

ARISE & BUILD

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THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION

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The idea that the ministry of reconciliation of 2 Cor. 5:16-21 is restricted to an elite group of preachers and ministers has been hard to dislodge, despite

how firmly Hebrews 5:11-14 asserts that growth unto full teaching authority is expected of all Christians.¹ J. A. Bengel (1687-1752) comments on 2 Cor. 5:18 as follows:

Us especially comprehends the apostles; but not them alone; for at the beginning of ver. 18, the discourse has already a wide application. Thus the subject often varies in the same discourse, and yet the variation is not expressly noted.²

In David Garland's words, our obligations regarding the ministry of reconciliation are clear, and we are called upon to be true peacemakers in every sense of the word:

The ministry of reconciliation therefore involves more than simply explaining to others what God has done in Christ. It requires that one become an active reconciler oneself. Like Christ, a minister of reconciliation plunges into the midst of human tumult to bring harmony out of chaos, reconciliation out of estrangement, and love in the place of hate.³

God did not deputize Paul to make people feel good about themselves and their relationship to God but to effect a real peace.⁴

That peace, that cessation of hostilities, is between God and man *and* between man and man, as opposed to peace falsely so-called, and we have our own part to play in the increase of Christ's government and of peace.

Dr. Rushdoony also sees a broad obligation being committed into the hands of Christians in this pivotal passage of Paul's in 2 Cor. 5:16-20:

We are a new creation with a clean record; and we have a duty now, the ministry of reconciliation. Having been reconciled to God by Jesus Christ, we have a duty in Christ to reconcile others to Him. At its heart, this "ministry of reconciliation" is our calling to make known Christ's work of redemption for all of history, to make it serve God's Kingdom rather than man's. We have thus a duty of gratitude and service. The duty of reconciliation, of reconciling men to God through Jesus Christ, is now our duty. This duty of reconciliation is *committed*, or, put in us; it is now our life. We are not satisfied with the world as it is: we work to reconcile it to God in Christ.⁵

Among modern commentators, Rushdoony is not alone in seeing the work expected of us in regard to extending reconciliation into all things we put our hand to. Trent Casto's new commentary casts the situation in a similar light.

Hostility festered between all of us and God, but God reconciled us so that we could be at peace with Him. The "us" (referred to in 2 Cor. 5:18) who were reconciled and given the ministry of reconciliation should be understood not just of Paul and his associates, but of all believers. The very same ones who are said to be reconciled to God have also been given the ministry and message of reconciliation.⁶

The calling to represent God's reconciliation was especially for the apostle Paul and for those of us called to preach

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the gospel, but it is also true of every believer.⁷

J. R. Thomson further extends the meaning of reconciliation as he begins his discussion of the concept.

Ver. 18. – “*The ministry of reconciliation.*” Every good man is a peacemaker. Both unconsciously by his character and disposition, and consciously and actively by his efforts, he composes differences and promotes concord and amity among his fellowmen.⁸

Noted New Testament scholar Stanley E. Porter argues that all Christians are ambassadors for Christ, and he provides three arguments in favor of this notion.⁹

Frank J. Matera lays out the fundamentals of reconciliation and the social dynamics that undergird it when it extends to interpersonal and social connections:

The New Testament vocabulary for “reconciliation” consists of a number of compound words (*katallage, katallasso, apokatallasso*) that indicate a change in the social relationship of people previously at enmity with each other. Accordingly, people who have been reconciled with each other “exchange” a relationship of enmity and hostility for one of friendship and peace.¹⁰

We must reject the idea that this matter isn’t part of our reasonable service and is reposed only in evangelists, pastors, and missionaries. The priesthood of all believers alone militates against such sacerdotal (priestly) thinking, the idea that a spiritual elite is being charged with a task while laymen are off the hook. No, this obligation is not based on sacerdotal grounds, but upon *moral* grounds.

