

"The Forgiveness of Sins"

—By Terry Schlossberg

"Forgiveness of sins, then, is for us the first entry into the church and Kingdom of God."

John Calvin, Institutes, Book IV, Ch. I. 20.

Forgiveness and our union with Christ

The Apostles' Creed now takes us deep into the ministry of the Church of Jesus Christ. Alistair McGrath writes that the whole of the New Testament understanding of the work of Christ is contained in this brief testimony: "the forgiveness of sins." This little phrase is the Gospel's explanation "of what was going on between God, Christ and sinful humanity in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus."

When we affirm the forgiveness of sins in repeating the Creed, we are declaring our imperfectability and the sin that first made us aware of our need of the Savior. That need of forgiveness, the gift of God's sanctification notwithstanding, follows us to the grave. Anselm described us as "ruined palaces," referring both to our glory as God's special creation, and to the sin that undoes us, and that we ourselves cannot undo. John Calvin said that our first calling is to repentance and that it is a lifelong calling.

God's New Person Development Plan

Probably no Scripture speaks so loudly behind this statement of the Creed than the familiar John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." This is the rescue party at work.

It is forgiveness that begins the work of rebuilding the palace that God wants to make of us, reshaped

in Christ's own image and indwelt by him as Holy Spirit. It is the work of reconciliation that unites us with our Savior and delivers the gift of the peace that passes all understanding. **Baptism, the sign of God's forgiveness**

This confession within the Creed follows "one holy catholic church, the communion of saints." This is appropriate, says Calvin. We who have



gone our own way are brought back by God's mercy and kindness. Thus, we enter the Church by way of baptism, signifying God's forgiveness of us and the new life laid out before us. The sacrament, the bricks and mortar of the institution, the pastors, elders, and members who welcome us, are meant to be a visible reminder that we have entered a new kingdom by the only means possible: forgiveness.

This first sign of God's mercy is only a glorious beginning. The con-



fession of sin, that is a common part of Presbyterian liturgy in worship, is a lifelong reminder of what our hearts tell us: we are in constant need of God's forgiveness for our daily offenses "in thought, word, and deed." (Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q. 82)

The Word and the Sacraments of the Church are intended continually to minister grace to the lives of believers. Self-examination and confession are associated with the Supper that signifies the unity of a repentant and forgiven body of believers.

Forgiveness: the world-changing promise of God

Here in the Apostles' Creed is the great, but simple, declaration of the heart of the Gospel: the forgiveness of sins. Here is the declaration of our freedom in Christ. Here is the promise that we can be what we cannot be on our own. God can transform us. But, the promise is not so simple as "can." God *means* to transform us. He *wants* to transform us. He *died* to transform us. So we are not dead in our sins.

This is a promise that can change the world.

Sin can be a slippery matter. It is human nature to want to bury our own offenses against God, or to confess to lesser sins in order to turn our eyes away from those things in us that most grieve our heavenly Father. We are drawn to those people who console us by helping us rationalize our sins.

"forgiveness of sins"

There are times when our grief is so great that we are tempted to think we must be its cause. Think, for example, of accidents in which a family member dies. Relatives can torture themselves with remorse and self-accusation for the rest of their lives. They need the ministry of the church to help them when they assume guilt that has no basis in reality. In cases like this, the church can help free us to grieve our losses without the burden of guilt. But there are times when we are caught unaware by a sin we have tried to explain away, and it can suddenly seem too great to bear. Think, for example, of women who take the lives of their unborn children. Though a whole society has tried to absolve them of their guilt, many of those women become self-destructive. Studies show a significantly higher incidence of suicide among them.

In the latter instance, we in the church need to reach out in love to help the woman who has been persuaded by her own rationalization or the voices around her to take the life of her child. This is a situation of real guilt. And it is why Jesus died. We must not try to make his death of no

effect. The Bible teaches us to gently lead those who have sinned to repentance. Jesus' death is the key to life: his forgiving love is lifesaving and life-transforming.

Forgiveness: The miraculous power to overcome our sins and set us free

No person needs to live with guilt. Guilt is exactly what Christ died to free us from. And there is no sin that Christ cannot forgive. There is no life that cannot be transformed by the power of God.

The Church must not lose this message. It is, at its heart, our only message. And it is not just "good" news. It is incredible and miraculous news. It is news that we must not withhold from those who need it most.

Can a woman who has taken the life of her child, by deliberate action, be forgiven? Of course she can! When Calvin speaks of this as God's "kindness," it feels like an understatement. When John Henry Newman speaks of it as "Amazing Grace," he seems to be warmer.

Repentance is one of the Gospel's paradoxes. We are not saved, or forgiven, by our repentance, and yet

repentance is necessary to forgiveness. Here is how the 17th Century Westminster Confession of Faith puts it:

Although repentance be not to be rested in as any satisfaction for sin, or any cause of the pardon thereof, which is the act of God's free grace in Christ, yet is it of such necessity to all sinners, that none may expect pardon without it. (BOC, 6.083)

So, for the men and women reading this, who have destroyed the life of an unborn child, or encouraged a woman to take that action, or advocated for it as a policy of the Christian Church, forgiveness lies right in front of you, yours for the asking: the sincere asking. God is very clear about wanting to free us from sin—every sin. He demonstrated his love for us by giving up his Son to die—for us. Lay claim to the promise of forgiveness and freedom. Let us claim it every time we repeat the Apostles' Creed!

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