

Ministers of Reconciliation—As WELS Faces the 21st Century

By John C. Lawrenz

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For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died.
And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves
but for him who died for them and was raised again.

2 Corinthians 5:14,15

Ready or not, here it comes... the year 2000, that is. And, following it, the third millennium of the Christian era. The year 2000 will also mark the 150th anniversary of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, our synod, our part of Christendom in these last days. It is a Janus time, a time to look backward and a time to peer into the future. Your district praesidium has selected a theme from the fifth chapter of the Apostle Paul's second letter to Corinth for this year's Southeastern Wisconsin District Pastor-Teacher Conference. We are gathered together because we are **MINISTERS OF RECONCILIATION**. We labor nearly 2000 years after the Apostle Paul coined that term. In our service to Christ we are the product of all those years, and more particularly the last 150. Church history is, as our seminary's catalog states, a review of the struggles and triumphs of the gospel in the visible Church throughout the New Testament era. In this presentation I will challenge you to be renewed in your grasp of history's genesis on the one hand and its apocalypse on the other. Standing somewhere between the beginning and end, we will tomorrow focus on Christ's catalytic presence in our personal histories as his ministers.

Ministry's object is people. In the opening chapter of the Bible people are the crowning glory of God's creative work. The days of creation lead up to and end with the creation of man. Alone in all the universe, it is true of man that he has the capacity to know the One who made him. Man was created in God's image. At the same time God rooted man in the rest of creation. He has a material body made of the same elements as the heavens and the earth. Matter, energy, and time fix man's presence in the universe. In addition man shares a quality with the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the beasts of the field. This quality sets them all apart from the waters, the dry land, and earth's vegetation. They all own the breath of life. They are all living beings.

The second chapter of the Bible captures mankind's function in God's creation. Everything God made was evidence of perfect divine love. Everything was very good and entirely perfect. As the crown of divine creativity, God gave man the rule over everything. This included things animate and inanimate, neither of which could consciously respond to God's love. The rest of creation experienced God's love through the mediation of Adam's work as caretaker. The first man had God's leave to develop a special bond with living, breathing creatures. As God's minister, Adam exercised his superior faculties by naming the animals who shared the breath of life with him.

A more complete intellectual, social, emotional, and physical bond, however, was reserved for Adam's corresponding self, the woman taken from his own side. Adam took the woman as his wife. With her he was not alone. To her he expressed his deepest feelings.

Work and social bonding is not limited to humans. Animals, too, work in Creation and develop bonds with man, their own kind, and other creatures. One faculty, however, is exclusively human. Only man was made in the image of God. The human species is the only one that requires a spiritual bond with God. Man alone worships. God asked Adam and his wife to respect one tree inviolate. Active obedience, a free act of the human will returned God's love. The penalty for disobedience was serious, the complete and total loss of man's ability to bond with God on God's holy terms. Man's loss of the free exercise of his unique faculty spelled death, a separation that has profoundly altered everything that makes man the crown of God's creation. Death ends true worship. Death ends the perfect exercise of morality in mankind's stewardship over creation and its creatures.

Death happened. It continues to happen. This has been the ruling fact of life, apart from God's grace, since the Fall. How death entered creation is revealed in the Bible's third chapter. Loss occurred the moment our first parents ate of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They hid from God. They blamed each other. They felt shame. They couldn't even answer a straight and simple moral inquiry without being devious.

As God would tell them, it now was the lot of the male of the species to struggle hard for daily bread. Never again would labor yield life's necessities and joys with ease. The female of the species, marvelously fashioned to complement her husband physically, emotionally, socially, and intellectually, would now struggle to hold her own amid relationships that were afflicted by sin. As homemaker and bearer of children, life would bring her a generous helping of pain and sorrow. Man and woman would alike return to the dust from which they had been taken. In time they would forfeit the breath of life.