MORAL, NOT SACERDOTAL

As J. R. Thomson points out in his discussion of the ministry of reconciliation that Paul describes,

The Christian ministry consists in the offer of reconciliation. It is a *moral* and not a sacerdotal ministry; it is *experimental*, being entrusted to those who are themselves reconciled; it is a ministry accompanied with *supernatural power*, even the energy of the Spirit of God; it is an *authoritative* ministry, which men are not at liberty

to disregard or despise; it is an *effectual* ministry, for those who discharge it faithfully are unto many the “savour of life unto life.”¹¹

The *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* weighs in on the powerful effects wrought by the reconciliation that Paul is defining anew for us.

The term *reconciliation* has a pre-history in the tradition Paul gladly took over, as in 2 Corinthians 5:18-21 and Colossians 1:15-20. ... In particular, he has disinfected the term of its gnosticizing taint by anchoring reconciliation in the historical events of Jesus’s passion and tying in the effect of reconciliation to moral transformation in human lives. These far-ranging and distinctive ideas – covering cosmic, personal, societal and ethnic areas of our human story – are nevertheless part of a pattern, whose picture fills the tapestry. The various strands are closely textured and intricately woven together. Yet they are not aimlessly put into a frame. There is an emerging design and a coherent picture. And the most adequate and meaningful title for the result is, we submit, “reconciliation.”¹²

Matera further points out that this ministry is a *very close cousin* to the other ministries that Paul has identified, and in fact is all but synonymous with them, wherein its moral nature as driven by the Spirit is correlated without any contradiction.

Now Paul affirms that God has also granted him a share in “the ministry of reconciliation.” This ministry, of course, is not a new ministry that is somehow different from “the ministry of the Spirit” or “the ministry of righteousness.” Rather, the concept of reconciliation allows Paul to clarify further his understanding of the ministry of the Spirit and the ministry of righteousness.¹³

C. Lipscomb shows how the Law of God then comes into play within the domain of reconciliation as set forth in Paul’s epistle:

The enmity of the carnal man has to be subdued, and in this sense he is “a new creature,” but the possibility of this creation rests upon an antecedent fact, viz. a changed relation to the violated Law of God.¹⁴

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The question of what Old Testament passage Paul is structuring his appeal on has usually led expositors to point to Psalm 105:26ff, but Garland points out that O. Hofius has identified a much better fit in Psalm 78:5.¹⁵ The elements of 2 Cor. 5:18-20 follow that verse perfectly, and since that psalm has a subsequent context (verses 6 and 7) to which it is driving, it is worth our effort to look at the entire passage in this light:

For He established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which He commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children: That the generation to come might know them, even the children which should be born; who should arise and declare them to their children: That they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments: (Ps. 78:5-7)

Given the remarkably tight connection between Paul's argument and the Psalmist's survey of God's activities, it is reasonable to surmise that the *ultimate purpose* disclosed in verses 6-7 for His actions in verse 5 should be given serious consideration. That purpose is to not only have them set their hope on God, but also to *keep His commandments*.

THE ULTIMATE REACH OF RECONCILIATION

Benjamin Warfield regards this passage in 2 Cor. 5 as teaching the ultimate goal behind the Great Commission, and warns us against several common errors in dealing with the passage. The first error is a too-shallow approach to the biblical text, glossing quickly over the words and thus losing Paul's intent in the process. The second is to actually draw the wrong conclusion even where the text's words are not handled hastily. The third is to blithely limit the Holy One of Israel, and the fourth is to assume that testimony alone is sufficient to satisfy God, that throwing Him a bone in this regard without actually discharging our duties regarding true reconciliation is good enough. It is not.

