

though its relevant implications for those who answer honestly are considerable indeed. I hope that the preceding survey of several key rhetorical techniques and related translational issues has shown that the ability to give an honest reply to the divine challenge depends to an appreciable extent on the degree to which respondents have been able to personally experience the dramatic significance of the prophetic text itself. That, inevitably, is the task of the translator!

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"WE PLEAD ON CHRIST'S BEHALF: "BE RECONCILED TO GOD,"

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Correcting the Common Mistranslation of 2 Cor 5.20

Virtually all English translations render 2 Cor 5.20 by supplying a direct object for the main verb in the first part of the sentence, rendering the verse something like this: "We beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God (NASB)."¹ This suggests that Paul is exhorting his immediate audience, the *Corinthians*, to be reconciled to God. Such an exhortation, however, appears to be problematic since, whatever the many flaws in the Corinthian church, Paul generally addresses its members as believers (compare the opening in 1 Cor 1.2-9, the address as "brothers," *adelphoi*, in 1 Cor 1.10, 26; 2.1; 3.1; 4.6; 10.1; 12.1; 14.6, 20; 15.1, 31, 50, 58; 16.15; 2 Cor 1.8; 8.1, 13.11, and the father/child relationship referred to in 1 Cor 4.14-15; but compare 2 Cor 13.5). Thus it seems unlikely that Paul would urge the *Corinthians* to be reconciled to God, since the term "reconciliation" usually refers to a person's conversion, cosmic reconciliation of all things to God, or the salvation-historical ramifications of Christ's work (compare Rom 5.10-11; 11.15; 2 Cor 5.18-19; Eph 2.16; Col 1.20, 22; but compare 1 Cor 7.11).²

The original reads: *deometha hyper Christou, katalagete to theo*. The passage should probably be rendered as follows: "We appeal on Christ's behalf, 'Be reconciled to God.'" In context, this appears to refer to Paul's apostolic ministry and message. At least since 2.14, Paul has elaborated on the nature of his apostolic ministry. The immediate context speaks of the apostles' effort to "persuade people" (5.11), clearly a reference to evangelistic preaching (compare also v. 17). God reconciled the apostles to himself (they were converted), and he gave them the "ministry of reconciliation" (the responsibility to work for the conversion of others; v. 18). As ministers of reconciliation, the apostles also have been given a *message*

of reconciliation, the plea to be directed toward *all unbelievers*; "Be reconciled to God?" (v. 20). In this context, then, Paul's exhortation appears to be addressed, not to the *Corinthians*, but to be descriptive of *Paul's apostolic proclamation of God's offer of reconciliation in Christ in general*.³ Not until 6.1 does Paul specifically return to address the *Corinthians* themselves. Since this interpretation seems to account better for the flow of Paul's argument in 5.14-21, why do English translations virtually without exception supply an object not found in the Greek original, thus supporting the notion that Paul is exhorting here members of the Corinthian church? Are we to understand that Paul is exhorting members of the Corinthian church?

The reason for this procedure may be the awkwardness of rendering the main verb, *deometha*, absolutely in English ("we appeal?"). The Greek verb itself, however, is not necessarily used with a direct object. In the remaining five Pauline references, *deomai* is used absolutely in Rom 1.10; 2 Cor 10.2; and 1 Thes 3.10 while taking the genitive in 2 Cor 8.4 and Gal 4.12. This appears to shift the burden of proof upon those who would want to supply a direct object when such is absent in the original. The following discussion will seek to investigate the various reasons set forth for such a procedure in order to determine whether the verse's usual rendering in English translations is accurate or whether it should be corrected.

Survey of Commentators

A survey of commentators reveals a considerable diversity of viewpoints. Bultmann maintains that Paul's word of reconciliation is "altogether appropriately addressed to the Corinthian community."⁴ Martin considers the phrase under consideration to be an "aside" by which the author addresses his readers directly, turning "the traditional teaching in a new direction."⁵ Martin views Paul here as holding out "the offer of what reconciliation should mean in the situation of the Corinthian malcontents."⁶ This interpretation, however, appears to represent an effort to justify theologically a reading that is better taken more straightforwardly as referring to Paul's apostolic proclamation in general to unbelievers (compare 2 Cor 5.18-19).

Harris notes the absence of any object in the original, stating that the phrase "be reconciled to God" may either be a summary of the message of reconciliation or Paul's entreaty to the unregenerate at Corinth.⁴ Bruce goes one step further, acknowledging, "No object is expressed in the original with *we beseech*, although English style expects one; the supplied *you* should not be taken to mean Paul's Corinthian readers, who are presumed to have been reconciled (compare v. 18), but those to whom he and his colleagues preach the gospel."⁵ As Bruce observes, this stands in marked contrast to 6.1 where, in contrast to 5.20, the object of Paul's entreaty (the *Corinthians*) is made explicit.⁶

1 Rudolf Bultmann, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1965, 164; Similarly, C.K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, New York: Harper & Row, 1973, 178.

2 Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, WBC 40, Milton Keynes, UK: Word, 1991 [1986], 155.

3 *Ibid.*

4 Murray J. Harris, *2 Corinthians*, EBC 10, ed. Frank Gaebelien, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981, 354.

5 F.F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, London: Oliphants, 1971, 210.

6 *Ibid.*, 211.

7 Compare already Martin, *2 Corinthians*; cf. also John Reumann, "Reconciliation," *IDB* Supplementary Volume (1976) 729.

1 Emphasis added. See the appendix for a survey of English translations of 2 Cor 5.20. Each of the thirteen translations surveyed supplies the personal pronoun not found in the original Greek. The NKJV, but remarkably not the NASB, indicates the absence of the pronoun in the original by italicizing it. It should be noted that this problem may, at least in part, be particular to the Anglo-American world, since German translations, for example, habitually render the passage along the lines of "Wir bitten an Christi Statt" (*Einknechtsbittensatzung*; "We plead on Christ's behalf"), thus rendering the Greek original without supplying a direct object for "we plead."