Nor could the first sinners worship freely in spirit or in truth. Without divine assistance, God would soon find himself defined by man in human terms. Worship would become a labor to work free of sin's consequences. God could be blamed, appeased, or recast to resemble something seen, heard, felt, smelled or tasted in creation. These new gods could not be loved. It is not accidental that the earliest evidence of man-made religion focus in three areas. Human beings worshiped to insure the fertility of the soil, to protect the woman in child-bearing, and to cope with the mystery and fear of death. With the divine image lost, there could be no joy in sharing God's company. Death, broadly defined, meant the end of all bonds with the truly holy. Disconnected from God, human beings found themselves in a state of chronic and hopeless non-reconciliation. Life, such as it was, meant enmity with God.

Death, whose power is sin, permeated man's work, the social intercourse of his life amid other living things, and his attitude toward the God. Without reconciliation death was corrosive, pervasive, irreversible, and final.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come. All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. 2 Corinthians 5:17-19

Enter God who did, and still does it all. Reconciliation is the removal of enmity from the divine-human equation. Its performance by God, acting alone on behalf of mankind, defines love. Its appropriation by mankind is one of passive recipient and active donor. God gives. Man receives. The result of assimilated love is a new creation.

Sin's power to kill is denied. Real sins are not brushed aside. Rather they are treated with the utmost solemnity as an offense against God's holiness and justice. God set the price and paid it fully. A sinner's account is settled, not by overlooking sin's very real existence, but by shifting the accounting of sin from the perpetrator of the crime to the one against whom the sin was perpetrated. Reconciliation is as dynamic in its capacity to shape thoughts, words, and deeds, as the acts of creation that made mankind the crown of creation in the first place. Transplanted love takes root and grows. It joins divine love in an alliance to curb the sinful flesh. It fights pressure from the unreconciled in society. And it beats back Satan's temptations. In addition to all of this, reconciliation awakens an altruistic desire to share the good news of a new creation with others. God's new creation flows to and is made complete in a ministry of reconciliatory outreach.

All this was immediately evident in the Garden of Eden. In their sinful state Adam and Eve were helpless until God intervened. Neither the man nor his wife could do a thing even remotely approaching reconciliation. It was necessary for God to address enmity. He said, I, not you, will alter this state of war between us. My words and my actions will initiate reconciliation. I, God, will unite with man through the miracle of incarnation. As true man, I will accomplish what sinful man could never accomplish. A baby, born of a woman, will take into his holy heel all the damning venom of evil, but will lift his wounded heel to crush the life out of evil and its death-delivering consequences.

The Creator's ministry of reconciliation to the first sinners had an immediate impact on the losses caused by sin. God awakened a new knowledge of good and evil by speaking frankly and unilaterally about the effect of sin's curse on human life. This preaching of law drew a bright line around humanity's problem. A divinely enforced look into the human mirror set things up for straight talk about God's free gift of salvation. Only in this law/gospel manner and only in the law first, gospel second sequence could reconciliation work.

The Lord covered Adam and Eve's naked bodies with skins. In so doing, he acknowledged that Adam and Eve lacked the power by themselves to look at creation with the open, shame-free eyes of their former innocence. God would reach into the resources of creation to provide cover for the reconciled. By an act of divinely sanctioned sacrifice, the Lord signaled his restoration of Adam and Eve as "new creations" to whom he had imputed the "image of God" once more. Reconciled sinners were still more precious to the Creator than the best of all his animals.

God's ministry of reconciliation went so far as to banish Adam and Eve from paradise. They had bought into Satan's claim that self-assertion would make them like God. He did not want them to be sealed for all eternity by a another, eternally-binding assertion of will. He would not let them taste eternal life here on earth in their grace-imputed, yet still sin-infected, state. Eating from the Tree of Life would be reserved for a new heaven and a new earth, whose coming would follow, not precede, the final judgment.

In all points, God acted and Adam and Eve received. God's power in them repressed the urge to blame. A reconciled Adam looked at his wife, no longer as the source of his troubles, but as the miraculous conduit through whom God would work out his plan of salvation. Adam's name for his reconciled helpmeet was Eve. God had made her the mother of all those who would receive new life from God. Likewise, a reconciled Eve gloried in childbearing. She spoke of her firstborn in words that revealed a firm faith in God's promise to intervene as he had promised. And, when father and mother faced the reality of physical death as the result of their firstborn's unreconciled hatred for his younger brother, neither Adam nor Eve let go of their faith in reconciliation. They brought Seth, "the substitute," into the world. If neither Cain nor Abel were to be the "seed" through whom the promised Seed would someday arrive, Seth would be that conduit.

