"RECONCILE YOURSELVES TO GOD."
AN UNUSUAL INTERPRETATION OF 2 CORINTHIANS 5:20
IN ITS CONTEXT

Reimund Bieringer

After a solemn introduction in 2 Cor. 5:20 Paul addresses the Corinthian community with the aorist imperative passive καταλλάγητε which is invariably translated into English as “be reconciled” (or “let yourselves be reconciled”). There seems to be a far-reaching consensus that the human activity that is commanded by Paul in the imperative is limited to the acceptance of God’s gift of reconciliation that Paul had elaborated upon in 5:18-19.

Outside the English-speaking world, there are, however, a few voices (especially in French-speaking circles) that sound a different cord. Jacques Dupont said in his 1952 article on reconciliation: “Le sens moyen: 'se réconcilier' paraît plus naturel,” and he explained the meaning of the middle form as follows: “Dieu a fait le premier pas, mais il demande à l'homme de faire le second.”¹ In 1989 Jan Lambrecht suggested the reflexive translation “reconcile yourselves” in an article² and repeated the same interpretation in his 1999 commentary on 2 Corinthians in the Sacra Pagina series,³ even though his suggestion had since then met with little enthusiasm. For instance, Margaret E. Thrall had expressed her objections in her 1994 commentary on 2 Corinthians in the ICC series, in the following words:

The plea to the hearers is: καταλλάγητε τῷ θεῷ. The imperative is significant, since it shows that man is not merely a passive participant in a purely automatic process. Whether this means, however, that the verb should be seen as actually having a reflexive force is more doubtful. To translate, “Reconcile yourselves to God” perhaps goes too far in this

³ J. Lambrecht, Second Corinthians, Collegeville 1999, p. 100.
direction. God and man are not seen by Paul as equal partners in the process, although God’s activity cannot come to full fruition without the positive human response.\(^4\)

In this study we shall focus on the “mystery” of καταλλάγητε in 2 Cor. 5:20d. We shall first undertake a grammatical analysis of aorist passives in general. Second we shall discuss the meaning of the aorist passive forms of διαλλάσσω and καταλλάσσω in Greek literature. Finally, we shall turn to an interpretation of 2 Cor. 5:20d in its immediate context.

1. **A Grammatical Analysis of the Aorist (Imperative) Passive**

a. **Aorist Passive Forms Understood as Passives**

In a passive sentence the subject is not the one who acts, but the one who undergoes or receives the action.\(^5\) In the normal meaning of the passive nothing is stated about the subject’s attitude toward the action which is directed at the subject. The permissive (“let/allow yourself to be ...”) and the causative (“get/cause yourself to be ...”) meanings of the passive on the other hand suggest a more or less cooperative attitude.\(^6\)

The verbs διαλλάσσω and καταλλάσσω are transitive and are therefore expected to be used in the passive. There are several instances in biblical and extra-biblical literature where these verbs are used in undoubtedly passive forms. Other occurrences are ambiguous.\(^7\)

The normal meaning of the passive is most frequently presupposed in the English translations of 2 Cor. 5:20d (“be/become reconciled”), German and Dutch translations usually prefer the permissive sense (“let yourselves be reconciled”). The permissive aspect seems already to be a concession to the conviction that the normal passive meaning is not satisfactory in the case of this imperative. It is a hesitant attempt to introduce an ever so slight active nuance into the passive.

\(^4\) M.E. Thrall, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* I, Edinburgh 1994, pp. 437-438. See also the critical voices in the discussion which followed Lambrecht’s paper at the 11th ecumenical colloquium paulinum which is documented in Lambrecht, “Reconcile yourselves ...”, pp. 192-209 (394-411).


\(^6\) See *BDT* § 314 (cf. § 317).

\(^7\) See below, pp. 18-22.