

# Reconciled through Death: The Efficacy and Particularity of Reconciliation

Selected Scriptures

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## Introduction

Well, we return once again to our sermon series on the atonement of Christ, which I've entitled, *O Perfect Redemption!*, borrowing from the lyrics of that great hymn, "To God Be the Glory." And we have been asking the question, "Given that Christ's atonement was a perfect redemption—that there is not the least imperfection or failure in the work of Christ on the cross—what can we conclude about that controversial question of the extent of the atonement: "For whom did Christ die?" And our answer has been that a perfect redemption must be a particular redemption. And why is that? Because if the divine design of the atonement is, as 1 Timothy 1:15 says, actually "to save sinners," and if, as Job 42:2 says, "No purpose of [God's] can be thwarted," then everyone for whom Christ died must be saved. An atonement of unlimited power and perfect efficacy must necessarily be limited in extent to those who actually enjoy its benefits, to those who are actually saved by it. And who are they? Only those whom the Father chose in eternity past, to whom the Holy Spirit eventually regenerates and grants saving faith.

And so far in this series, we've had two messages on the design of the atonement—showing how the Triune God's intention for the atonement is exclusively salvific, and therefore points to a particular redemption. And then, in our last two messages, we've begun discussing the nature of the atonement. And we've said that it is most fundamentally a work of penal substitution: Christ pays the penalty for our sins by becoming a substitute for us. But then we observed that Scripture characterizes this penal substitutionary atonement according to **four key motifs**: expiation, propitiation, reconciliation, and redemption. And the argument has been that, given how Scripture defines each of these designations for the atonement, we are right to conclude that the **nature** of the atonement is perfectly efficacious.

We've seen that Christ's atonement was an **expiatory sacrifice**—an offering to God that really does take away our sin and our guilt. As the fulfillment of the Passover and the Day of Atonement, Hebrews 9:26 says that, "now once at the consummation of the ages He"—that is, Jesus, our Great High Priest—"has been manifested to *put away sin* by the **sacrifice** of Himself." This is what the cross, as an expiatory sacrifice, has accomplished. It didn't make sin put-away-able. It put away sin! And that means He did not put away the sin of those who bear their own sins and perish under the weight of them for eternity in hell. He didn't put away the sins of those whose sins are not actually put away. No, Isaiah 53:12: "He Himself *bore* the sin of *many*."

And then, last time, we saw that Christ's atonement was a **propitiatory sacrifice** as well. And as we dug into Scripture we found out that propitiation means: the efficacious satisfaction of divine wrath. Because God is holy, His response to human sin is to be justly stirred to holy anger. His holiness constrains Him to hate all unholiness. And because God is righteous, He must exercise that wrath against sin! He must punish sin wherever He finds it. And so if we're going to be saved, we need God's wrath against us to be appeased, to be satisfied, to be extinguished by some just means of satisfaction. And the atoning death of Christ is that very propitiation, Romans 3:24–25: “[We] are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a **propitiation** by his blood, to be received by faith.” You see, by receiving in Himself the full exercise of the Father's wrath against the sins of His people, the Lord Jesus Christ satisfied the Father's righteous anger against sin. And in doing so, He turned away God's wrath from us who, were it not for our Substitute, were bound to suffer under that wrath for ourselves.

And the point was: if Jesus' death is a propitiation—if the atonement turns away wrath for those for whom it is accomplished—then God's wrath against those sinners Jesus died for is extinguished forever. For that wrath ever to be roused again would mean that the propitiation Christ made was insufficient to satisfy the demands of God's justice. But that is unthinkable! The Father was perfectly pleased by the sacrifice of the Son! And so there is no wrath left for God to execute upon those for whom Christ has died as a propitiation. And since we know that many do suffer the wrath of God for their sins, it becomes plain that Jesus was not their propitiation. No, as the Great High Priest of the New Covenant, Hebrews 2:17, He made propitiation for the sins of the people—the people of God, His brethren, the children whom the Father had given Him.

