

# **The Theology of Forgiveness and its Enactment**

**Taskforce on the Practice of Forgiveness in the Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA)**

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John W Kleinig

Question: how does the process of confession and absolution, reconciliation and restitution work theologically for the offender and the offended person?

## **The Delivery of Forgiveness**

Jesus, the Son of God, was sent by His Father to take away the sins of the world (Matt 1:21; John 1:29) and to speak His Father's word of pardon to sinners here on earth (Matt 9:3-8; John 5:24). He does not just pardon the evil deeds that they have done but frees them from sinful state of mistrust of God and rebellion against Him. He speaks God's word of grace to those who are guilty of rebellion against their Creator and under the sentence of eternal death from him for their rejection of Him. That word of pardon is his final judgment which they hear already now, long before they stand before His tribunal at the end of the world.

God's word of forgiveness differs from human forgiveness. It does not just voice His acceptance of sinners because He has graciously decided not to hold their sins against them, as we do when we forgive someone. Rather, by the life, death and resurrection of his Son He takes upon himself the weight of their sin, frees them from entrapment in it, and makes them right with himself. By His word of pardon he frees ungodly sinners from the guilt of sin, the sentence of spiritual death, and the power of the devil; by it He reconciles them to Himself and to their brothers and sisters in His family.

By His life, death, resurrection, and ascension Jesus has become the judge of the living and the dead (Acts 10:42; 2 Cor 5:10; 2 Tim 4:1). God the Father has entrusted all judgment to Him (John 5:22, 25). This means that He determines the eternal destiny of all people by speaking his word of absolution, or withholding it from them. That word of forgiveness is the key that opens the door to His Father's house, admits people to His royal presence, and gives them access to His grace. Those who hear and believe that word no longer face the awful prospect of condemnation at the last judgment, since they have already now passed from death to life with God the Father (John 3:17-18; 5:24). They may approach the Father with the full assurance of faith and serve him with a good conscience (Heb 9:14; 10:22).

## **The Role of the Church as a Forgiving Community**

The risen Lord Jesus delivers His Father's word of judgment to sinners (Acts 10:43; 13:38-39) in and through the church which He has established as a forgiven, forgiving community (Matthew 16:18-19; 18:15-35). He therefore appointed the apostles and their successors in the apostolic ministry to bring His forgiveness to repentant sinners; He also gave them His Holy Spirit, so that they could work with Him in forgiving

sinner (John 20:21-23; 2 Cor 5:20-6:1). They are authorised to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations in the name of Jesus (Luke 24:47).

There are three parts to Christ's delivery of forgiveness in and through the church. First, Jesus Himself actually forgives people their sins in the divine service. There, on the one hand, he diagnoses sin by the preaching of God's law which leads sinners to repentance, and He offers pardon to penitent sinners through the proclamation of the gospel. There, on the other hand, He delivers forgiveness personally through the water of baptism (Acts 2:38) and frees people from sin with His cleansing blood in Holy Communion (Matt 26:28; 1 John 1:7). By His blood He does not just forgive us our sins; He too cleanses us from all unrighteousness, all injustice (1 John 1:9). By His forgiveness He not only pardons the offender, but also releases both the offending person and offended person from spiritual damage done by the evil deed.

Second, Christ has appointed pastors as ministers of the gospel to work with Him in His personal delivery of forgiveness. He authorises them to exercise the keys together with Him in the congregations that they serve (Matt 16:18-19; John 20:21-23).<sup>1</sup> The Augsburg Confession teaches that pastors use the keys to deliver forgiveness by baptising, preaching the gospel, giving the absolution,<sup>2</sup> teaching right doctrine, and admitting people to Holy Communion (Augsburg Confession 28:5-10,21-22). They, most obviously, exercise the keys by pronouncing the absolution person to person or in the congregation. By that absolution they admit those whom they absolve to Holy Communion. The absolution which they speak does not just assure people that they are forgiven; through its enactment God the Father actually forgives them.