But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation -- if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. Colossians 1:22, 23

On the eve of the 21st century, things in this world have not changed fundamentally from what Scripture describes in the opening chapters of the Bible. Every human being exists to be a new creation from the moment of reconciliation onward. This reconciliation is not of sinful human origin. It comes down from above by means of the inspired words God has chosen to reveal his many-sided, ever-perfect love. Every word of reconciliation in the Holy Scriptures focus on the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus. This Jesus was for ages a sure promise. For us in these last days he is an accomplished fact of history.

We are therefore Christ's ambassador's, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf be reconciled to God. 2 Corinthians 5:20

The ministry of reconciliation, too, is from God. Ministry is the Holy Spirit's power, given to believers, to alter human existence in God's name and with divine authority. This power is exercised privately by all and publicly by those set aside by the body of believers as competent and faithful witnesses. As the result of preaching, private or public, God restores where sin destroys. As the result of teaching, private or public, we receive courage to lay aside worldly idolatry and worship God in spirit and in truth. As a blessed by-product of faith-inspired acts of service we, privately or publicly, function as parts of Christ's body in our families, our congregations, and the community of faith around the world. Gospel-motivated love empowers us to work with our heads, our hands, and our hearts as responsible stewards of a reconciled world and everything in it.

What marks our time as unarguably different is not the essence, but the magnitude of the unchanging realities in the midst of which we carry on God's ministry of reconciliation. Today there are arguably as many people alive on the face of our earth as have ever lived and died. Elapsed time has allowed the imagination of man's unreconciled heart free rein to do the devil's dirty work. Neither work, nor society, nor religion is simple. Everything is exceedingly complex and interconnected. Technology has the power to saddle the world with evils that are quicker to deliver, and with less restraint than ever before. Not to fear. Our Reconciler is greater than the prince of this world and all his minions.

At the same time the world has never before seen a time in which the opportunities for outreach with the ministry of reconciliation are as great. There are more souls to save. They are closer to us than ever before on account of rapid transportation. The Internet has made virtually every man our neighbor. What is more, the very magnitude of today's moral problems, coupled with their intractable nature, are an invitation for grace to shine through all the clearer. *What God once of Israel, where sin increased, grace increased all the more* (Rom 5:20) may be ripe for re-application in our day.

We still have time. How much, on one knows. The 21st century may usher in an era of unparalleled wickedness. The distress experienced by the next generation may be without parallel. Antichrist may fully recover and assert himself like never before. What of it? We have God's promise that he will shorten the worst of times for the sake of his elect. Right up until the bitter end, there will be a ministry of reconciliation. *The gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations* (Mt 24:14). Only then will the end come.

Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! Romans 5:9

Nowhere is the apocalyptic tribulation of an unreconciled world portrayed more graphically than in the last book of the Bible. Among the layered descriptions of earth's troubled last days, chapters 6 and 7 of Revelation, are noteworthy. There we meet four horsemen. Each is coming at humanity with ferocious intensity. These horsemen represent the obstacles which will be there in the 21st century for all who take up the ministry of reconciliation. After the horsemen we see humanity divided between those who are willing to die for their faith and those whose prime impulse is to hide from God. Finally, the Holy Spirit gives us a glimmer of the eternal reward awaiting those who faithfully preach and teach reconciliation to a dying world.

The first of the four horses is a white one. The vision appears reassuring. Heroes ride on white horses. In Revelation 19 the Lord Jesus Christ rides into John's consciousness, bearing the epithets faithful, true, Lord of Lords and King of Kings. He wears many diadems and is dressed in the garments of Calvary's sacrifice. He leads a host of others on white mounts. They are together on a mission of judgment against a godless world. Their sword of execution is the double-edged sword coming from the mouth of the rider. We recognize that sword as the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God.