### **Reconciliation**

But man's sin has not only incurred guilt and aroused God's wrath. That genuine guilt and that impending wrath has effected and become the ground of an enmity and hostility between God and man. And this alienation is pictured vividly throughout Scripture. In Genesis 3:8, after Adam and Eve have sinned, the text says, “They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife *hid themselves* from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.” That is one of the saddest verses in all the Bible. The word for “presence” in Genesis 3:8 is literally the word *face*. It seems that it was a regular occurrence for the holy presence of God to be moving about in the Garden—that it would have been normal for God to have face-to-face communion with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day. They would hear the sound of God walking in the garden and would say, “Is Yahweh coming? Is now time for more face-to-face fellowship with our loving and bountiful Creator? Amen! “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; when shall I come and appear before God?” (Ps 42:2).

And yet after they sinned, instead of that *joyful, eager* anticipation, their immediate instinct was to *hide* themselves from the Delight of their eyes—to *avoid* fellowship with the source of all satisfaction! Sin had *alienated* God from man. And eventually, they were driven *out* of Eden, *expelled* from the Paradise of God’s holy presence, which was guarded by angels wielding a flaming sword (Gen 3:24).

Sin separates man from God. The prophet Isaiah comments on this broken relationship when he says in chapter 59 verse 2 of his prophecy: “Your iniquities have made a *separation* between you and your God, and your sins have *hidden his face* from you so that he does not hear [you].” We who were created for intimate friendship with our Creator have become His enemies. Romans 5:10 describes our natural state of sinfulness as enemies. Colossians 1:21 says that we are alienated from God, hostile in mind, and engaged in evil deeds. And in Romans 8:7, Paul says, “The mind set on the flesh”—which is to say the fleshly human mind in its natural state—“is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” What a miserable condition! Man’s sin is in mortal conflict with God’s holy justice. And the result is that man is not only hostile toward God, but God is also hostile against man. His wrath abides on those who by nature are children of wrath (John 3:36; Eph 2:3), and it will break over them unless the ground of that righteous hostility is done away with.

And it is precisely here, in the depth of our need, that the perfect redemption of Christ meets us with saving power. Scripture does not only describe the atonement as an expiatory sacrifice that takes away sin and guilt. It does not only describe the atonement as a propitiation that satisfies God’s righteous wrath against us. But even because of those realities, Scripture also characterizes the atonement as a work of **reconciliation**, whereby the ground of the enmity and hostility and alienation between God and man is removed, and peace is accomplished. By His propitiatory sacrifice, Christ does away with the ground of the enmity between God and men—the guilt of sin and the wrath of God—and overcomes that alienation by accomplishing peace in its place. As Paul says in Colossians 1:21–22, “And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet He has now **reconciled** you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach.” The verse just before that, Colossians 1:20 says that He has “made peace through the blood of His cross.”

And in a real sense, **reconciliation** is the most ultimate way to speak of Christ’s perfect redemption, because it accomplishes the ground of the peace with God that Romans 5:1 says we enjoy through our justification. Because of Christ’s atonement, we who were separated from the God we were created to know and worship will be restored to loving fellowship with Him. First Peter 3:18 says, “Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous”—so there is the judicial reality of the cross: Christ pays the penalty of our sin as our Substitute. But

then the next phrase tells us the “why” of the atonement: “Christ died once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, so that He might bring us to God.” That’s what salvation is about! That’s the goal! Restoring us to the all-satisfying, unspeakably glorious, consummately delightful God that our sin cut us off from! Propitiation, redemption, justification, forgiveness, freedom from punishment—all of those glorious doctrines just get stuff out of the way so that we can get to Him. So that we can have access to the Father, Ephesians 2:18 says—in whose presence, says David, is fullness of joy, and in whose right hand are pleasures forevermore (Ps 16:11).

You see, what makes the Gospel good news is not simply that our sins are forgiven, or that we get out of hell, that we don’t feel guilty anymore, or that we get to see our friends and family in heaven. The bottom of why the Gospel is good news is because it **reconciles** us to the God who makes heaven *heaven*. Our sin had cut us off from Him—this magnificent treasure, this ocean of delight. And the cross of Christ overcomes the alienation and hostility that exists between us and God, and purchases the **reconciliation** that brings us back to Him.