Third, the risen Lord Jesus involves all the members of the church in His delivery of forgiveness to each other and the world.<sup>3</sup> Since they have been forgiven, they are to gently rebuke fellow Christians who do not acknowledge that they have sinned, pray for their forgiveness, and forgive them when they apologise for what they have done (Matt 18:15-35; Luke 17:1-4; Gal 6:1-5; Eph 4:32). They are expected to seek reconciliation with any fellow Christian whom they have offended and angered (Matt 5:23-26). In their given social location they are also called to practice positive retaliation with those who are outside the church by repaying evil with good and blessing those who abuse them (Rom 12:14-21; 1 Pet 2:21-25; 3:9-12). Corporate

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<sup>1</sup> As the Messiah Jesus is the one who holds 'the key of David,' the key that opens the door to his Father's presence by forgiving those who are sinners. In Matt 16:19 he shares 'the keys of the kingdom of heaven' with Peter as the head of the apostles. The image there is of Peter as the doorkeeper of the king's palace. By forgiving or withholding forgiveness he either admits or excludes people from approaching the king and gaining help from him. The 'keys' is therefore a technical theological term for the exercise of forgiveness in the church. The 'office of the keys' refers to the authority and responsibility of a pastor to admit people to God's royal household in baptism and to the table of the heavenly King in Holy Communion.

<sup>2</sup> **Absolution means 'release' from sin, liberation from the penalty for it. The absolution is a performative utterance by which a pastor actually forgives repentant sinners by the authority of Christ. This is the authorised formula for it as it is spoken by the pastor at the beginning of the Communion Service: *Christ gave to his church the authority to forgive the sins of those who repent, and to declare to those who do not repent that their sins are not forgiven. Therefore, upon your confession, I, as a called and ordained servant of the Word, announce the grace of God to all of you, and on behalf of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.***

<sup>3</sup> We need to distinguish our forgiveness of those who have sinned against us from God's forgiveness of them. When we forgive them they do not necessarily thereby receive God's forgiveness.

prayer plays an important part in all this, for the church does the work of God in prayer (Matt 18:18-20). In the Lord's Prayer the members of the church therefore work with Christ in the delivery of forgiveness by identifying themselves with those who have sinned and asking God the Father to forgive them too (Matt 6:12; Luke 11:4). They are even called to love their enemies by asking God the Father not to punish and condemn them but to pardon and bless them instead (Matt 5:43-48).

## The Purpose of Forgiveness

What then is the purpose of forgiveness? It has to do with our relationship with God the Father as well as our relationship with each other in the church.

First and most obviously, those who are forgiven are justified before God the Father (Rom 5:1). He accepts them and approves of them; He is, in fact, pleased with them and delights in them, since they are united with His Son and share in His righteousness and holiness. They are at peace with Him. There is therefore now no condemnation for them before God (Rom 8:1). They stand before God with a good conscience and have access to His grace through Jesus (Rom 5:2). They have no need to excuse themselves, cover up in his presence, and make up for their sins. Instead, they can approach God the Father confidently in prayer to receive His blessings for themselves and others. So they can now serve God the Father as His holy priests who bring needy people to God and his blessings to needy people.

Second, since they have been reconciled with God the Father, those whom he has forgiven are called to practice forgiveness and seek reconciliation with Christian brothers and sisters in the church. They should seek reconciliation with those whom they have offended and do what is needed to restore their relationship with them, by apologising, asking for pardon, and offering appropriate restitution (Matt 5:23-28). Outside the church, when they have been wronged by unbelievers, they should not pay back evil with evil, or take revenge against those who have abused them, but pay back evil with good (Rom 12:14-21; 1 Thess 5:15; 1 Pet 2:21-25; 3:9-12). The ultimate goal is, if possible, to seek reconciliation and live at peace with all people (Rom 12:18).

Third, those who have been reconciled with God through the gospel of forgiveness are well-equipped to act as compassionate agents of God's merciful and restorative justice in their communities. Like all other people on earth they still live under God's law and serve Him in the world. They are therefore called to exercise justice in their station and vocation in the world, whether it be in the family or the workplace, in public life or in the church. They are called to use the Ten Commandments to ensure that those around them are not abused but receive fair treatment. They are well-placed to do so because they know that even though God requires all people to act justly, He expects his people to be merciful in judging others (James 2:13).

