 17 July and 15 August, 2010. I was able to work on this essay during that research visit.

Eirēnē and its related terms – ‘peace’ in the New Testament

The key Greek concept of peace in the New Testament is *eirēnē* and its related terms. Jesus calls his disciples to be ‘peacemakers’ in the Sermon on the Mount. This term, *eirēnopoioi* (Mt. 5:9), is a composite of two stems: *eirēnē* – ‘peace’, and *poieō* – ‘to make, to create’. In Matthew 5:9 (NRSV) we read:² ‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God’. Although this saying does not appear in the Gospel of Luke (see Luke 6, the Sermon on the Plain), so we may call it the special material (*‘Sondergut’*) of Matthew, I accept it as an authentic saying of Jesus. I agree with Richard France who argues: ‘In view of the many Old Testament precedents, there is no improbability in Jesus’ use of the beatitude form on separate occasions and with different emphases’.³ The Sermon on the Mount is a very significant collection of the sayings of Jesus – we can find in it most of the important themes of his teaching. The Beatitudes at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount contain the key message of Jesus – the very position of the Beatitudes highlights their significance: Jesus tells his disciples how different his Kingdom is from the expectations of the surrounding world. The Son of God tells his disciples what he expects from those who are – for his sake, on the basis of his work of salvation – the ‘sons’ of God. We note that in the Greek the term for ‘children’ is *huyioi*, which literally means: ‘sons’. The sons of God follow their Master: they bring peace into the world. They bear witness to the Son of God, who has brought peace into the world.

This saying in the Sermon on the Mount is in harmony with two other sayings of Jesus, reported in two other Gospels. In Mark 9:50 we read: ‘Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another’. The two parts of this saying are connected by ‘and’ (*kai*), but this connecting particle may have various meanings. As Richard France puts it: ‘The good salt which should characterise disciples

2 In this paper I shall quote the Bible from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America), unless otherwise stated.

3 R. T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985, reprinted 1990), p. 108.

consists in (*kai* used epexegetically) or results in (*kai* of consequence) peaceful relationships'.⁴ In John 14:27 the following saying of Jesus is reported: 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid'. This means that Jesus is the source of peace among human beings. As Donald Carson has affirmed: 'The world promises peace and waves the flag of peace as a greeting; it cannot give it. But Jesus displays transcendent peace, his own peace'.⁵ Only Jesus can grant the disciples peace; that is why he can expect his followers to bring this same message into the world and to work on the peace of the world.

Jesus brings peace into the world because he is the 'Son' of such a God, who himself is a God of peace. This expression, a genitive construction in the Greek language (*theos tes eirēnēs*), appears several times in the letters of the apostle Paul. The genitive can express source: God is the source of peace. The genitive can also have an adjectival, attributive sense – in this case this would mean that God is characterised by peace; peace is his attribute. Some examples of this usage in the Pauline epistles are: Romans 15:33: 'The God of peace be with all of you'; Rom. 16:20: 'The God of peace will shortly crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you'; 1 Cor. 14:33: 'for God is a God not of disorder but of peace'; 2 Cor. 13:11: 'Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you'.⁶ In this latter example we note that the same genitival structure has a further element: God is the God 'of love' (*agapēs*) as well as the God of peace. Peace is called for in this same verse by a verb: 'live in peace', in Greek a plural imperative of *eirēneuō*: *eirēneuete*.

Philippians 4:7-9 is an exhortation to the Philippian Christians.

4 R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Milton Keynes: The Paternoster Press, 2002), p. 385.

5 D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), p. 506.

6 For a discussion of New Testament texts containing the term *eirēnē*, see the relevant section by Werner Foerster in the TDNT article on *eirēnē* and related terms, TDNT2 (1964, third printing: 1968), pp. 411-17.

In this passage we find both the expression ‘the peace of God’ and ‘the God of peace’. These verses read:

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (8) Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. (9) Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

In these verses the apostle Paul calls his readers to live in accordance with what had been transmitted to them in the Christian tradition – but he also points out that it will be ‘the peace of God’ that will make them capable of leading such a life. If they do think and live according to what they have learned from the apostle, then they have a promise as well: ‘the God of peace’ will be with them. As Moisés Silva has put it: ‘It is not only the peace of God but the God of peace himself who will overshadow us with his care. Yet that promise is conditioned by the command to lead obedient lives.’⁷ (For further examples of the expression, ‘the God of peace’, see 1 Thess. 5:23; Heb. 13:20.)