And so reconciliation is a treasure. It is another glorious facet in the brilliant diamond of the atonement that merits our contemplation. And so this morning we will study the atonement as a **reconciliation**. And like we’ve been doing, we’ll undertake that study in two broad parts: **nature** and **extent**. First, we’ll examine the **nature** of reconciliation from Scripture—how it is the effectual work of God through the cross of Christ whereby He removes the ground of the enmity or hostility between God and man, namely, sin. And when man receives this work of reconciliation, our relationship to God is transformed from alienation to communion and fellowship. And then, secondly, in light of what the Bible says reconciliation is, we’ll examine the **extent** of reconciliation, and see how, like expiation and propitiation, reconciliation is also particular—limited to the elect alone.

## **I. The Nature of Reconciliation**

First, then, let’s look at the **nature** of reconciliation. There are at least three key passages in the New Testament that define the doctrine of reconciliation for us. We read one of them just a moment ago: Colossians 1:20–22. Another is Romans 5:10–11, where Paul says, “For if while 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. And not only this, but we also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation.” And 2 Corinthians 5:18–19 is another. There, Paul writes, “Now all these things are from God, 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.” And then there is also a passage in Ephesians 2, where Paul speaks of Christ reconciling both Jews and Gentiles “in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to

you who were far away, and peace to those who were near; for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father.”

Now, from these passages, we can observe at least **three characteristics** of the biblical doctrine of the atonement as reconciliation. Number one, it is evident that reconciliation is a **work of God, not man**. Reconciliation is a work of God accomplished in Christ through the efficacy of His atoning death. Consider how consistently in these verses God is named as the subject of the action of reconciliation. Second Corinthians 5:18: “Now all these things are from *God*, who reconciled us to Himself.” The next verse, 5:19: “*God* was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.” Colossians 1:22: “Although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet *He* has now reconciled *you*.” God is the subject of those sentences, not man. And man is the object in those sentences, not God.

This means that sinful human beings do not undertake to achieve reconciliation with God. Everywhere Scripture speaks of reconciliation, God is the active reconciler, and man passively receives reconciliation from God. Romans 5:10: “While we were enemies,”—continuing in open rebellion against God, persisting in hostility against God—“we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son.” That’s the passive voice, which means the action is done to us, not performed by us. And the next verse, Romans 5:11, says, “through [Christ] we have now received the reconciliation.” And so this ought to be plain: reconciliation is a work of God, not man. Man does not accomplish reconciliation. Man does not even cooperate with God to bring about reconciliation. Reconciliation is what man receives as a gift of sovereign grace from an unspeakably merciful and longsuffering God.

A second characteristic of reconciliation that we observe from these texts is that it is a **finished work of Christ on the cross**. And this is really important for us to understand, because it’s not quite what we think of when we speak of reconciliation. As we said before, there is mutual alienation between God and man. And so when we say that reconciliation between God and man was accomplished on the cross, it sounds like we’re saying, “Everyone for whom Christ died became believers in 30 AD!” But of course, that’s not true. We remain hostile to God until He grants us the gifts of repentance and faith. It is only when sinners believe in Christ that it can be said, as in Romans 5:11, that “through [Christ] we have now *received* the reconciliation.” But Romans 5:10 says, “*While* we were *enemies* we were reconciled to God through the *death* of His Son.” So notice: reconciliation was accomplished by Christ’s death, in and of itself. And it was accomplished by Christ’s death while we were still His enemies.

This means, friends, that Scripture distinguishes (a) Christ’s *accomplishment* of our reconciliation, on the one hand, and (b) our *reception* of the reconciliation that He accomplished. Do you see that in the text? Verse 10: We were reconciled to God through Christ’s death, 2,000 years ago. But, verse 11: when God grants faith, we are said to have now *received* the

reconciliation. We have to understand this. Christ's work of reconciliation was finished and accomplished on the cross, but it is received by and applied to the believing sinner at conversion. If someone were to ask you, "When were you reconciled to God?" I think your natural inclination would be to say, "Oh, when I repented and believed in the Gospel." But no, that's when you received the reconciliation. When were you reconciled? Answer: When Christ died.