God was reconciling the world with Himself in Christ (2 Cor. 5:19). Every word here must be taken in its full meaning. The ministry which Paul exer-

cised, and which everyone who follows him in proclaiming the gospel exercises with him, is distinctively the ministry of reconciliation, not of testimony merely, but of reconciliation. It has as its object, and is itself the proper means of, the actual reconciliation of the whole world. ... His meaning, when he cries "Behold, now is the acceptable time, behold, now is the day of salvation," is not, as it has sometimes been strangely misunderstood, that the day in which we may find acceptance with God is swiftly passing by, but rather that now at length that promised day of salvation has fully come.¹⁶

David Thomas makes it clear that "Paul speaks of the world being reconciled to God, not of God to the world. The 'world,' not a section of the race, but all mankind."¹⁷

Ralph P. Martin's comments on the Corinthian passage lay out the fundamentals that necessitate the advent of this ministry of reconciliation.

To Paul, the estrangement which the Christian reconciliation has to overcome is undubitably two-sided: there is something in God as well as something in man which has to be dealt with before there can be peace.¹⁸

The serious thing which makes the Gospel necessary, and the putting away of which constitutes the Gospel, is God's condemnation of the world and its sin; it is God's wrath, "revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men" (Rom. 1:16-18). The putting away of this is "reconciliation": the preaching of *this* reconciliation is the preaching of the Gospel.¹⁹

When Christ's work was done, the reconciliation of the world was accomplished. When men were called to receive it, they were called to a relation to God, not in which they would no more be against Him – though that is included – but in which they would no more have Him against them. There would be no condemnation thenceforth to those who were in Christ Jesus.²⁰

The very universality of the expression – reconciling a world to Himself – is consistent only with an objective reconciliation. It cannot mean that God

was overcoming the world's enmity (though that is the ulterior object), it means that God was putting away His own condemnation and wrath. When this was done, He could send, and did send, men to declare that it was done; and among these men, none had a profounder appreciation of what God had wrought, and what he himself had to declare as God's glad tidings, than the Apostle Paul.²¹

The lengthy, weighty passage in 2 Cor. 5:16-21 has many facets but one master theme. In it Paul is setting down the Christian conviction that in the Christ event a new world has been born and a new age has supervened on world history. Phrases like "a new creation," "reconciliation," and "righteousness of God" are all virtual synonyms for this new eon which has radically affected *both* divine-human *and* all earthly relationships.²²

Notice his conclusion that though the primary focus is the relationship between God and man, this changes the relationship between man and man as a result: the vertical dimension governs and shapes the horizontal dimension. No earthly relationship is omitted from the scope of the reconciliation that is in view in Paul's mind.

HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS: MEDIATED OR UNMEDIATED?

Ralph P. Martin brings home the interpersonal dimension of the reconciliation that has been committed to us, so that we will recognize that the horizontal dimension, where personal relations operate, is specifically targeted by the reconciliation that was first initiated by God to remove the enmity between the world and Himself.

Paul proceeds to spell it out in terms of reconciliation which (on our understanding of the text) had a *Vorlage* which *did* speak of cosmic restoration. In his hands the teaching is given a new twist: he has located reconciliation in forgiveness and as a matter of personal relations, with his eye on the Corinthian scene (v. 19b)...²³

And in dealing with personal relations, with relationships between man and

man no less so than between God and man, we need to grasp the concept of the mediatorial work of the law. This is an extension of the covenantal relationship established between every single creature in God's universe. We'll first look at Dr. Rushdoony's discussion of the mediator between man and man, and then consider Cornelius Van Til's approach to the same matter within a specifically covenantal context.

In his two-volume *Systematic Theology*, Dr. Rushdoony puts forward the critical difference between relationships that are mediated and those that are direct and unmediated.

Prior to man's fall, all his work was under God and in terms of God's directions, God's law-word. At the same time, all his relationships were mediated through God. Adam's relationship to Eve, to the animals, and to the earth, was not a *direct* one: it was always governed by God's covenant and hence a mediated and governed relationship. In submitting to the temptation to be his own god (Gen. 3:5), Adam chose instead to have a *direct* relationship with all things, an *unmediated* relationship governed only by his own will and word.

Every attempt at an unmediated knowledge leads finally to a pessimism concerning the possibility of knowledge. Similarly, every effort at a direct contact and use leads to a like frustration and ultimate defeat. The world of men is not our creation, nor are animals and the earth. To approach any of them as a god, with our own creative word, is to move in terms of an insanely evil delusion and assured defeat. In hell, there are no mediated relationships between men and men, and hence no communication.