Peace is a gift of God who brings salvation to mankind. In Romans 5, we can see that God’s justifying work precedes the peace between God and human beings. In verse 1 we read: ‘Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ’. Thomas Schreiner has pointed to the close connection between the two notions: ‘The first result of justification is peace’.⁸ The same idea is expressed in Colossians 1:20: ‘and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross’. In this verse Paul points to the ‘cross’ and Jesus’ ‘blood’

⁷ Moisés Silva, *Philippians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 1992, second edn 2005, second printing 2007), p. 198.

⁸ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1998), p. 253.

as the place where ‘peace’ was achieved by God: God ‘has made peace’ – in Greek this is expressed in one word: *eirēnopoiesas* (the aorist participle of *eirēnopoieō*).⁹

Peace as God’s gift becomes a task for God’s children: they have to bring peace into human relationships as well. Romans 12:18 is an example of this expectation: ‘If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all’. The ‘all’ in the Greek text is expressed by *meta pantōn anthrōpōn*: ‘with all human beings’. This includes our neighbours and neighbouring nations as well. Christians should understand this call today also in this way: we have to seek peace with all the nations around our country. It is a matter of course that peace-seeking does not mean abandoning Christian commitments. ‘If it is possible’ in this context is rightly explained by Schreiner by the following comment: ‘One cannot violate the truth of the gospel and devotion to Christ in order to make peace with those who resist the truth’.¹⁰

The Christian congregation can extend a peaceable hand to others, because Christians begin peace-making among themselves, as it is written in 1 Thess. 5:12-13: ‘But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labour among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; (13) esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves [*eirēnēnete en heautois*]’. Concerning the last clause of these verses, F. F. Bruce argues that it ‘probably goes back to Jesus’ admonition to his disciples’ reported in Mk 9:50 (‘be at peace with one another’ – as seen above).¹¹ This last clause is in relation to the preceding thoughts: Paul calls for peace among the leaders and members of the congregation. Leon Morris has correctly observed: ‘He [Paul] does not say “be

⁹ I note that Colossians is regarded as ‘Deutero-Pauline’ by many contemporary commentators. Without entering this debate, I point to James Dunn’s evaluation of verse 20 (concerning the possibilities that Paul or his ‘close disciple’ has formulated it): ‘Either way we can hardly avoid the adjective “Pauline” in describing the theology expressed’; see James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Carlisle: The Paternoster Press, 1996), p. 104.

¹⁰ Schreiner, *Romans*, p. 673

¹¹ F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Waco, Texas: Word Publishing, 1982, First British Edition 1986), p. 118. Here Bruce also notes that the clause expresses ‘a common Christian exhortation’.

at peace with them,” which would savor of calling on the church members to subject themselves to their leaders, but “Live in peace with each other,” which makes the injunction equally binding on leaders and followers. Both are to keep the peace’.¹² Colossians 1:20, a verse mentioned above, leads us to our next main point, because in it Paul also uses the word ‘to reconcile’ (*apokatallaxai*).

***Katallagē* and its related terms – ‘reconciliation’ in the New Testament**

We have seen that it is God who brings peace into the world; and his children, the Christian community, have to answer this gift of God by living in peace with one another and with their neighbours. This double aspect is present also in the notion of reconciliation. In the New Testament occurrences of the term *katallagē* (and of verbal forms related to this noun), it is clear that God has reconciled the world to himself, and our work toward reconciliation is our answer to God’s grace, our answer to God’s gift of reconciliation. Human beings have become enemies of God because of their sin; they deserve God’s anger and punishment, but it is not they who initiate reconciliation: it is God, who has provided for a solution for humankind that has alienated itself from God. This active part on God’s side in the work of reconciliation is beautifully expressed in 2 Cor. 5:18-20:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; (19) that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. (20) So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

Romans 5:10-11 points to Jesus’ death as the place where reconciliation between God and human beings has been achieved: ‘For if while

¹² Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Revised Edition 1991), p. 168.