You see? Your faith doesn't reconcile you to God; Christ's death reconciles you to God! Again, Romans 5:10: "We were reconciled to God through the *death* of His Son." Colossians 1:20: God reconciled all things to Himself: how? "Having made peace *through the blood of His cross.*" Colossians 1:22: "He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through..." faith? No. "Through death." Whose death? Christ's death. Sinners are reconciled to God through Christ's death, and not through their faith. After all, reconciliation refers to the putting away of the ground of the enmity between God and man. And what is the ground of that enmity? It's sin. And sin is not put away by the sinner's faith. It's put away by Christ's death. And so the Bible scholar Leon Morris, in his classic work on the atonement, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, wrote that "reconciliation was wrought on the cross before there was anything in man's heart to correspond" (225). Another commentator said, "Reconciliation was finished in Christ's death. Paul did not preach a gradual reconciliation. He preached what the old divines used to call the finished work. . . . He preached something done once for all" (Forsyth, *The Work of Christ*, 86). Still another wrote, "The work of reconciliation, in the sense of the New Testament, is a work which is finished, and which we must conceive to be finished, before the gospel is preached" (Denny, *The Death of Christ*, 103).

And so we need to distinguish between reconciliation *accomplished* and reconciliation *applied*. But, much like the persons of the Trinity, or the two natures of Christ, though we distinguish between reconciliation accomplished and reconciliation applied, we can never separate them. And so that brings us to a third point concerning the **nature** of reconciliation: **reconciliation accomplished never fails to issue in reconciliation applied**. Scripture never suggests that reconciliation might be objectively accomplished for those to whom it is not subjectively applied. No, everyone whom Christ reconciles to God through His death on the cross eventually comes to receive that reconciliation through God-given faith in Him. There might be a gap of time between those events; but the one must follow the other.

And it would have to be that way, wouldn't it? Christ intends His atonement to purchase saving benefits precisely so that they may be applied, so that they might find their home as it were with those for whom they were purchased. Not so they might be left suspended in mid-air, as if Christ could put away God's enmity against someone only for that person to revive that enmity and frustrate the work of Christ through his stubborn unbelief. No, Romans 8:32, "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?" In other words, if God has done the greater thing for us, by giving Christ over to

death to purchase our reconciliation, He will not fail to do the lesser thing for us, which is to give us all those things—that very reconciliation—that Christ purchased for us by His death. And so all those “reconciled to God through the death of His Son” (Rom 5:10) will indeed “receive the reconciliation” (Rom 5:11). If that weren’t the case—if there were some for whom Christ purchased reconciliation who did not eventually come to *receive* that reconciliation—that would be to say that Christ’s work of reconciliation was ineffectual, that, yes, perhaps He died to make reconciliation possible, or potential, but that He failed to bring about the end goal that He intended in dying for His people.

And so, summing up, Scripture teaches us that the **nature** of reconciliation is that it is the effectual work of God, through the death of Christ, whereby He removes the ground of the enmity or hostility between God and man, namely, sin. And we saw that the accomplishment of this work infallibly secures its application, such that everyone for whom it is purchased eventually receives it. And when man receives this work of reconciliation, his relationship to God is transformed from alienation to communion and fellowship.

## II. The Particularity of Reconciliation

Well, what implications does the nature of reconciliation have on the extent of reconciliation? That brings us to the **second** major point of our sermon, namely, the **particularity of propitiation**. We find, as we have in our studies of expiation and propitiation, that the reconciliation Christ accomplished on the cross is **particular**, and not universal, in its extent. Christ has reconciled the elect alone, and not all without exception.

How do we see that? Well, first of all, if we recognize that application necessarily follows accomplishment—that everyone reconciled through the death of Christ eventually receives that reconciliation in time—then we simply need to ask ourselves: Do all without exception receive reconciliation? Are all without exception eventually restored to fellowship and communion with God? No, we are not universalists. As much as we might wish that all without exception would be finally saved—that no one would go to hell—we remember once again Jesus’ own words in Matthew 7:13: “The gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it.” As sad as it is to think about, there are those who perish in their sins and remain forever at enmity with God.

