

# “This Ministry of Reconciliation”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, North Carolina

September 16, 2007

**Text: “All this is from God, who reconciled us himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (II Corinthians 5:18).**

A number of years ago, when I was a graduate student at the University of Heidelberg in Germany, I had the opportunity to visit a number of cities in what was then West Germany. One of the most memorable to me was a visit to the city of Berlin. In those days, Berlin was divided by the Berlin Wall. It divided West Germany from the Soviet-dominated country of East Germany. “Checkpoint Charlie” was the name of the station that allowed Americans to view East Berlin and to enter that city, which was still devastated and unreconstructed since World War II. I remember climbing the stairs to the guard tower there and being surrounded by heavily armed American soldiers. As you looked out the glass windows, you could see the guard towers of the East German soldiers, who were only several hundred yards away and you could see the weapons in their soldier’s hands, which were pointed at us, and any unauthorized person who crossed from East to West could be shot in an instant.

## I.

When the New Testament speaks of the reconciling work of Jesus Christ, it speaks of Christ as one who broke down the walls that separate people from each other. The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the church at Ephesus, speaks of the ministry and death of Jesus in this fashion. He says of Jesus that “he has broken down the dividing walls of hostility, that he might create in himself one new man in the place of two” (Ephesians 2:14-15).

As we look at the world around us, we are painfully aware of the walls that separate us: the wall being built in Israel to separate Jews from Palestinians; the walls of sectarian violence in Iraq that separate Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds.

There are walls of separation in this country as well, walls that separate people who are black, white, and brown from each other. There are cultural walls, economic walls, and religious walls.

In the passage from which I read this morning, the Apostle Paul speaks of the ministry of reconciliation that has been given to us. That ministry is the heart of everything we do in the church and it is the life force that informs and supports the entire work of the church. Paul Tillich in his book *The Shaking of the Foundations* observes that the words “sin” and “grace” are two of the most difficult words of our faith to understand. Often they have been misused; often they have been misunderstood. And yet it is impossible to describe the Christian gospel without these two words, for they unlock for us the meaning of reconciliation.

## II.

So what do we mean by sin? Throughout the centuries the church has spoken of “sin” in many ways. The Shorter Catechism speaks of sin as “a want of conformity or transgression of the will of God,” which is to say, it embraces both the things we do and do not do. Theologians have spoken of sin as pride, as the human tendency to assume the role of God. In Paul Tillich’s famous sermon “You are Accepted,” he speaks of sin not so much as an act but as a condition. It is a state of separation.

First of all, we are separated from God. Most of us, if we are honest, know that there are times in our life when we feel a deep sense of guilt from what we are and pretend to be, from what we know we should be. Our lives are often filled with a sense of emptiness, guilt, and lack of purpose.

Several years ago a prominent Psychiatrist, Karl Menninger, published a remarkable book he entitled “Whatever Became of Sin?” In that book he stated that as a doctor, he treated a lot of people who identified things that were wrong with them. They were confused, depressed, anxious, and often suffered from irrational and delusional thoughts, but few of them could make any connection between their notions of guilt and shame and the fact that some of this was the product of the great separation that divided them from their creator. This is the most fundamental and damaging separation that we all face.

Second, we are separated from other people. Who of us has not had the experience of being in a crowd of people and yet feeling strangely alone? One of the greatest sadnesses that any of us face is the enmity that often occurs in families: wives who hate husbands, husbands who hate wives, children and parents who cannot get along.

There is often the enmity that we face even among our friends. The famous author Truman Capote once was quoted as saying, “every time a friend succeeds I die a little.”

Then too, there is the separation that occurs among groups. Reinhold Niebuhr once published a book he entitled “Moral Man and Immoral Society” in which he made the point that, whereas individuals often can be very moral, groups of people can often be very immoral. Sometimes a group of people will discriminate against individuals in ways that individuals would never do. It may be easy for us to denounce the anti-Semitism of Nazi Germany or the

lynch mobs of the South in the days of slavery, but most of us can go to bed at night without too much worry that over half the children in the world will go hungry today.