we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. (11) But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation'. Friedrich Büchsel has rightly emphasised in a thorough dictionary article on *allassō* (and words related to it, like *katallagē*, *katallassō*):

God reconciles us or the world to Himself in 2 C. 5:18f. He is not reconciled. Nor does He reconcile Himself to us or to the world. On the other hand, we are reconciled to God in R. 5:10, or reconcile ourselves to Him in 2 C. 5:20. Thus God and man are not on equal terms in relation to reconciliation. Reconciliation is not reciprocal in the sense that both equally become friends where they were enemies. The supremacy of God over man is maintained in every respect.¹³

To have received reconciliation involves a task, indeed, a ministry: 'the ministry of reconciliation': to bring to the world 'the message of reconciliation' – as we have seen in the Corinthian passage above. Reconciliation is a gift of God – planned by him as part of the history of salvation. In Romans 11, in a passage that points to God's mysterious plans, we read (Rom. 11:13-16):

Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I glorify my ministry (14) in order to make my own people jealous, and thus save some of them. (15) For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead! (16) If the part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; and if the root is holy, then the branches also are holy.

Here, in verse 15, 'the reconciliation of the world' (*katallagē kosmou*) refers to the salvation offered by God to Gentiles (i.e. Christians of Gentile origin); and this makes Paul's own people, the Jews 'jealous' so that they will also accept God's salvation, they will enjoy

¹³ See the relevant section by Friedrich Büchsel in the *TDNT* article on *allassō* and related terms, *TDNT* 1 (1964, third printing: 1968), quotation at p. 255.

‘acceptance’ by God. As Schreiner has put it, ‘The participation of the Gentiles in the promises made to Israel is designed to provoke Israel to jealousy’.¹⁴

In the passages above, the verb *katallassō* was used in the active voice when its subject was God: God reconciled the world to himself; and it was used in the passive voice when it referred to human beings who were reconciled to God. The same verb also appears in a compound form: *apokatallassō*. This Greek word (perhaps first introduced by the apostle Paul in early Christianity)¹⁵ also means ‘to reconcile’, and it is used with God as its subject in two important passages. These passages appear in the letters to the Ephesians and to the Colossians – letters that are referred to as ‘Deutero-Pauline’ by many New Testament scholars. In this paper we do not have space to go into detail, so I simply affirm that with many scholars I do regard these epistles, too, as authentic Pauline letters.

The first appearance of the term *apokatallassō* is in Ephesians; I quote the relevant verse in its context (2:14-18):

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. (15) He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, (16) and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. (17) So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; (18) for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.

It is significant that in verse 14 Jesus is called ‘our peace’ (*hē eirēnē hēmōn*). Jesus is ‘making peace’ (*poiōn eirēnēn*) in as much as he has created ‘one new man/humanity’ from Gentile and Jewish Christians

14 Schreiner, *Romans*, p. 594.

15 This possibility is kept as open question by Stanley E. Porter, who has surveyed all the relevant literature in antiquity in his monograph: *Katallassō in Ancient Greek Literature, with Reference to the Pauline Writings* (Cordoba: Ediciones el Almendro, 1994), see especially pp. 163 and 189. See also Büchsel on *allassō* and related terms in TDNT, p. 258: ‘Since it [*apokatallassō*] is never found prior to Paul, it is perhaps coined by him’.

(v. 15). Jesus did this in order that ‘he might reconcile [*apokatallaxē*] both groups to God’. It is important that here the verb is in the active voice, and its subject is Jesus: it is Jesus who reconciles man to God. We may note that in this passage, too, there is a reference to a central point in salvation history: God’s new people is one people, in which Christians of Gentile origin and Christians of Jewish origin live as God’s one new ‘man’, as God’s one people. The Christian community is able to testify to God’s reconciling work because the Christian community lives in peaceful, reconciled unity between Gentile and Jewish Christians. Frank Thielman has rightly emphasised the importance of the repetition of the word ‘one’ in this section: ‘Here too, then, his [i.e. Paul’s] focus is on the unity of Jews and Gentiles. They are one just as the Spirit is one, and in this Spirit-effected unity they come to God, an approach made possible by the death of Christ’.¹⁶

A similar idea occurs in Col. 1:20, a verse we have already quoted, because the term *eirēnopoiesas* also occurs in it. This verse is the end of a beautiful Christ-hymn – may we quote but the end of it (Col. 1:18-20):