The rider of Revelation 6 is no Jesus Christ, nor is he one of his faithful and true followers, although he would like to have the world think so. He holds a weapon, but not the sword that cuts one way with the law, and the other with the gospel. It is a bow with which to shoot souls with the fiery darts of the Evil One. His is a unearned crown of a borrowed authority. He comes, not to separate the sheep from the goats, but simply to conquer. If Jesus Christ is the real thing, this rider is a Döppelgänger. When alerting the Twelve to the signs of the end of the age, Jesus warned "many will come in my name, claiming 'I am the Christ' and will deceive many" (Lk 21:8, Mt 24:5). Jesus added, "Do not follow them" (Lk 21:8).

What aspect of the old/new creation is this horseman out to trample?

What evidence do you see that the white horseman is riding at full gallop today?

Contrast "the sword of the Spirit" with the "fiery darts of the Evil One."

Is there evidence that this rider may be riding also in our fellowship?

The second horseman rides a fiery red steed. In his hand is a large sword. In Romans 13 the Apostle Paul lauds the institution of civil government as an institution of God that bears the sword for a worthy purpose. *He is God's servant to do you good... an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer* (13:4). This rider, however, is not on a crusade to curb sin, punish evil, and avenge innocent blood. The rider on the red horse rides to take peace from the earth. Jesus predicted that the last days would witness wars and revolutions (Mt 24:7, Lk 21:9,10). The rider wields his sword to make men slay each other. Jesus predicted that the love of most would grow cold because of the increase of wickedness (Mt 24:12). Who can deny that the human social contract underlying family and community is under violent attack in our day?

What aspect of the old/new creation is this horseman out to undermine?

What "at home" societal behaviors are as lethal as a sword-thrust? Check Lk 21:34.

What mega-dangers lurk for the societies of the world in the 21st century?

Is there evidence that Red Rider may be riding amok in our fellowship?

Check Mt 5:21-26 and Jam 3:1-12. What sword deserves a Christian sheath?

Horseman number three is mounted on black, the color of despair. He carries scales used for weighing out consumer goods. He is the only rider for which an explanatory voice is necessary. The voice quotes sale prices for wheat and barley. A quart of wheat, enough to bake a loaf of white bread, and three quarts of barley, enough to bake three loaves of dark bread, are each priced at a day's wages. Clearly these are no bargains. The same voice warns against adulterating the oil and wine. In the economy of the eastern Mediterranean, grain (wheat or barley), olive oil, and wine were the three staples (see Ps 104:15). We are to understand a set of circumstances in which the laws of supply and demand have driven the price of daily bread to ridiculous heights. It is well past the time for luxuries. The unscrupulous must be warned not to water down the necessities. Jesus lists famines together with false prophets, war, and pestilence as signs of the end times (Mt 24:7; Lk 21:11).

What aspect of the old/new creation is this horseman out to manipulate?

Describe the dark and deadly side of economic "progress" experienced in the 20th century?

What conceivable circumstances might create wild inflation in the world's future?

Does a "developed" economy increase or diminish the threat of famine? Why?

Is there evidence that this rider may feel at home also within our fellowship?

What kind of advice did Jesus and the apostles offer regarding material possessions?

The last of the four horsemen is a tandem. Mounted on the pale (actually green, the color associated with pestilence) horse is Death itself. Hades (hell) trots behind. Death is a scavenger that cleans up after the damage is done by the three horsemen who precede him. Without a ministry of reconciliation to remove death's sting, the dead proceed irrevocably to the abode of the damned. According to John's vision we are to expect the inhumane cost of war, famine, pestilence, and wild beasts to be high in the last days, claiming one in four.

Does it matter to believers/non-believers by which means physical death comes?

Which of our world mission fields has a population in which 1 in 3 has AIDS?

What kind of warfare might carry off 25% of the population anywhere on earth?

What microscopic "wild beasts" threaten our future?

Estimate what percent of today's people die and go to hell. What can we do about it?

The four horsemen represent the forces of evil that lead human beings into false worship, that create a bloody breakdown in morality, that result in a godless manipulation of the bounty from which men are expected to eke out their livelihood, and that multiply death on a stupefying scale.

Death may also be the lot of the reconciled who bring reconciliation to a dying world. When the fifth seal in Revelation, chapter 6, was opened, John's eyes rested on Christian martyrs, those whose lives were cut short by godless men who opposed the ministry of reconciliation. Righteous Abel, Adam's second son, was the first believer to die prematurely. The trek through death for Abel and others like him is no folly, however. Beyond the grave, martyrs find a safe haven under God's altar. There they are cleansed by the blood Jesus and there they are robed in the white of the Jesus' perfect righteousness.