In his Small Catechism Luther quite rightly connects this responsibility for doing what is just directly with his teaching on private confession and absolution. Those who wish to receive God's absolution should examine their conscience by considering their unique God-given social location with its responsibilities in the light of the Ten Commandments (Small Catechism Kolb-Wengert 4:17-23/Tappert 5:19-23). So in preparation for private confession we are encouraged to reflect on whether we are a

father or a mother, a son or a daughter, an employer or employee; whether we have been disobedient, unfaithful, lazy, ill-tempered, or quarrelsome; whether we have harmed anyone by word or deed and allowed anyone to be abused; whether we have stolen, neglected, wasted, or damaged anything. And so on! The accent here is on our own acts of injustice rather than those done by others. As forgiven people we are to act justly and fairly in our dealings with others. It is worth noting that the acts of injustice that cause the greatest spiritual damage come from the abuse of power by parents, husbands, employers, leaders, and pastors (Matt 18:6-9; Luke 17:1-3). Those who hold these positions represent God in them. So their abuse of power is the abuse of their God-given authority which does great spiritual damage to those who are hurt by it.

### **The Practice of Confession and Absolution in the LCA**

Most Protestant churches, quite rightly, emphasize the need for us to confess our sins in keeping with the instruction given in 1 John 1:8-9:

*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he (God the Father) is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*

They argue that since Christ has won forgiveness for us by His death on the cross, we are all already forgiven. They therefore do not offer an absolution to people who feel guilty and condemned by God. No human being can do that, they quite rightly say; only God can.<sup>4</sup> Instead, they deal with guilt in two other ways which are not, in themselves, wrong, but they make guilty people rely on their own resources rather than God's promise and gift of pardon. On the one hand, they reassure those who are guilt-stricken that they are already forgiven and urge them to accept that as a fact. On the other hand, they also urge Christians to confess their sins in prayer to God and, in some cases, to each other, so as to get rid of their guilt. So by the act of confession guilty people appropriate the forgiveness that is already theirs.

Many Christians believe that a verbal confession is not enough just by itself, for repentance must accompany confession. People must not only say that they are sorry for what they have done; they must feel sorry about it, really and truly sorry. Demonstrably so! In fact, the verbal act of confession is meant to express that sorrow. In itself it is not enough unless it is truly heartfelt. So then, for them, the assurance of forgiveness depends on the feeling of contrition and its authenticity. This teaching is rather damaging pastorally. It not only contradicts the Biblical teaching on justification by making forgiveness depend on how we feel; it also creates uncertainty about salvation.

In contrast to this common teaching, the Lutheran church emphasises the enactment of forgiveness in confession and absolution. Thus in the Small Catechism Luther gives this explanation of confession:

*Confession consists of two parts. One is that we confess our sins. The other is that we receive the absolution, that is, forgiveness, from the confessor as from*

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<sup>4</sup> This is only partly true. God has authorised Jesus to forgive sins and to commission his disciples to do so too (Matt 9:1-8; John 20:21-23).

*God himself and by no means doubt but firmly believe that our sins are thereby forgiven before God in heaven.*<sup>5</sup>

Two things are noteworthy in this practical definition. First, the emphasis here rests on a verbal confession, an apology to God the Father rather than on contrition, the subjective sense of regret and sorrow for sin. Yet this does not belittle the importance of contrition; it, in fact, recognises that by ourselves we cannot produce it, for true contrition comes from God himself though his law that accuses us of sin (Rom 3:20) and the Holy Spirit who alone can convict us of sin (John 16:8-9). Second, great weight is placed on the reception of forgiveness from God through the spoken words of absolution. We confess our sins in order to receive the absolution. We receive forgiveness in faith by believing what the words say and taking them as from the mouth of God.<sup>6</sup>

### Three Kinds of Confession

While anyone may confess their sins privately and directly to God and ask him for forgiveness<sup>7</sup> as we do in the Lord's Prayer and with some psalms,<sup>8</sup> there are three established rites for confession in the LCA. They differ from each other in their context, character and purpose.

The first kind is the corporate rite of confession and absolution at the beginning of the divine service. In it the congregation confesses its sins in general terms to each other and to God (James 5:16; 1 John 1:9) in order to receive the word of absolution from its pastor as from the mouth of God (John 20:23). By this absolution repentant sinners are admitted into God's gracious presence and to the Lord's table. With it the pastor exercises the Office of the Keys in that service so that the members of the congregation can serve God with a good conscience (Heb 9:14) and approach the heavenly Father in the full assurance of faith as they hear His word and receive Holy Communion (Heb 10:19-22).