He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. (19) For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, (20) and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Although in the Greek text only the term ‘fullness’ (*pan to plērōma*) is used, the expression clearly refers to God, so the English translation appropriately adds ‘God’ as the subject: ‘God was pleased to reconcile [*apokatallaxai*] to himself all things’. We can agree with the result of Porter’s detailed argumentation: ‘God is the agent of reconciliation in v. 20. On the basis of *pan to plērōma* being personified, it is appropriate to understand God as the unstated subject of *apokatallaxai* and the understood personal agent

¹⁶ Frank Thielman, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2010), p. 175.

responsible for *eirēnopoiesas*.¹⁷

An important passage in the Sermon on the Mount uses a related term, too, where Jesus teaches about reconciliation among human beings. In Matthew 5:21-26 we read in the words of Jesus:

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgement.’ (22) But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool’, you will be liable to the hell of fire. (23) So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, (24) leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. (25) Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. (26) Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

Here in verse 24 the Greek text has a compound verb with the same root as *katallassō*; it is a slightly different verb, but with the same meaning, ‘to reconcile’: *diállassō* (or deponent *diállassomai*). The verb occurs in the passive aorist imperative, *diállagēthi tō adelphō sou*, ‘be reconciled to your brother’. This passage appears among the so-called ‘antitheses’ in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus as sovereign Lord expositis a commandment from the Ten Commandments. He warns his followers that it is not enough not to take away the life of others, but that we should not even be angry with them. He goes even farther and says that we have to be alert to situations when other people may ‘have something against’ us; in this case reconciliation has to precede even the act of worship: we can only approach God if we made peace with our fellow human beings beforehand. As France has put it, ‘If God will punish anger, we cannot worship him with grudges unsettled’.¹⁸ In this case, we have to be active: we have to initiate reconciliation with our ‘brothers and sisters’ (as the NRSV

17 Porter, *Katallassō*, p. 176.

18 France, *Matthew*, p. 120.

translation puts it; in the Greek text we have the masculine *adelphos*, ‘brother’, which in the masculine plural can include both men and women). It is not stated explicitly in this passage, but we may add that our task to work for peace and reconciliation is based on God’s prior work and gifts: the Sermon on the Mount begins with the Beatitudes. Jesus calls his followers ‘blessed’ – they are blessed from God’s mercy, from his free gift. Those who are ‘the sons of God’ can be peacemakers (as we have seen above in Mt. 5:9); and they can be active in seeking reconciliation with their brothers and sisters even before they ‘offer their gift at the altar’.

***Hilasmos* – ‘expiation, propitiation’**

Finally, I should like to mention briefly another term, which shows the grounds of reconciliation. The cultic term of ‘expiation’ (*hilasmos* and related terms) leads us to God who has provided for the expiation and propitiation for our sins and for the sins of the world in Jesus. In 1 John 2:1-2 we read the words of the aged apostle John:

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; (2) and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

Here the Greek term for ‘atoning sacrifice’ is *hilasmos*, which may refer to both expiation and propitiation. The same term is used in 1 John 4:10, where Jesus is explicitly called the ‘Son’ of God: ‘In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins’. I agree with the interpretation of the term offered by Robert Yarbrough: ‘While Jesus’s death certainly has the effect of expiating sin (wiping away its penalty), it is difficult to avoid the impression that it also propitiates (turns away the wrath of) God’s promised punishment of sin and sinners whose transgressions are not atoned for on the last day’.¹⁹

¹⁹ Robert W. Yarbrough, *1-3 John* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 78.

We may add a reference to the passage that we just discussed above the Sermon on the Mount: we do not have to offer sacrifices any longer, because the one and only Son of God has sacrificed himself for our sins. This is beautifully expressed also in the Letter to the Hebrews, where in chapter 2, verse 17 we read about Jesus as our high priest: 'Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people'. In this verse the infinitive of the verbal form is used: 'to make a sacrifice of atonement', *eis to hilaskesthai*, 'for the sins of the people', *tas hamartias tou laou*.

In conclusion, we may affirm that peace and reconciliation are among the most important themes of the theology of the New Testament. Accordingly, these terms – and their message – have to remain central in Christian ethics today.