We are struck by John's description of the martyr voices, strong, robust, unafraid, defying those whose transitory earthly power had the momentary power to ridicule belief, take away earthly possessions, and snuff out life, often in the cruelest of manners. The martyrs demand the swift and certain justice of the Last Day, but are admonished to set aside their eagerness for personal redress in favor of God's desire to lengthen the time before the end comes. Why? To permit as many as possible to be reconciled with God. Nothing is more important to God.

What is the fullest application of Jesus' admonition to turn the other cheek?

What is the greatest treasure we have? How should possessing it affect our life and death?

Contrast our impatience as ministers of reconciliation with God's patience.

What persecutions might we expect in the 21st century?

When the sixth seal in Revelation, chapter 6, is opened, it reveals a sharp contrast. The martyrs were eager to see the Last Day come. Not so the unreconciled whose reality begins and ends with this world. For them the "birth pains" of the end times bring terror and confusion. Earthquakes mock the permanency of earth. Celestial calamities wreck the cosmic clock. Mother Nature behaves unnaturally. Amid such chaos, rank and privilege count for nothing. The mighty and the wealthy are no better off in such straits than the man of lowliest caste. Death, strangely, is no refuge for the unreconciled. The impulse is to hide from God at all costs.

Is modern man afraid of facing God? If so, how? If not, why not?

Are the signs of the end apparent already? Does it matter?

Does calamity serve a useful purpose in respect to the ministry of reconciliation?

Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ,
through whom we have now received reconciliation. Romans 5:11

Whether John's visions deal with seven seals, seven trumpets, seven plagues, or seven bowls, the seventh is always a signal for an interlude that suspends the progression of events momentarily. The inevitable denouement of history is put off so that still another look might be taken of the end times leading up to the Last Day. The pause that precedes the opening of the seventh seal, like all the other interludes, is a glimpse beyond time into eternity.

In Revelation, chapter 7, the "other side" may be summed up thus. Heaven will contain the perfect sum of all believers from all times. In symbolic terms this number is 10 x 10, the cube of decimal perfection, raised to the 12th power, the symbolic number of God's chosen (think of the 12 tribes, the 12 minor prophets, the 12 apostles). Taking another, equally valid estimate, John sees a number beyond the human capacity to count. The distinguishing factor is not number, but diverse ethnicity. Folks are there despite nationality, language, or race. Purity (white robes), victory (palm branches), and joy (song) are the common denominators. The purity is due to robes washed in the blood of the Lamb, the foundational truth undergirding our reconciliation ministry. The victory is won in spite of great tribulation. Reconciliation with God through Christ is the passport through life's darkest hours. The joy that we glimpse there is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things seldom seen as we pursue our this-side-of-eternity ministry of reconciliation. For those whose worship of God on earth is less than full on account of human shortcomings, heaven's worship knows no clock. For those for whom society had no place here on earth, God spreads a heavenly tent big enough for every reconciled brother

or sister to be at home. For those lacking the simplest of creature comforts here and now, heaven knows neither hunger nor thirst, nor tears, nor life without a shepherd to show the way.

How is Revelation's vision of paradise better than the paradise given Adam and Eve?

What comfort is the doctrine of election as we face the 21st century?

What does John's second vision of heaven's guests tell us about our mission field?

Which this-worldly griefs inhibit your ministry of reconciliation?

Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb. Amen!

Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength

be to our God forever and ever. Amen! Revelation 7:10,12

Jesus' ministry of reconciliation culminated in his vicarious death. Jesus words provide food for thought as we contemplate our ministries in his service. Study Jesus' last words on the cross. What do they say? What points do they make? What instruction do they offer?

Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing. Lk 23:34

My God, my God , why have you forsaken me? Mt 27:46, Mk 15:34

I tell you the truth, today you Will be with me in paradise. Lk 23:43

Dear woman, here is your son.... Here is your mother. Jn 19:26,Z7

I am thirsty. Jn 19:28

It is finished. Jn 19:30

Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. Lk 23:46