The second kind of confession is a private pastoral rite by which a person confesses to a pastor in his official capacity and receives the absolution from him.<sup>9</sup> The context for this is a conversation in which a pastor offers pastoral care to a person with a guilty conscience. In it a guilty person is not required to confess all sins but only those that weigh upon the conscience, as is taught in the Small Catechism: 'before the confessor we are to confess only those sins of which we have knowledge and which trouble

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<sup>5</sup> Kolb-Wengert, 360. Note the similar definition in the Large Catechism: 'confession consists of two parts. The first is our work and act, when I lament my sin and desire comfort and restoration for my soul. The second is a work that God does, when he absolves me of my sins through the word placed on the lips of another person' (Kolb-Wengert, 478).

<sup>6</sup> Luther discusses all this simply and well in his explanation of 'Repentance' in the *Smalcald Articles* 3.3. There he distinguishes 'active contrition,' which is self-produced and so contrived, from 'passive contrition,' received and receptive contrition, true heart-felt sorrow that is worked in us by God and received in faith (3.3.2).

<sup>7</sup> Here we do not consider the apology that is made by an offender to an offended person in order to receive forgiveness and achieve reconciliation. In the Large Catechism Luther says: 'We are to confess our guilt before one another before we come to God to ask for forgiveness' (Kolb-Wengert, p. 477).

<sup>8</sup> See the seven penitential psalms: 6; 32; 38; 41; 51; 102; 130; 143.

<sup>9</sup> See 'Private confession and absolution (pastor)' in David Schubert (ed), *Rites and Resources for Pastoral Care*, Openbook: Adelaide, 1998, 27-32.

us.’<sup>10</sup> Since the pastor is bound by a vow of silence to respect the confidential nature of the confession,<sup>11</sup> the guilty people can be honest and frank in owning up to what has been done, without any fear that what they confess will be abused or held against them.<sup>12</sup> The absolution, which is offered personally by the pastor in his official capacity, provides the highest possible degree of certainty for the one who receives it. It is a performative word that does what it says, an authoritative enactment by an ordained minister who acts with the authority of Christ in His church and serves as His mouthpiece (John 20:22-23).<sup>13</sup> He speaks the word of forgiveness both on behalf of Christ and on behalf of the church.

It is important to note that a pastor may in some circumstances withhold the absolution. Christ did not just authorise his ministers to forgive sins; he too gave them the responsibility to retain the sins of those who did not repent (John 20:23). This means that no one can demand an absolution from a pastor. Instead the pastor must exercise discretion and judgment as to whether the absolution is given or not. He must, indeed, withhold the word of forgiveness from those who do not own their sin and accept God’s judgment on them, from those excuse themselves and seek divine sanction for their sin.

The context of private confession and absolution determines its special purpose and status. It is offered to those believers ‘whose consciences are burdened or who are distressed and under attack’ from Satan, the accuser of the faithful (Small Catechism 4:29, Kolb-Wengert, 362). Satan accuses and condemns them for their past sins in order to give them a bad conscience and shake their faith in Christ; he uses their guilt to confuse them spiritually and keep them from hearing the gospel and receiving Holy Communion. So in private confession and absolution the pastor-confessor is required to exercise spiritual discernment. He must first scrutinise and diagnose the actual spiritual state of a person’s conscience. The actual cause of guilt needs to be discovered with the help of God’s law and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Misplaced guilt which concentrates on a trivial or imagined offence must be distinguished from true guilt that comes from breaking God’s law. The confessor must then decide whether to forgive or retain sin in each particular case. If people merely wish to make excuses for themselves and get God off their backs, if they refuse to submit to God’s word and intend to continue in their sin, the confessor withholds the absolution. Since

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<sup>10</sup> Kolb-Wengert, *Small Catechism* 4:18, 360.

<sup>11</sup> Here are the words of the vow made by a pastor of the LCA at his ordination: ‘*Do you promise to exercise the Office of the Keys in accordance with the word and command of Christ, and keep inviolate the seal of confession?*’

<sup>12</sup> The confidential nature of private confession means that the confessor can, if necessary, be quite frank and blunt with person, as Luther emphasises in his Table Talk 5178 (LW, 395): ‘*Somebody asked, “Doctor, if a parish minister absolves a woman who has killed her infant child and afterward the matter becomes public through others, should the parish minister, when asked, offer testimony in this case before a judge?” “By no means,” said the doctor [Martin Luther], “for the forum of the conscience is to be distinguished from the forum of the civil government. The woman didn’t confess anything to me; she confessed to Christ. But if Christ keeps it hidden, I should conceal it and simply deny that I heard anything. But I would say privately to the woman when she came to me for absolution, “You whore, don’t ever do it again!”*’