A third separation is the separation that we experience within ourselves. Karl Menninger once wrote a book he entitled “Man Against Himself,” in which he described the kind of self-hatred that is often exhibited in people. Part of the great separation that we experience is this contempt we have for ourselves. The person who cannot love himself cannot love another. But the depth of our separation is not just that we are incapable of loving ourselves. On the contrary, in each of us there is an instinct of self-destruction, which often is as strong as our instinct of self-preservation. Long before the advent of modern psychology, the Apostle Paul eloquently expressed this terrible tension within us. “For I do not do the good I desire,” writes the Apostle, “but rather the evil that I do not wish to do. It is not I who do it,” he went on to say, “But sin that dwells in me.”

### III.

But if sin is the great separation that exists between us and our creator, between our fellow human beings and within ourselves, then grace is the acceptance of that which is rejected. The Apostle Paul put it this way: “Where sin abounds,” he wrote, “Grace abounds even more.” I believe he wrote these words not just to be sentimental or even to try to put a happy ending to a sad story. I believe he wrote these words because they describe the most powerful and overwhelming experience in his life, his encounter with Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus. In his encounter with Christ, he found himself accepted in spite of being rejected. He found himself, for the first time, able to believe that God loved him, able to love himself, and able to love others as well.

Do we know what it means to be “struck by grace?” It does not mean that we believe that God exists, or that Jesus was the Christ, or that the Bible is the word of God.

Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when our disgust for our own self, our indifference, our weakness, and our lack of direction seem intolerable to us. It strikes us when year after year the longed for perfection that we seek in our lives does not appear, and when the old compulsions reign within us.

It strikes us when, in a moment of darkness, we hear a word that says to us, “You are accepted. You are accepted by that which is greater than you, the name of which you do not know.” When that happens to us, we may not be better than before. We may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed. In that moment, grace conquers sin, and reconciliation bridges the gulf of estrangement.

Frederick Buechner, in his book “The Sacred Journey,” tells of such a transforming journey. He was a young man who had just graduated from Princeton University and who was living in New York. By coincidence really, he happened to attend the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church. The minister of that church was a man by the name of George Buttrick.

Buechner recalls that during a worship service something very remarkable happened to him that was a transforming experience. Listen to how he describes it:

“Something in me recoils from using such language, but here at the end I am left with no other way of saying it than that what I found finally was Christ. Or was found. It hardly seems to matter which. There are other ways of describing what happened to me—psychological words, historical words, poetic words—but in honesty as well as in faith I am reduced to the word that is his name because no other seems to account for the experience so fully.”

The Christian faith stands or falls on our ability to state as clearly and unambiguously as we can, that this is the heart of the matter. God has done for us in Jesus Christ what we cannot do for ourselves. Christ has borne on his body our sins. He has died that we might live. Paul puts it like this: “If anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation. The old has passed away. The new has come.”

That is the gospel we proclaim and it is the basis of this ministry of reconciliation in which we share at First Presbyterian Church. Now, if there is someone who wonders what all of this has to do with Stewardship, let me reply by simply saying, “It has everything in the world to do with Stewardship.” As each of us is asked to make a pledge to the Operating Budget of this church, we are being asked to insure that the ministry of this church continues in its strength. Giving to the church is not the same as giving to the United Way, to the Arts and Science Council, and to many other worthwhile causes in this city.

Giving to the church ensures that this gospel of reconciliation is preached and practiced in this church. Today, we are living in a time of unprecedented decline of the mainline churches. Jim Miller recently shared with me that in 1970 the Church of Scotland had 3 million members. Today it has 500,000.

There is nothing more critical for us than the mission and witness of this church remain strong. We are a vital, growing, and dynamic church in the heart of a great city.

We must be faithful to the gifts that God has bestowed on us. Therefore I challenge you to give faithfully to this church that the Gospel of Christ be proclaimed and that this ministry of reconciliation remains strong.

Amen!