

LIFE IN CHRIST: LIFE IN NEW CREATION

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2 Corinthians 5:16-21

We all possess, I would argue, at least a basic understanding of how our nation was founded. For centuries, indigenous people had inhabited this continent. We know them as Native Americans. The Canadians identify them as the First Nations. Around 1000 AD, Leif Ericson, a Norse explorer, sailed from Iceland and became the first European (that we know of) to set foot on the North American continent. In 1492, Christopher Columbus made his famous voyage from Europe to the New World. He believed he had arrived in Asia but it was just the Bahamas. After that, people began emigrating from the Old World to settle in the New World. Some of these settlements were successful. Others, like the mysterious Roanoke Colony, were not. In 1619, slaves were brought from Africa for the first time to the new land.

As the population of the New World grew, the people began to organize. Although Spain and France laid claim to large swaths of the New World, eventually Britain would claim the northern and central Atlantic coast and the crown recognized thirteen separate colonies in the region. Tensions between Britain and France became manifest in the French and Indian War which was fought from 1754 to 1763. Meanwhile, the colonies began to identify with one another and self-identify as Americans. They began to resent the control that Britain placed on them and they argued for, among other things, “no taxation without representation.” In 1773, a group calling themselves The Sons of Liberty, acting in defiance to the crown, destroyed a shipment of tea in Boston Harbor. Britain responded by closing the harbor and imposing punitive measures. In 1776, representatives from these colonies met and approved a declaration of their independence from the sovereign rule of Britain, a declaration which begins with these words: “When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another.”

The British monarchy, of course, objected to this demand for self-rule since they viewed the Americas as a lucrative source of revenue. So, they sent more troops to hold the colonies in check. The colonists fought back and entered into the American War for Independence. The war was actually a world war with the French, Spanish, and Dutch getting involved. The Americans’ Continental Army was led by General George Washington. The war is generally considered to have ended with the defeat of the British army at Yorktown in October 1781. Shortly after that, the British parliament voted to suspend all war activities in the Americas.

However, just because the hostilities had ended did not mean that the war was over. There were still issues to be dealt with. The thirteen states and Britain

recognized that each were players on the world stage. They had deep economic, political, and personal entanglements. They were like a couple that gets a divorce but still has kids to raise and need to figure out how to get along. The Americans and the British had to work things out.

So they did what any two nations would do. They appointed ambassadors to meet and develop an agreement. The British were represented by Richard Oswald and David Hartle. The Americans sent John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, John Jay, and Henry Laurens. Adams would go on to become the first US vice-president and then the second president. John Jay was a lawyer. He was ambassador to Spain. He served as the first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Henry Laurens was a rice planter from South Carolina and political leader. He succeeded John Hancock as President of the Second Continental Congress. And Benjamin Franklin did just about everything.

These ambassadors met in Paris and negotiated an agreement that is known as the Treaty of Paris. This treaty was signed on September 3, 1783, and quickly ratified by both nations, thus officially ending the war.

The treaty begins with these words: "In the Name of the most Holy & undivided Trinity. It having pleased the Divine Providence to dispose the Hearts of the most Serene and most Potent Prince George the Third, by the Grace of God, King of Great Britain, France, and Ireland, Defender of the Faith, etc., and of the United States of America, to forget all past Misunderstandings and Differences that have unhappily interrupted the good Correspondence and Friendship which they mutually wish to restore; and to establish such a beneficial and satisfactory Intercourse between the two countries upon the ground of reciprocal Advantages and mutual Convenience as may promote and secure to both perpetual Peace and Harmony."

The treaty lays out ten separate articles designed to restore the relationship between the two countries. First of all, Britain acknowledges the United States as free and independent.

The treaty established geographical boundaries for the United States.

The treaty granted fishing rights to US fishermen in the Grand Banks off the coast of Newfoundland.

The treaty determined that past debts would be paid by creditors on both sides.

The treaty stipulated that the States would return any seized property and not take any property from loyalists in the future.

Prisoners of war would be released. And so on.

This treaty did not just end the war; it sought reconciliation between the two nations. That word, ‘reconciliation,’ is powerful. Reconciliation is the process of restoring friendship, of bringing harmony to a fractured a relationship, of settling differences in a way acceptable to all parties involved. A divorced couple can choose to never speak again. That is not reconciliation. Reconciliation requires that they forge a new relationship, maybe not as husband and wife, but as friends.