<sup>13</sup> Luther says this in his Table Talk 5176 (LW 54, 394): ‘*This ought especially to be taught, that confession’s not made to man but to Christ. Likewise it isn’t man who absolves but Christ... Wherefore one should teach that men make confession to Christ, and Christ absolves through the mouth of the minister, for the minister’s mouth is the mouth of Christ and the minister’s ear is the ear of Christ. ..Christ sits there, Christ listens, Christ answers, not a man.*’

they do not confess their sins but wish to justify themselves before God and the confessor, they remain under accusation. If they admit their sin, accept God's judgment on them, and seek pardon rather than escape from accountability, the confessor pronounces the absolution. As appropriate, the confessor will also advise those who have been absolved that the absolution does not shield them from the physical and temporal consequences of their sins, nor does it exempt them from making appropriate restitution to the victim of their sins. If they have broken the law, the confessor will urge them to own up to it and accept the legal penalties for what they have done.

The third kind of confession takes place privately before another Christian. Here is how this kind of confession is described in the Large Catechism:

*This comes into play when some particular issue weighs on us or attacks us, eating away at us until we can have no peace nor find ourselves sufficiently strong in faith. Then we may at any time and as often as we wish lay our burden before our brother or sister, seeking advice, comfort, and strength* (Kolb-Wengert, p. 477).

This normally occurs during a session of pastoral care and counselling with an elder or deacon or lay worker or any other Christian friend. The authority for serving as a confessor comes from their status as members of God's royal priesthood. As such they can bring the sins of others to God in prayer and bring his forgiveness to them with his word. In hearing this kind of informal confession the confessor is not required to scrutinise the person and make a decision whether to withhold forgiveness or not. Yet any information must be treated confidentially. The actual rite is rather informal and flexible.<sup>14</sup> It varies from case to case. It may include a relevant word of God, prayer for and with the person, an act of confession, and a declaration of forgiveness. Where appropriate, the layperson who has heard the confession encourages and helps the person to be reconciled with those who have been hurt by the offence. The purpose of this informal rite is to encourage guilty people to unburden themselves and to comfort them by telling them that God has forgiven them and using an appropriate passage from the Bible to reassure them. It is not used to admit or exclude a person from Holy Communion. If pastoral carers cannot deal with what emerges, they refer the person to a pastor.

### **Spiritual Help for the Victims of Sin**

While the Lutheran church has always offered clearly defined pastoral help to those who have sinned and seek forgiveness, it has often neglected those who have been sinned against, the victims of sin. This issue has been brought to our notice by the problem of sexual abuse in the church. Yet even apart from that, this issue requires urgent attention in the LCA, for the victims of sin also suffer damage like those who have sinned (Matt 18:6-9; Luke 17:1-3).

The cycle that sets in with the experience of abuse by the victims of sin is much more complex and convoluted than the cycle of guilt from sin. It has been well described in *Rites and resources for pastoral care*:

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<sup>14</sup> See 'Private confession (layperson)' in David Schubert (ed), *Rites and Resources for Pastoral Care*, Openbook: Adelaide, 33-38.

People who are hurt by evil acts may be angry with the offenders and want to condemn them. When this anger is cherished, it breeds bitterness and resentment, ill will and malice, hatred and rejection, slander and revenge. It may lead the angry person into self-righteous sin in reaction to the evil deed. The devil may use the hurt to stir up inappropriate anger by reminding the victim exaggeratedly of the injury, by inciting resentment and hatred towards the offender, by urging 'justified' revenge, and by raising doubts about the goodness and providence of God. If the victims of an evil deed feel violated and contaminated by someone, the devil may attack conscientious people by making them feel guilty about their anger, ashamed of themselves, and worthless in the eyes of other people and of God. This may generate self-pity, self-hatred, depression, and despair of God's grace, which may result in withdrawal from participation in public worship and withdrawal from Christian fellowship.<sup>15</sup>

So, while the presenting symptom for sin is a guilty conscience, the presenting issue for those who are victims of sin is most often anger. Anger is the best index of abuse, just as its disappearance is the best index of healing from abuse.