And so (a) if everyone for whom Christ dies is reconciled by His death, and (b) if everyone thus reconciled eventually receives that reconciliation in conversion, and (c) if not everyone receives that reconciliation, then we simply can’t escape the conclusion that (d) Christ does not reconcile all without exception, but only those who are finally saved—namely, the elect alone.

### A. Second Corinthians 5:18–19

“But wait a second! Doesn’t Paul use explicitly universal language with respect to the scope of Christ’s reconciliation? I mean, 2 Corinthians 5:19 says that ‘God was in Christ reconciling the *world* to Himself.’” And there are those who say that since Christ is said to reconcile the *world*, and yet not all without exception are finally saved, therefore reconciliation must be redefined as something which is ineffectual—that there is such a thing as a “non-salvific” reconciliation (Shultz, 212).

Well, there are a couple ways to respond to that. First, if you were with us for our last sermon on propitiation, you remember that the term “world” in Scripture does not always mean “every individual who has ever lived in the world without exception.” We mentioned that in 1 John 5:19, John says, “We know that we are of God, and that *the whole world* lies in the power of the evil one.” But we noted that, as much as “the whole world” sounds genuinely universal, it doesn’t include the Apostle John or the believers he’s writing to, because in the immediately preceding verse, he says “the evil one does not touch” the “one who is born of God.” How can all without exception lie in Satan’s power if he cannot touch the children of God? Obviously, “world” doesn’t always mean “all without exception.”

And we can multiply these kinds of examples. In John 8:26, Jesus says, “The things which I heard from [the Father], these I speak to *the world*.” But of course, Jesus had not spoken those things to every individual alive in the world at that time. There, “speaking to the world” means that He spoke openly to many people in Israel. In John 12:19, the Pharisees complain that “*the world* has gone after Him.” But again, that doesn’t mean “everyone who had ever lived,” or even “everyone who was alive at that time.” It refers to a large number of people in Israel. In John 15:18–19, Jesus told His disciples that they were not of the world, but He chose them out of the world, and because of this the world hates them. And so there, “the world” doesn’t include the people of Christ and so can’t refer to all without exception. All that to say, in the first place, the presence of a universal term like “all” or “world” doesn’t automatically refer to all without exception.

Second, if we did read “world” in 2 Corinthians 5:19 to mean that Christ reconciles all without exception, we would be forced to modify the definition of reconciliation beyond the biblical recognition. And those who hold to universal atonement admit that. One commentator says that for his interpretation of universal reconciliation to stand, “the common understanding of reconciliation must be broadened” (Melick, *Colossians*, 226). Yes indeed it does! For universal reconciliation to stand, reconciliation must be “broadened” to include those who are not finally reconciled! It has to be redefined as ineffectual. Listen to how another commentator puts it: “God and Christ appeal to [unbelievers] 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” (Marshall, “Meaning of Reconciliation,” 123).



Did you hear that? In order to support universal reconciliation, reconciliation can't be an objective work of God accomplished through Christ's finished work on the cross. It must be redefined as something that has been begun by God which must be completed by man. Unbelievers must "complete the action" of reconciliation "by taking down the barrier on their side." But given that Scripture characterizes the atonement itself as a work of reconciliation, this is nothing short of suggesting that the atonement itself must be completed by man. Man becomes his own co-savior. If reconciliation was not a finished work of Christ through His death but has to be completed by the unbeliever's decision to believe, you couldn't avoid casting Christ's cross work as ineffectual and incomplete until it is granted its efficacy by the sinner's faith. And again, that's what they say. Another commentator writes that reconciliation does not "become effective for the sinner" until he believes (Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 496). But that is not an efficacious accomplishment. That is not a perfect redemption. That is not the atonement of which we sing, and for which we praise God.