The more mediated our relationships are in Christ, the more productive is our life and work, because the mediated relationship is the governed and directed one. The total providence and power of God are then linked to our lives and activities.²⁴

Dr. Rushdoony finds additional support for his view in the Berkeley Version's translation of Prov. 14:9:

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The bond (or, interpreter, intermediary) between foolish men is guilt, but between the upright it is a good will.

Rushdoony expands on both halves of this proverb, but we will focus solely upon his comments on the second half of the passage:

The bond, interpreter, or intermediary between us is One greater than ourselves. It is the Lord. Our relationship is thus greater than we are. As Christians, we have no *direct* relationship with anyone or anything. All our relationships are mediated through Jesus Christ, who made and remade us all. This gives a more solid and a permanent bond to our fellowship one with another.²⁵

Whereas Christ is the only mediator between God and man, the mediator between man and man and between man and nature is the law of God, which governs those relationships and directs our course. Dr. Rushdoony makes this explicit when discussing what he calls “the mediatorial work of the law.”

Jesus Christ is the only mediator between God and man. There is no salvation except through Jesus Christ, the God-given mediator and redeemer. The mediation of Jesus Christ is *between God and man*; the law is the God-given mediator *between man and man*.

No direct relationship is possible between persons except through the law of God. Attempts to bypass the law for a person-to-person confrontation without God means the judgment of God, for the law is operative against its violators, and against the destruction of the true relationship of man to man under God’s law.²⁶

Cornelius Van Til argued that “God put all things in this universe into covenant relation with one another.”²⁷ As a result of this fact, “man’s righteousness, which ought to be a reproduction of the righteousness of God, would be, to begin with, a *proper sense of subordination* of himself to God and of coordination of himself with his fellow man.”²⁸ As this is developed, “he therefore would actually increase in his power to maintain these relationships.”²⁹ Van Til’s conclusion follows inexorably:

Now if we contemplate righteousness as a matter of right relations among all creatures, and of the right relation of all creatures to their Creator, it becomes clear that the will of man had a great comprehensive task to perform. By seeking righteousness, the will of man was seeking the kingdom of God. *Righteousness is the sinews of the kingdom of God.*³⁰

The covenant responsibility makes it clear that the self-realization of the individual is the advantage of all and is furthered by and dependent upon the realization of others. The pagan conception of self-realization involves the sacrifice of others and is at their expense. The Christian conception of self-realization is in terms of the kingdom of God and a common humanity, an organism.³¹

It is apparent that Van Til’s discussion of the pagan conception of self-realization involves *direct, unmediated* relationships where fallen man asserts his false claim to divinity, to be as God in his own thinking. Rushdoony and Van Til are looking at the same issue, but from different angles, illustrating different facets of what’s at stake in man’s usurping of God’s throne.

James Reid, in treating of 2 Cor. 5:18-20, notes that “a man who is reconciled to God is called by that experience to be a minister of *reconciliation*. . . . 20. *We Are Ambassadors for Christ* – Our task is that of building the bridge between men and God and between men and men. . . . We shall not heal their hurt by saying ‘Peace, peace; when there is no peace’ (Jer. 8:11).”³² Moreover, “the ministry, which through this experience is committed to men, is the *ministry of reconciliation*, not of denunciation, or reformation, or exhortation, or any form of uplift.”³³ Here we have several significant concerns.

The bridge between men and men involves dealing biblically and lawfully with the matters that separate and divide men from one another. You will note how Reid pinpoints a prevailing issue in our own age: men launching a ministry of denunciation, or exhortation, or reformation, or “any form of uplift.” None of these—repeat, *none of these*—have been committed to men. But the ministry of reconciliation

has been committed to us. It is time to implement it with all our energy.