### Healing from Abuse

God offers five main kinds of help for the victims of sin in the church. He invites them to unload on Him; He cleanses them with the waters of baptism; He offers healing for them in Holy Communion; He requires sinners to settle matters with the victims of their sin; He assists them to forgive those who have sinned against them.

First, just as those who have sinned can confess their sins to God to receive pardon from Him, so those who are victims of sin can share their experience of abuse to Him and receive help from Him. In 1 John 1:8-9 the apostle says:

*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*

The Greek term for 'unrighteousness' also means 'injustice.' God does not just forgive the unrighteous things we do; He too purifies us from the unrighteous things that are done to us. It is right, then, for us to divulge to God the sins that have been committed against us and well as the sins that we have committed, for we are all stained by both. The blood of Jesus, which 'purifies us from all sin' (1:7), cleanses us from the taint of abuse and injustice, the sense of defilement that besets the victim of sin.

We may, then, unburden our hearts to God by confessing our hurt and anger to Him. In fact, Paul urges us to just that in Ephesians 4:31 where he says: *Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamour and slander be put away from you, with all malice.* The language here indicates that God is the one who alone can remove the spiritual effects of abuse from us.<sup>16</sup> That is what Christ does for us when we unload on Him. When we hand it over to him in prayer, He gets rid of it for us.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> David Schubert (ed), 'Anger,' *Rites and Resources for pastoral care*, Openbook: Adelaide, 1998, 130.

<sup>16</sup> Grammatically speaking, Paul uses a third person passive imperative.

<sup>17</sup> It is significant that only after Paul has urged his readers to hand over injuries to God does he tell them to forgive each other in Eph 4:31-32.



God provides help for us in doing this with some of the psalms of lament.<sup>18</sup> Typically, they begin by complaining to God in general terms about the evil that has been experienced. In this complaint, which is often full of hurt and anger and outrage, the victims of sin tell God how they feel about the evil deed, the enemy who has done it, and God who has failed in his duty of care for them. From there they go on to ask God for help and restoration. As they do this they often express their desire for revenge and appeal to him for justice against their enemy. These psalms mostly end with the prospect of renewed thanksgiving and praise after the experience of deliverance and restoration.

Second, God the Father washes us clean and gives us new a birth through the Spirit-filled waters of baptism (Tit 3:3-7); cf. 1 Cor 6:11; Eph 5:25-27; Heb 10:24). There He not only washes away the guilt of sin, but also washes away the corrosive stain of malice and envy and hatred. He pours out His Holy Spirit on us who puts to death our old polluted self and give us a new holy self by uniting us with Jesus. In baptism He frees us from the old sinful way of life that is based on repaying evil with evil; he provides a new way of life that is based on the forgiveness of sins, a way of life in which the Holy Spirit detoxifies and renews us. So baptism gives a new foundation for us who are all victims of sin. It helps us to renounce unrighteous anger and bitterness and resentment and malice and hatred and slander and vengeance as the works of the devil as we put our trust in the triune God for our deliverance from the evil that has been done to us. We may therefore begin and end each day by recalling our baptism as we turn away from all evil and seek help from God.<sup>19</sup>

Third, Jesus helps those who are victims of sin by giving them his blood in Holy Communion. His blood cleanses them and gives them a good conscience (Heb 9:14; 1 John 1:7). That includes cleansing from the stain of abuse and injustice, the pollution of bitterness and resentment and hatred. It is likely that in Matthew 26:28 Jesus includes this benefit when he says that his blood is ‘poured out for many for the remission/forgiveness of sins.’ The Greek word for ‘forgiveness’ includes the idea of ‘release,’ ‘liberation from slavery and imprisonment.’ That is how it is used in Luke 4:18 where Jesus speaks about bringing ‘release’ to both the captives and to the oppressed. Like the year of jubilee in the Old Testament,<sup>20</sup> the amnesty that Jesus proclaims by preaching the gospel is far-reaching; it includes the forgiveness of sins, liberation from bondage to sin, sickness and the devil, and the restoration of creation to its proper state of harmony with its Creator; it culminates in the resurrection of the body and life with God in heaven.<sup>21</sup> So in Holy Communion Jesus offers his blood for release from the stain of sin for the victim as well as release from the guilt of sin for the sinner. Through Holy Communion those who are victims of abuse receive healing from the wounds of Jesus (1 Pet 2:24).