We are not reconciled to God by our faith, but by Christ's death. Christ is our Savior, not our faith. And I love what the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Scottish minister Horatius Bonar said about this. He said, "Faith is not our savior. It was not faith that was born at Bethlehem and died on Golgotha for us. It was not faith that loved us, and gave itself for us; that bore our sins in its own body on the tree; that died and rose again for our sins. Faith is one thing, [and] the Savior is another. . . . Let us not confound them, nor ascribe to a poor imperfect act of man, that which belongs exclusively to the Son of the Living God." Bonar says, Faith is precious, but "its preciousness is not its own." Its preciousness is "the preciousness of Him to whom it links us." Faith is glorious, but only because it joins us to the object of faith: Christ our Substitute.

And, third, we can examine the details of the text of 2 Corinthians 5 itself and find that there is good reason to read the "world" that Christ reconciles to refer not to "all without exception," but to "all without distinction, *throughout* the world." And that is because of the relationship between reconciliation and justification. Back in Romans 5:9–10, you can observe the parallelism between the two: "we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son" in verse 10 stands parallel to "having now been justified by His blood" in verse 9. This relationship is underscored in 2 Corinthians 5:19, where Paul defines the substance of God's reconciling work in Christ as "not counting their trespasses against them." And on what righteous basis can God not count sinners' trespasses against them? On the basis of verse 21. He counted those trespasses against Christ in our place. "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." This is the doctrine of justification.

Now, the term "counting" in 2 Corinthians 5:19 is the Greek word *logizomai*, which is the word that Paul uses all throughout Romans 3, 4, and 5 to refer to the non-imputation of sin and the imputation of righteousness that is at the heart of the doctrine of justification. As Paul says in

Romans 4:6, the justified one is “the man to whom God *credits righteousness* apart from works.” And “credits” is the same word for *counting* in 2 Corinthians 5. Two verses later, Romans 4:8 says the justified one is “the man whose sin the Lord will not *take into account*”—again, same word: *logizomai*. So, “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself,” by what means? By justifying the world! By “not counting [the world’s] trespasses against them” on the basis of making Christ to be sin on their behalf.

And so if reconciliation consists in justification—in the non-imputation of sin, in the imputation of sin to a substitute, and in the imputation of righteousness—we cannot avoid saying that reconciliation and justification are co-extensive. Both benefits of the cross extend to the same number of people. No one is reconciled who is not also eventually justified. But are all without exception justified? Do all without exception have their sins imputed to Christ, and Christ’s righteousness imputed to them, so that they are declared righteous in God’s sight? No. And so we must ask of those who hold to a doctrine of universal reconciliation: (a) if reconciliation consists in justification, and (b) if not all without exception are justified, then (c) how can all without exception be reconciled?

The answer is: they can’t. Rather than radically redefining “reconciliation” to fit an absolutely universal sense of the term “world,” it’s much better to let reconciliation mean what it always means, and interpret “world” as it’s often defined in Scripture: all without distinction *throughout* the world. Paul is emphasizing the expansiveness of Christ’s work of reconciliation—that it extends to those actually reconciled throughout all the world—not to indicate that it extends to every individual who has ever lived, even those who remain unreconciled, alienated from God through all eternity.

#### B. Colossians 1:20

And that leads me to a second text that is often marshaled in support of a universal reconciliation, and that’s Colossians 1:19–20. There, Paul says, “For it was the Father’s good pleasure ... through [Jesus] 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.” “So you see?” they say, “God reconciles *all things* to Himself through the blood of Christ’s cross!” But because they grant that not everyone will be saved—that there will be some who remain alienated from God for all eternity precisely because the ground of their enmity hasn’t been done away with—they propose an even more radical redefinition of reconciliation. Since “all things” is taken to refer to every person without exception, these interpreters argue that even those suffering in the eternal lake of fire are in a sense “reconciled to” and “at peace with” God!