RECONCILIATION TRANSFORMS HUMAN RELATIONS

To know no one after the flesh means no longer attempting to have direct, unmediated relationships with them. When the relationship is governed by God's law-word, then His Spirit is the intermediary. This implies a new social standard, as David Thomas points out in 2 Cor. 5:16:

The man in Christ has a new SOCIAL STANDARD. "Henceforth we know no man after the flesh." The world has numerous standards by which it judges men: birth, wealth, office, etc. To a man filled and fired with love to Christ these are nothing. He estimates man by his *rectitude*, not by his rank; by his *spirit*, not by his station; by his *principles*, not by his property.³⁴

As B. H. Carroll comments on 2 Cor. 5:17ff, "An unconverted man lives unto himself and decides all questions according to the way it pleases him, but the converted man is a new creature in that respect, and decides things as Christ would have him decide, though contrary to his inclinations."³⁵

We have a working template in Proverbs 16:7 for how relationships mediated by God's law work like leaven to transform prior enmity. "When a man's ways please the Lord, He maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him." God's proactive role here is baked into the Hebrew wording, as Waltke notes: "more specifically, *He compels [them] to surrender (yasim: see salom in 3:2), a unique grammatical construction.*"³⁶ Waltke chooses an interesting example to illustrate this truth:

Through Isaac's willingness to give up his rights to the Philistines and under God's good hand, the Philistines ultimately sought to ally themselves with this man of blessing.³⁷

In 1863, Wardlaw saw another parallel to this thought in Israel's history: "Verily I will cause the enemy to entreat thee well in the time of evil and in the time of affliction," Jer. 15:11.³⁸

Waltke sees the next verse as an interesting "qualification" of verse 7 in verse

8, which he renders as "better a little with righteousness than a large income with injustice," indicative of the primacy of justice in the providence of God.

Consider the practical example of a mediated versus an unmediated transaction in the matter of haggling over price. When mediated, neither the buyer nor seller misassign value to an item being sold. They trust each other, and so value does not become inflated to compensate for false devaluation. The Golden Rule is operative and manages expectations. When *unmediated and direct*, however, we encounter the dynamic of Prov. 20:14: "It is naught, it is naught, saith the buyer; but when he is gone his way, then he boasteth." All economic calculations then become confrontational and steeped in dishonesty. This corrosive force spreads into all sectors of society.

The poor tithing legislation that actually abolishes poverty includes a community feast that brings everyone together, "so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands" (Deut. 14:29). Like the law to return your enemy's ox to him (Ex. 23:4), God's law restores community and communion between man and man, and even promotes safety in the community (Ex. 21:29).

THE PINNACLE OF RECONCILIATION

Reconciliation denotes the cessation of hostilities. We see aggression between nations finally cease in the prophecy of Isa. 2:2-4, where weapons are converted into agricultural implements, where the *permanent cessation* of war is promised: "nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war evermore." The Prince of Peace has "spoken peace to the nations" after having "cut off the chariot ... the horse ... and the battle bow" (Zech. 9:10), while the increase of His government and of peace has no end (Isa. 9:7). In fact, "abundance of peace shall endure until the moon be no more" (Ps. 72:7) – the fruit of reconciliation. The conversion of His enemies into His adopted people is the engine driving this process, the *reconciling* of all things in the heavens and in the earth (Col. 1:20-21) paralleling the *restitution* of all things (Acts 3:21).

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However, the process doesn't end merely with the hostility between man and man being extinguished, but also the hostility between man and nature, the created order. This is what Isa. 11:6-9 teaches us, and what Paul in Rom. 8:19-23 affirms in its fullness. "They shall neither hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain, for the knowledge of the Lord shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea."⁴⁰

By establishing the Law (Rom. 3:31) we discharge our holy duty in respect to this crucial ministry of reconciliation that has been deposited in every one of us by our Lord and Savior.⁴¹

1. <https://chalconedon.edu/resources/articles/the-perpetual-kindergarten>

2. John Albrecht Bengel, *Bengel's New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1981 [1741]), vol. 2, p. 300.

3. David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 1999), p. 291-92. Garland lists several examples of Paul taking on the role of reconciler in First Corinthians, concluding thus: "Clearly, reconciliation does not entail glossing over sin or ignoring it for the sake of maintaining harmony. Paul confronts it directly and forcefully, so forcefully in the letter of tears that it temporarily deepened the breach in his relationship with the Corinthians and prompted this letter to mend any hurt feelings. But Paul knows that there can be no real reconciliation without an acknowledgement of sinful behavior and repentance for it." (p. 292).