Look at the language of the Treaty of Paris: “to establish such a beneficial and satisfactory Intercourse between the two countries upon the ground of reciprocal Advantages and mutual Convenience as may promote and secure to both perpetual Peace and Harmony.”

The nation of South Africa, after abolishing the system of apartheid, established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. South Africans could apply to this commission to tell their stories of what they had suffered under apartheid or how they had perpetuated apartheid. The purpose was to give people the opportunity to speak out and tell the truth, all for the reconciliation of the nation. Imagine how it would feel to be able to speak openly and know that you are being heard by your nation and even the world.

The idea of reconciliation is key in our reading today from Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians. This word appears five times in the passage.

God reconciled us to himself through Christ.
God has given us the ministry of reconciliation.
In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself.
God entrusts the message of reconciliation to us.
On behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

As you recall, the apostle Paul established this Christian church in the Greek city of Corinth. When the church appeared to be on its feet, Paul moved on to the next mission opportunity. He remained in contact with congregation and followed their progress. He learned through letters and word-of-mouth of various differences and conflicts plaguing the congregation. Through at least four letters (and we have two of them), Paul attempts to help and direct his people in Corinth.

Here in Chapter 5 of this letter we call Second Corinthians, Paul strives to help the people embrace the larger picture, to see beyond their petty differences, and recognize the true issue at hand—that is, God’s work in Jesus Christ. This is greater than any of them. Their petty concerns revolve around the old order. Paul reminds them that God brings something new.

Our reading begins with Paul pointing out that no longer should we regard any person from a *human point of view*. Literally, he writes that no longer should we regard anyone according to the flesh (*sarx*). For Paul, *flesh* exists in opposition to

spirit. To live in the spirit is to live in God. To live in the flesh is a rejection of God. As Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, to live according to the flesh is to have a mind that is hostile to God and a life that displeases God. Living according to the flesh leads to death (Rom. 8:6, 13).

To live in Christ, Paul writes, is to live in a new creation. *Everything old has passed away; everything has become new.*

Paul is reminding the people that as human beings, we are stuck in the old; we are stuck in the flesh. We cannot change ourselves. We cannot, under our own volition, walk in the spirit. We cannot reach salvation. Only God has the power to make that happen.

We are sinners. We have broken the covenant with God. If we desire a relationship with God, then our sins must be accounted for. We must seek reconciliation. And only God can offer that. God alone is the author of reconciliation. God works for this reconciliation through Christ.

In the Treaty of Paris, Article 4 called for the repayment of debts on both sides. With God, we cannot repay the debts of our sins. There is no such currency. As an act of reconciliation, God paid those debts for us with the life of the Son.

For Paul, there is a war at hand—a war between the flesh and the spirit, between death and life, between sin and righteousness. Those who are *in Christ* are on the side of spirit and life and righteousness. They have witnessed the new creation.

This comes about from God who reconciled us to him through Christ. Did you hear that? God did the work here. God reconciled us to him. We didn't do it. We can't do it. Only God can do it. Through the life and sacrifice of Jesus, we are reconciled with God. As a result, God has encumbered us with *the ministry of reconciliation*—a ministry we are to accept and use.

I love the words of verse 19 where Paul tells us that God reconciles the world to himself, and in doing so does not *count their trespasses against them*. Imagine you are trying to make up with a friend with whom you've had a disagreement. In the process, you continue to point out how your friend has offended you. These are his sins, his trespasses, and you use them as leverage. God does not do this. God sets our offenses aside. They are not part of the negotiation. In becoming something new, we start with a clean slate; nothing is held against us.

Finally, in the Treaty of Paris there were ambassadors—representatives from each side. We, too, Paul reminds us, are ambassadors. God names us as *ambassadors for Christ*. This is a job given us so that we might work to bring God's reconciliation to the world. You are an ambassador for Christ. Everything you do should be in his name.

Benjamin Franklin and the others were heroes of their day for negotiating the Treaty of Paris which brought two warring nations to friendship. Today, Britain is regarded as the closest ally of the US. We have what Winston Churchill termed a “special relationship.”

In this season of Lent, let us not forget our call to be *ambassadors for Christ*. Let us also rejoice that through Christ we are the recipients of God’s healing reconciliation. In this, we are truly a new creation.