You say, “No! That can’t be!” Here’s what Bruce Ware writes: “This reconciliation must be one which includes a sense in which those outside of Christ, consigned to eternal punishment in hell,

are at peace with God.” You say, “What sense does that make?” Well, Ware defines this “peace” and “reconciliation” as no longer rebelling against God, because their rebellion against Him “has been crushed and is ended.” Gary Shultz, who also holds this view, writes, “The nonelect in hell will be reconciled in that they are no longer able to rebel against God because they will acknowledge Jesus for who He is.” They argue that Paul means in Colossians 1 the same thing he means in Philippians 2:10–11, when he says that “every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on the earth *and under the earth*, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” So here are those, under the earth, in hell, reconciled to God by virtue of this confession of Jesus as Lord.

But it must be said plainly: this is just not what reconciliation means. In the first place, being at peace with God is utterly incompatible with suffering under His wrath. What does Paul say in Romans 5:1: “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God.” Peace is established through justification, not condemnation. Christ establishes peace by, Ephesians 2:14 says, “abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances”—by canceling out, Colossians 2:14, “the certificate of debt consisting of decrees [that] was hostile to us, [taking] it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.” Revelation 20 pictures eternal hell as the place where unbelievers will “drink of the wine of the wrath of God,” “be tormented with fire and brimstone,” the smoke of whose torment “goes up forever and ever,” Revelation 14, who “have no rest day and night.” The eternal absence of rest cannot be reconciled with the concept of peace! In fact, God says, “There is no peace for the wicked” (Isa 48:22; cf. 57:21). Friends, it is a contradiction to say that the damned experience this peace while suffering under the very hostility and enmity that Christ abolished by His reconciling death.

Secondly, it’s not true to say that conquered enemies who confess Jesus as Lord are no longer rebels. In Mark 1:24, the demon who possessed the man in Capernaum cried out, “What business do we have with each other, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who You are—the Holy One of God!” The demon acknowledged Jesus for who He was: it confessed that Jesus was Lord, the Holy One of God. And yet the text gives no indication that the demon ceased his rebellion or disregard for Christ. In the same way, while it’s true that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, for those who are “under the earth”—the damned, the demons, and the devil—such a confession will not be the adoring praise of a worshiper at long last, nor the subdued acknowledgment that one was wrong. No, it will be the despairing admission of a conquered enemy, bowing in resentful defeat to the Sovereign King whose power he can no longer deny. And that might very well lead to greater rebellion and greater disregard for their ultimate Enemy, who pours out His wrath upon them without mercy. No, the only sense in which the rebellion of Christ’s enemies is diminished in hell is that it is contained in such a way that they can no longer harm God’s people or revel in their sin without consequences. But that is not reconciliation. That is banishment. That is alienation. John Piper comments on this, saying, “This

is not the peace Jesus purchased with his blood. This is the removal of those who would not make peace with God” (“My Glory I Will Not Give to Another,” 655).

Third, notice the difference between Colossians 1:20 and Philippians 2:10–11. In Philippians, where there is no mention of the word “reconciliation,” Paul speaks of *three* categories of beings whose knees will bow and whose tongues will confess: “those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth.” In Colossians 1, there are only two: both the things in heaven and the things on earth. And these *are* the objects of Christ’s reconciliation. But notice what’s absent. There is no reference to the things “*under* the earth.” The damned are in Philippians 2, but reconciliation is not. And reconciliation *is* in Colossians 1, but the damned are not.

What’s the reason for that? Because in Colossians, Paul is speaking of the time after the enemies of Christ have been sent to their judgment, *after* they have been “cast out into the outer darkness,” Matthew 8:12; after they have been put “outside” of the New Jerusalem, Revelation 22:15, with “the dogs and the sorcerers and the immoral persons and the murderers and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying.” You see, this realm of existence “outside” the new heavens and the new earth is the “outer darkness” that is “under the earth.” It’s a real place, but it’s not part of the new heavens and new earth, where all things have been reconciled to God through Christ’s blood. So this means the “all things” of Colossians 1 is explicitly limited to the “things on earth” and the “things in heaven”—describing only those who stand in a right relationship to God through Christ—because those who are “under the earth” have already been removed in judgment. The enemies of Christ are not the objects of the reconciliation of Colossians 1 because they are not part of the “all things” that remain in the new reality after God has cast the wicked into outer darkness.