4. *Ibid.*, p. 294.

5. R. J. Rushdoony, *Sermons in First and Second Corinthians* (Vallecito, CA: Chalcedon/Ross House Books, 2023), p. 268.

6. Trent Casto, *2 Corinthians* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2023), p. 156. Casto cites the 1984 commentary by Victor Paul Furnish in support of this idea.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 159.

8. H.D.M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell, eds., *The Pulpit Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1950), vol. 19, sec. 2, p. 132.

9. In Barnett's retelling, Porter claims that "(1) the 'us' references in vv. 18 and 19 should not be limited to the apostles, (2) *hos* with the genitive absolute *tau parakalountos* in v. 20 is best taken as 'with the thought that God appeals through us,' and (3) *katallagete to theo* is addressed to those to whom the Corinthians are ambassadors." Barnett offers reasons why he thinks Porter's analysis is incorrect, but his points don't appear to address the unique nature of Paul's excursus on reconciliation, which Porter had focused on comprehensively in 1993. See Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 310, n. 44.

10. Frank J. Matera, *II Corinthians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), p. 138.

11. Spence, p. 132.

12. *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993). See *The Center of Paul's Theology*

13. Matera, p. 139.

14. Spence, p. 129.

15. Garland, p. 294.

16. John E. Meeter, ed., *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield, Vol. 1* (Phillipsburg, PA: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1970), p. 350.

17. Spence, p. 126.

18. Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1986), p. 154.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 158.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 153.

24. R. J. Rushdoony, *Systematic Theology* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1994), vol. 2, p. 1023.

25. R. J. Rushdoony, *Faith and Action* (Vallecito, CA: Chalcedon/Ross House Books, 2018), vol. 2, pp. 842-843.

26. R. J. Rushdoony, *Institutes of Biblical Law* (Vallecito, CA: Chalcedon/Ross House Books, 2020 [1973]), pp. 438-439.

27. Cited in R. J. Rushdoony, *By What Standard* (Vallecito, CA: Chalcedon/Ross House Books, 2022 [1959]), p. 84.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*, p. 86. These five citations are taken from Van Til's *Christian Theistic Ethics*.

32. *The Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1953), vol. 10, p. 342.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 339.

34. Spence, p. 125.

35. B. H. Carroll, *An Interpretation of the English Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1943), vol. 5, sec. 2, pp. 296-97.

36. Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs, Chapters 15-31* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 14.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

38. Ralph Wardlaw, *Lectures on the Book of Proverbs* (Minneapolis, MN: Klock & Klock, 1981 [1863]), vol. 2, p. 80.

39. Waltke, p. 15.

40. <https://chalconedon.edu/resources/articles/the-scope-of-healing>

41. <https://chalconedon.edu/resources/articles/the-crooked-shall-be-made-straight>

Humanism is collapsing, but is the Church ready to govern in Christ's name?

Rushdoony predicted the times in which we live which is why he focused the mission of Chalcedon on the great work of Christian Reconstruction. The only remedy to what we face is a return to Christian faith, character, and obedience.

Rushdoony wrote, "The Biblical doctrine of theocracy means the self-government of the Christian man," (*Sovereignty*, p. 31) which means the Christian most needs the resources to equip him for Biblical self-government.

The Chalcedon Foundation is a "think-tank for the self-governing Christian," and our mission is to equip Christian families and churches to apply the faith to every area of life and cultivate faithfulness to God's law and covenant in order that Christ's Kingdom might increase.

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