

**Ministers of Reconciliation? Ambassadors of Christ?:
Reflections on 2 Corinthians
5:14-20 and the TRC**

**A sermon preached by Zac Klassen at Bloomingdale Mennonite Church
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Good morning,

In our scripture reading for this morning, we heard the voice of the Apostle Paul, describing to the Church in Corinth the good news of God’s reconciliation for the world and the new creation that comes with being in Christ. Good news. Or so it seemed to Paul in his first-century context as the Apostle to the Gentiles. But what happens when the message of good news becomes bad news for those who are hearing it? What happens when the message of reconciliation and new creation becomes the occasion for division and death?

The ugly history of colonialism in Canada and throughout the world, and the devastating impact that it has had and continues to have on Indigenous peoples everywhere, have made repeating Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians anything but straightforward for the church of today. The history of colonial expansion into new worlds—often led by those claiming to be ambassadors of Christ—divided families, and divided peoples from their cultures and spiritualities. The history of Indian Residential Schools in Canada and the United States brought with it something new to Indigenous families, but it was not new creation in Christ. The newness the children were to embody in their school settings required the erasure of their old identity and in its place the new identity of so-called ‘civilized,’ Christian children. We know all too well by now that in the history of colonialism, Christ’s ambassadors have “entreated” Indigenous peoples to be reconciled to God through force or coercion, not love and that this has had disastrous long-term impacts.

As I reflected on this, it all seemed to me to be such an aberration and distortion of Paul's original gospel concerning God's reconciling work among differing people groups. Paul proclaimed a message with profound social and political implications, and he did so in relationships with diverse people groups, namely Jews and Gentiles. In his conversations with Jews and Gentiles in the Christ communities that he wrote to, Paul navigated complex cultural and social politics in such a way as to *not* require the cultural dominance of one group over another.¹ For Paul, reconciliation with God implied reconciliation with people who were once divided and even hostile to one another—but that reconciliation did not assume cultural sameness, rather, it allowed for diversity. In many ways, you might say, this made Paul's missionary style and Gospel preaching characteristically anti-colonial or anti-imperialist:² there is no sense, in Paul, that Christ's lordship over creation happens by way of the assertion of one culture or group over all others. And yet, even if we think *Paul's* missionary strategy was anti-colonial, calling it such today does not let Christians off the hook, especially as it concerns our relationship with our Indigenous neighbours. It thus will not do to say, "the Christianity of the colonial past is not my Christianity...or, that wasn't real or authentic Christianity but mine is."

¹ Consider the fact that Paul did not want Gentiles to become Jews by being circumcised, for example (see his letter to the Galatians). And, as scholars are more and more becoming aware, Paul did not want or expect Jews to suddenly become as Gentiles either. Paul thought that Jews could continue to observe Torah as followers of Jesus and Gentiles could embrace Jesus fully as Gentiles without adopting Torah, even if there were certainly changes in practice that the Gentiles needed to make to follow Jesus. Furthermore, both Jews and Gentiles were said to be reconciled or placed in right relationship with each other through God's reconciling work in Jesus, not through the forced imposition of cultural sameness. When it came to the question of whether and how social and cultural identity should change in light of the gospel, Paul seems to have taken at least two approaches: first, everyone was to "...remain in the [social] condition in which you were called" (1 Corinthians 7:20), and second, that in Christ all of us are made one in our diversity (Galatians 3:28). The word social is, of course, not in 1 Cor. 7:20, but the "conditions" that Paul goes on to list in this passage are different social identity markers: slave, married, unmarried, etc. Here Paul could also have added, as he did in Galatians, circumcised or uncircumcised which, again, were social and cultural markers for Paul. While we do not need to follow Paul's approach to mission in every respect, his approach has implications that are, in my estimation, significant in our current era of trying to imagine a post-colonial future.

² There are several biblical and theological arguments made in this regard. For an example from Biblical scholarship, see Neil Elliot's *The Arrogance Of Nations: Reading Romans In The Shadow Of Empire*. For a theological argument see Willie James Jennings, *Outlaw Justice: The Messianic Politics of Paul*.

We cannot appeal to a more ‘faithful’ or ‘pure’ Christianity to remove ourselves from the collective guilt of our Christian past, especially given the ways that we continue to exercise a great deal of privilege that has originated from that past.

Our history rightly leaves us with complicated questions that we cannot ignore. How can we claim to be “entrusted with the message of reconciliation” that Paul spoke of, and how can we claim to be chosen as “ambassadors for Christ,” when we participate in and benefit from a colonial system that has done so much damage? There are some who would look at the history of Christian participation in colonialism and say that at this point Christians don’t have much to offer Indigenous peoples in terms of “reconciliation,” that the Christian witness is so tainted by its history of unfaithfulness, that Christians are no longer qualified to be “ambassadors” for Christ. If this were true, then Paul’s message of reconciliation and new creation would seem to ring hollow today.

And yet, wonder of wonders, there is this document called the *Truth and Reconciliation* commission, and with this document, the Indigenous peoples of Canada address the churches with a call to be reconciled—with a call to find a way together to live in just relationship with one another. The *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* or the *TRC*, is a labour of love that was birthed not by the church but through the hard work, honest testimony, and powerful witness of so many Indigenous peoples across Canada who are calling us to hear the truth about our collective history of violence against Indigenous peoples and heed the call to reconcile with them through repentance and action. Might we hear the voice of the reconciling God in this call from our Indigenous neighbours? Might it be that, through their call, God is in fact urging us to be faithful ministers of reconciliation and faithful ambassadors for Christ, not by repeating the sins of the past, not by imposing our own agenda on the process of reconciliation, but by listening to

and learning from our Indigenous neighbours and repenting of the ways continue to perpetuate injustice against them?

My hope for this morning is that we can indeed hear the voice of God in the call of our Indigenous neighbours as we seek to honour the sacred work of the *TRC*. But for that to happen, for us to hear the call of God in the *TRC*, we need to really listen to that call! So, rather than continue to preach to you in a typical sermon style for the next 15 or so minutes, I will instead give us an opportunity to review a bit about the history of the *TRC* and the calls to action that are included in it. And, to bring this all back to our scripture reading for today, I will provide a bit of interpretive commentary throughout to help us re-imagine the type of letter Paul might write to us today in the context of our relationship to our Indigenous neighbours. So, as we move into a time of listening and learning, let us open ourselves to the call of God that comes to us this morning.

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I hope that with this brief look at the *TRC* and the calls to action in it, that we will have heard the call of God on us to be actively involved in the process of reconciliation with our Indigenous neighbours through relationships of justice and mutual respect. The Spirit's work of new creation is moving among us, can you discern it? It is leading us to repentance and to new life.

AMEN