

The 64th Regular Convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Wednesday, July 14, 2010

Bible Study Essay 4: One People Forgiven through Christ to Forgive *in the Church*

This “Bible Study Essay” is the fourth of five essays that Ted Kober prepared for the 64th Regular Convention of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. It was originally presented on Wednesday, July 14, 2010. The theme of the convention was “One People—Forgiven.”

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Note that each Bible study essay provides discussion questions in the middle of the document. In the original convention, only 5 minutes was provided for this discussion because of time constraints. However, when used in other settings, we recommended that much more time be allowed for discussion of these questions.

Presented by Ted Kober

Children of the same heavenly Father, one people forgiven to forgive in the church,

On Sunday, I shared a story about a man who experienced relief from his depression through the power of God’s forgiveness. A kind brother helped me to see that I neglected to say that depression may have causes other than guilt and that God has blessed us with other methods for treating such causes. My omission could lead some to conclude that all depression can be treated in the same way. I’m sorry for my carelessness and ask for forgiveness.

For those I have hurt by what I said, I invite you to seek me out privately so that with God’s help we may be reconciled. I will be available in the back guest section much of today.

Blest be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above.

We share our mutual woes,
Our mutual burdens bear,
And often for each other flows
The sympathizing tear.¹

Do people actually fight in the church?

In her book *The Key to a Loving Heart*, Karen Burton Mains describes a bride like no other:

The wedding guests have gathered in great anticipation; the ceremony to be performed today has long been awaited... The bridegroom and his attendants gather in front of the chancel...

One by one, the bridesmaids, heralds of the nuptials, begin to stride in measured patterns. Several flower girls sow rose petals upon the white, unmarked aisle cloth. The sound of the organ rises, a joyous announcement that the bride is coming. Everyone stands and strains to get a proper glimpse of her beauty—then a horrible gasp explodes from the congregation. This is a bride like no other.

In she stumbles—something terrible has happened! One leg is twisted; she limps pronouncedly. The wedding garment is tattered and muddy; great rents in the dress leave her scarcely modest. Black bruises can be seen welting her bare arms; the bride’s nose is bloody. An eye is swollen, yellow and purple in its discoloration. Patches of hair look as if they had actually been pulled from her scalp.

Fumbling over the keys, the organist begins again after his shocked pause. The attendants cast their eyes down. The congregation mourns silently. Surely the Bridegroom deserved better than this! That handsome Prince, who has kept himself faithful to his love, should find consummation with the most beautiful of women—not this. His

bride, the church, has been fighting again.²

When I talk to unbelievers about Christian reconciliation, I often get this question: “Do people really fight in the church?”

We can and do fight in the church, and when we do, relationships are broken, ministries suffer, and our witness to Christ is diminished.

But it’s not just those outside that are surprised. We are taken aback when conflict appears in our Christian home, within our Christian church, at our Christian school, and in our Christian community. But should we really be surprised?

God’s people have been in conflict with one another since Adam and Eve sinned. Cain murdered Abel because he was jealous of his brother’s relationship to God. King David lusted after another man’s wife; had an affair with her; and, when she became pregnant, became so desperate to conceal his sin that he arranged for her husband’s death. Jesus’ disciples argued among themselves as to who was the greatest, even while Jesus was in their midst! And Paul’s letters to the early Christian churches reveal that they experienced all kinds of conflicts.

As those who read God’s Word, we of all people should remember that while we are saints, we are also still sinners. James 4:1-3 identifies the source of our conflicts:

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.³

So, if we know that we are still sinners, then we should anticipate that we will be in conflict with one another, even in the church. The question we should ask is not, “What if we get into conflict?” but rather, “How should the children of God respond to conflict when we find ourselves in the midst of it?”

Saints and Sinners: Responding to Conflict in the Church

One day I received a call from a pastor who asked me if he should be doing something to address a situation in his church.⁴ One of his congregational members contracted another member for construction work on his home. Disagreement arose between them regarding the quality and completion of the work, and the homeowner sued the contractor. These two members attended worship regularly but would sit on opposite sides of the sanctuary. Friends in the congregation sided with one party or the other, and they divided themselves into two groups, sitting with the member they supported. The pastor told me that this dispute literally split his congregation down the aisle. He indicated that the parties were scheduled for court the following week. He wondered what his responsibilities were in this situation.