Fourth, in Matthew 5:23-26 Jesus puts the onus of reconciliation on those who have angered their fellow disciples by sinning against them. Since they themselves have been forgiven, they have no need to justify themselves and defend their behaviour. He

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<sup>18</sup> See psalms 6; 13; 22; 35; 38; 40:11-17; 55; 56; 59; 64; 69; 88; 140; 142; 143.

<sup>19</sup> In his Small Catechism Luther, helpfully urges us to relive our baptism by making the sign of the cross as we say: ‘In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.’

<sup>20</sup> See Leviticus 25:8-55.

<sup>21</sup> See Arthur A. Just Jr., **Luke 1:1-9:50**, Concordia Commentary, Concordia: Saint Louis, 1996, 192-93.

requires them to take the initiative in making up with those whom they know that they have hurt. They are to seek reconciliation with their adversaries. This involves approaching them in friendly way without acting defensively, hearing them out, apologizing to them, and asking for forgiveness from them. They are to make an effort to win them back as friends and so restore their relationship with them. They, if possible, should try to settle matters out of court, before the trial begins and justice is done. If they refuse to settle matters personally, face to face in a friendly way when the opportunity arises, they may face the full weight of God's judgment in His final court of law. By their refusal to seek reconciliation they may forfeit God's forgiveness of them. By putting the responsibility for reconciliation on the offender, Jesus gives those who have been offended a chance to escape the dead end of anger, with its fixation on injustice, and its endless replaying of the offence.

Fifth, Christ encourages and empowers Christians who have been offended to forgive their fellow Christians who have offended them, just as they themselves have been forgiven (Matt 6:14-15; 18:21-35; Luke 17:4). He Himself models how this can be done and sets an example for us in doing this (Luke 23:34; Eph 4:32-5:2; 1 Pet 2:21-23). But this cannot be enforced or done prematurely. It comes, if possible, at the end of the process outlined above to complete the process of healing. To prepare us for this and, in some cases like incest, where face to face forgiveness may not be possible, Jesus gives us his prayer, the Lord's Prayer, with its remarkable fifth petition (Luke 11:4). In it Jesus identifies himself with us and our sins as He asks God the Father to forgive us, to release us from sin. And we join with Jesus in praying for the Father to forgive us, as we, there and then, forgive those who have sinned against us. Since Christ gives us his own words we are able to do what does not come naturally and easily to us. We no longer desire God the Father to withhold his mercy from them and condemn them; instead we ask Him to forgive both us and them as we ourselves forgive them before God. We, as it were, give up the 'right' to reject them, since God has not rejected them. So we stop damning them in our own hearts and no longer demand that God should deal with them according to the strict letter of his law. With our forgiveness of them before God the theological process of forgiveness is complete. Yet in another sense that process is not yet complete. It is enacted day by day as long as we live, for the old self that excuses its sins and damns others for their sins is with us until we die and are raised bodily with Christ.

## **Living without Condemnation**

God sent his Son to bring us forgiveness, so that we can live our lives here on earth without condemnation (John 3:16-18; 5:24; Rom 8:1). Since we are forgiven we are free from the crippling fear of condemnation by Him, free too from obsessive desire to condemn those who have hurt us. We are free from Satan's use of God's law, to damn us in our hearts by recalling the evil things we have done, and to damn others in our minds by recalling the evil things they have done to us. We are also free from the fear of rejection by others and their disparagement of us. Our conscience is free from the taint of guilt and fear as well as the stain of unrighteous anger and toxic hatred. Since we have a clear conscience we are open to receive from God and to pass on to others what we receive from him. We are free to forgive just as we have been forgiven. We are free to love others as God loves us. We are free to live boldly and act confidently without anxiety about the future and what may hold for us. We are free to live fearlessly no matter what happens to us. For if God is for us, if he accepts

and loves us, no one can ever be against us and nothing can ever separate us from the love that he has lavished on us in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:31-39). We may therefore sing with Robin Mann:

*We're free from our sin and we're free from our past,  
free from the chains of the past;  
free to be lovers and givers and friends,  
free to be people at last.<sup>22</sup>*

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<sup>22</sup> Verse 5 of the song 'Face to Face,' number 71, *All Together Now*, Lutheran Publishing House, 1980.