2 On efforts to construe Paul's terminology here as an application of kerygmatic teaching, see the discussion below.

Several factors favor Bruce's interpretation.¹ To begin with, it should be noted that, in the section from 2 Cor 5:14 to 21, personal pronouns denoting a direct address to the Corinthians are completely absent. Not until 6:1 does Paul resume the direct dialogue with the Corinthians from 5:13.² Also, the section from 3:1 to 5:21 does not contain a single injunction directed toward the Corinthians. Only in 6:1, 13, and 17 are they commanded to do certain things.

Reference has already been made to attempts at interpreting Paul's apparent exhortation to the Corinthians to be reconciled to God as an injunction for those believers to "live as reconciled people."³ According to this understanding, such an exhortation would be consistent with Paul's general purpose for writing 2 Corinthians in promoting interpersonal reconciliation.⁴ It seems preferable, however, to render *katalageite* ("be reconciled") as a genuine passive rather than as a deponent, since there is no indication that *katalageite* is ever used as a deponent in the aorist.⁵ The context, too, supports the notion that, while God actively provides reconciliation through Christ, the human being is merely enjoined to "allow himself to be reconciled to God" by accepting the reconciliation provided for him by God. In other words, Paul's command here is not "be reconciled to one another" but "be reconciled to God."

Conclusion

The major findings of this article may be summarized as follows. First, an absolute use of *deonmar* in 2 Cor 5:20 is certainly possible and should therefore not be ruled out *a priori*, even though this may appear to make for an awkward English translation. Second, the context strongly favors the absolute rendering, since it deals with the apostolic ministry and message of reconciliation *in general*. Third, the absence of pronouns referring to the Corinthians in the entire section 2 Cor 5:14-21, and the sustained emphasis on the apostolic ministry in general in 2 Cor 3-5, further caution against supplying a pronoun in v. 20. Fourth, attempts to reinterpret *katalageite* in terms of believers "living" "reconciled lives" are unconvincing in light of the fact that the grammatical form of the imperative appears to be a genuine passive. Rather, Paul's message exhorts people (unbelievers) to receive what God has provided: reconciliation in Christ. Fifth, if then the command "be reconciled to God" most naturally refers to initial conversion (as it usually does in the New Testament), it seems unlikely that Paul would have addressed *the Corinthians* in this way. Despite their divisiveness and

1 It should be pointed out that while the interpretation argued here essentially concurs with Bruce's, this commentator has failed to make an impact on the vast majority of English Bible translations, hence the need to further substantiate the necessity to establish the rendering argued for below as the standard for future versions.

2 Marshall's solution, while ingenious, appears forced. Acknowledging that "the language which Paul is using sounds much more like a description of the gospel message proclaimed to the non-Christian," he concludes that "Paul is here making use of the language of evangelism to call members of the church to welcome him [i.e. Paul] back personally as their spiritual father." Compare I.H. Marshall, "The Meaning of Reconciliation," in *Unity and Diversity in New Testament Theology: Essays in Honor of George Eldon Ladd*, ed. Robert A. Guelich, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans 1978, 129.

3 Compare already Martin, 2 *Corinthians*; cf. also John Reumann, "Reconciliation," *DB* Supplementary Volume (1976) 729.

4 Compare Hans-Jürgen Finsdels, *Verständigung Apostolat-Kirche: Eine exegetisch-theologische und religionsgeschichtliche Studie zu den Versöhnungsaussagen des Neuen Testaments* (ZKor, Rom, Kol, Eph), Würzburg: Echter 1983, 193.

5 Compare Marshall, "The Meaning of Reconciliation," 122-124; also BAQ 414.

immaturity, he generally considers them elsewhere in the epistle to be believers. Moreover, there is no indication in the context that Paul here singles out an unbelieving segment in the Corinthian church that needed to be reconciled to God in terms of experiencing a Christian conversion.

In light of these observations, there appears to be no good reason to view 2 Cor 5:20 as directly addressed to Paul's Corinthian audience. Rather, Paul here describes the general nature of his apostolic message of reconciliation. To paraphrase the verse, "We, the apostles, plead [with our respective audiences] to be reconciled to God." English translations should accordingly be corrected and delete the personal pronoun "you" that is usually supplied after "we urge" or "we plead." The statement should rather be rendered, "We plead on Christ's behalf; Be reconciled to God."

APPENDIX

Major English Translations of 2 Cor 5:20

English Version	Translation
NASB	"we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God"
NIV	"We implore you on Christ's behalf"
RSV	"We beseech you on behalf of Christ"
NRSV	"we entreat you on behalf of Christ"
KJV	"we pray you in Christ's stead"
NKJV	"we implore you on Christ's behalf"
NEB	"in Christ's name, we implore you"
CEV	"We speak for Christ and sincerely ask you"
NLT	"We urge you, as though Christ himself were here pleading with you?"
NCV	"We speak for Christ when we beg you"
GNB	"On Christ's behalf, we beg you"
REB	"we implore you in Christ's name"
NAB	"We implore you, in Christ's name"

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Should Old Testament "Cush" be rendered "Africa"?

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A question eventually facing any Bible translator is how to render geographical names. John A. Thompson simply answers: "Well-known places should usually be given their modern names, not their Hebrew or Greek names."¹ However, this approach creates new problems. What is a well-known place, and what is a modern name? Geographical names do not live their lives in a vacuum. On the contrary,

1 J.A. Thompson, "Bible geographies and atlas and their use in translating," *The Bible Translator* 32 (1981) 431-437, here 431.