You say, “Wait a minute. That doesn’t sound like ‘all things,’ though. Is it legitimate to speak of ‘all things’ in a way that excludes those who are finally damned?” And the answer is: yes, there is biblical precedent for describing this new-creation reality with universal terminology while nevertheless intending to exclude those who perish eternally. Turn briefly to Isaiah 66. Here at the close of Isaiah’s prophecy, God speaks in verse 22 of “the new heavens and the new earth” that will endure in His presence. Of that new creation, He says, verse 23, “And it shall be from new moon to new moon and from sabbath to sabbath, *all mankind* [literally, “*all flesh*”] will come to bow down before Me.” In Colossians 1, “all things” are reconciled to God through Christ. In Isaiah 66, “all flesh” will worship God in the new heavens and new earth. But, verse 24: “Then they will go forth and look on the *corpses* of the men who have transgressed against Me. For their worm will *not* die and their fire will *not* be quenched; and they will be an abhorrence to all mankind [again, literally, *all flesh*].”

So, the worshipers of God in the new creation are described in universal terms (“all mankind”), and yet there is a reference to the damned (“men”), who are distinguished and excluded from all

mankind. And so, just as “all mankind” does not include the “men” whose corpses will be an abhorrence to all mankind in Isaiah 66, neither does “all things” in Colossians 1:20 refer to “those who are under the earth.” Piper summarizes well: “The rebels in hell will simply not be part of the ‘all things’ which fill the new heavens and the new earth. They are ‘outside’ of the new reality, in the ‘darkness’” (655).

“But wait a minute,” you object again. “Doesn’t all things refer to the creation? Doesn’t that mean that Christ’s atonement extends beyond the people of God even to the *cosmos*? And so isn’t reconciliation universal in that sense?” In response to that, it must be said that an atonement that has cosmic *results* is not the same thing as an atonement accomplished for the cosmos. In Colossians 1:20, Paul isn’t teaching that the creation is the object of Christ’s reconciling work of atonement. He’s teaching that reconciliation of His people, who will inhabit the new heavens and new earth, has *consequences* for all of creation.

And that makes sense when you consider the relationship between mankind and the creation, both with respect to the curse of sin and with respect to the eradication of that curse in redemption. Turn with me to one final text, to Romans chapter 8. Romans 8:22 says what we all experience every day of our lives: this creation groans under the curse of sin. But creation has no sin of its own, right? The creation was cursed because of man’s sin. That’s what God said to Adam in Genesis 3:17: “Cursed is the ground *because of you*.” It was because of the sin of man that, Romans 8 verse 20, “the creation was subjected to futility.” The creation isn’t morally culpable for bearing thorns and thistles. Verse 20 again: It was “not willingly” subjected to futility; it was cursed by God Himself as a result of human sin.

But creation wasn’t cursed without a plan for its redemption. Look at verse 21: the One “who subjected it” did so “in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption.” But here’s the key: the redemption and renewal of the creation does not come about because it is the direct object of a universal atonement. No, but just as the curse of creation followed the curse of sinful man, so also the redemption of creation will follow the redemption of man. Look at verse 19: The creation “waits eagerly”—not for an atonement for its sins! but “for the revealing of *the sons of God*.” Verse 21: The creation will be set free from its slavery to corruption “into the freedom of *the glory of the children of God*.”

Paul is teaching that just as the creation was cursed in order to be a suitable habitation for *God’s* curse upon Adam’s posterity, so also will the creation be redeemed in order to be a suitable habitation for God’s blessing upon the new humanity recreated in Christ the last Adam. And this new humanity is not inclusive of all human beings, still less the animals or the inanimate creation, but rather consists of God’s people alone. This means that the ground of the cosmic renewal of Colossians 1 isn’t a universal provision made possible by Christ’s atonement. No, it is

the “consummated redemption of a particular group of people—“the sons of God,”” (Gibson, 310).

### **Conclusion**

And so we have beheld from God’s Word both the **nature** and **particularity** of the reconciliation that Christ accomplished in His atoning death on the cross.

{Please refer to the audio for the concluding exhortation and Gospel proclamation.}