

A Note on Θέμενος in 2 Corinthians 5:19

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It has been said that if ἦν...καταλλάσσω is a periphrastic construction, then θέμενος must be part of the periphrasis. This is true, but that fact is not an argument against our Synod's interpretation which views this passage as a *sedes doctrinae* for the doctrine of universal justification. Quite to the contrary, it helps to establish our position.

While periphrases with an aorist participle are uncommon in Greek, they are not unknown. We find at least one such construction already in Herodotus and they become more common in later Greek. In the New Testament there are two, and perhaps three, cases of that use of the aorist participle (Lk 23:19; Jn 18:30, v.r.; 2 Cor 5:19). Thus Greek usage does not make such a periphrastic construction impossible.

Having listed our passage as part of the evidence cited above, we can expect that we will be accused of assuming what needs to be proved. We believe that such proof can be furnished.

The phrase ἦν...θέμενος must be periphrastic because, if it is not, the passage says something that is demonstrably false. While participles are generally timeless, they do have some temporal significance imparted to them by the principal verb in the sentence and often also by the context. In the first sentence of the preceding paragraph, for example, the past participle clearly refers to a past action that took place when 2 Corinthians 5:19 was listed in the foregoing context. However, if in a sermon we would use exactly that same kind of grammar and say, "Having separated the sheep from the goats, the Lord will on the last day cite the evidence on the basis of which the separation was made," the past participle obviously refers to a future event that will take place on the day of judgment. The past tense of the participle in this case only indicates that the separating will be a past event when the evidence is cited.

If we interpret θέμενος as a circumstantial participle, as opponents of universal justification do, then whatever temporal significance this past participle has must be determined by the tense of the principal verb. It would then refer to an action which precedes the time indicated by ἦν. It would in that case have to mean that after God had committed to Paul and the other apostles the word of reconciliation, he was, or existed, in Christ. In other words, Paul would be saying that the commissioning of the apostles antedates the incarnation. But biblical history clearly demonstrates that the great commission was given after the resurrection and is in reality based on it (Lk 24:46f).

It is sometimes argued that since καταλλάσσω is a present participle and θέμενος is an aorist, the commissioning of Paul must precede the reconciling, and for that reason the reconciliation spoken of here is one that takes place when the word of reconciliation is preached and men come to faith. This is absolutely untenable, since the temporal significance of a participle is determined first of all by the tense of the main verb and not by the tense of the other participles in the sentence.

We are therefore forced to interpret ἦν...θέμενος as periphrastic. Paul used an aorist rather than a present participle because a present participle with ἦν yields an imperfect tense. Such an imperfect tense (as in ἦν...καταλλάσσω) correctly portrays God's work of reconciling, since that was an ongoing work which began with the incarnation and ended with the resurrection. An imperfect tense, however, could hardly be used to describe the commissioning of Paul, which took place at a very definite and limited time when Paul was called to carry the gospel to the Gentiles. Therefore only an aorist construction serves to express what actually happened.

One other thing might be said. If ἦν...καταλλάσσω is not periphrastic then ἦν is the principal verb in the sentence. Paul would in that case be saying that "God existed in Christ." Is such a statement sufficiently motivated in this context? It is true that Paul in Colossians 2:9 says that all the fullness of the Godhead dwells in Christ. But there he uses a present tense and the thought expressed fits into the context very well. But why would Paul in this place say that "God existed in Christ?" And why would he use an imperfect tense? Would that tense imply that God no longer exists in Christ? Is there any other passage in Paul's writings that uses that kind of language? In and through Christ God has done much for us. Is it not much more in keeping with what

Paul says elsewhere and also with what he says in verse 18 to understand ἐν Χριστῷ as an adverbial phrase modifying καταλλάσσω than as the equivalent of a predicate adjective? Those questions might also help to convince us that ἡ...καταλάσσω must be periphrastic.