Our text for today can help answer this pastor’s question. In Colossians 3:12-17, Paul writes:

Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Is there something the church should do?

Small Group Reflection Questions

- 1) Reflecting on Colossians 3:12-17, what are a congregation’s responsibilities toward members who are in conflict?

- 2) Give an example of how one can apply “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts” (v. 15) when serving conflicted parties in the church.
- 3) How should the means of grace (Word and Sacraments) be used to help reconcile members of the body of Christ?
- 4) How can lay leaders assist their pastor when he is a party in conflict?

How Easily We Forget!

The Scriptures frequently instruct us to confess our sins to one another, to forgive as we have been forgiven, and to seek reconciliation with a brother or sister when our relationship is impaired. Why then is it so difficult to do?

Although we confess in the Apostles’ Creed that we believe in the forgiveness of sins, we don’t always live as we profess. In spite of our weekly confession and absolution in worship, we sometimes use worldly ways to deal with our conflicts, even in the church. We allow bitterness to grow a wedge between us. We eagerly meet with like-minded people to talk about those with whom we disagree, but we avoid talking directly to people with whom we have broken relationships.

There are times when we come close to confessing and forgiving, but we either forget or refuse to do what we profess.

Two cases contrast Lutheran leaders who failed to put their faith into practice with those who did.

Case #1

“I’ve forgiven those people. But I don’t want anything to do with them. I will never set foot in that church again.”⁴

These were the words of the pastor that had just resigned. I had invited him to participate in a process for reconciliation, but he refused. He blamed a certain group in the congregation for forcing him out.

When I met with the lay leaders, I asked them why their last few pastors had left their church after such short terms. One person said, “It’s the district’s fault.” Another said, “It’s the seminary’s fault.” The leaders felt that they were the victims in these disputes.

I warned both pastor and congregation that if they did

not work together toward reconciliation, they would likely take their anger, raw hurts, and broken trust into new pastor/congregation relationships. While neither side could force the other to reconcile, Paul writes in Romans 12:18: “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

The congregation agreed to work toward reconciliation through studying the Bible on peacemaking, mediating difficult issues, and eventually reconciling among themselves through confession and forgiveness. That congregation was revitalized and today is healthy and growing. They have not had a pastor resign from ministry since. But their former pastor refused to participate in reconciliation, he denied that he had anything to confess, and he would not meet with people to offer forgiveness. Instead, he took another call to a new place, and within months he resigned from that position as well.

Those who refuse to do everything possible to reconcile, as far as it depends on them, sin against God’s Word and suffer the consequences of their decisions.

Case #2

Andrew,⁵ a sixth grade student in a Lutheran school, was caught by his teacher swearing on the playground. She brought him into the classroom, scolded him, and took away his recess privileges. As she turned to walk out the door, she heard him mutter a swear word behind her back. So, she called his parents.

Andrew’s parents were mortified. They served in leadership positions at the church. “I can’t believe he did that at school! We’ve had problems with him doing the same thing at home. Wait ‘til that kid gets home. He’s going to get what’s coming to him!”

A few days later, the teacher witnessed Andrew swearing again. This time she sent him to the principal’s office, where he was admonished and disciplined. But it wasn’t long before Andrew was messing up again.

As the pastor walked through the school one day, the principal stopped him and asked if he would meet with Andrew about his “problem.” The pastor agreed, and the principal pulled the student out of class to talk to his pastor, who was waiting in the principal’s office.

Andrew entered, head down, and said, “Sorry to be wasting your time, Pastor.”

“Andrew, you’re not wasting my time. I’m your Pastor,

and I understand that you are struggling with a sin issue. Can you tell me about it?"

Andrew acknowledged that what he had done was wrong, but he added, "I can't help myself, Pastor. I just get mad and I can't control myself." He looked at the floor, waiting for what he had come to expect—more Law.

Pastor spoke softly, "Andrew." No response. "Andrew, look at me." The boy raised his head.

Pastor continued, making the sign of the cross as he spoke. "Andrew, I remind you that at your Baptism the sign of the cross was made upon your forehead and upon your heart marking you as one redeemed by Jesus Christ. God loves you so much that he sent his only Son Jesus to die for your sins. As your Pastor, I forgive you all your sins, including the sins of uncontrolled anger and using sinful words, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

"Andrew, should we pray that God will give you the power to overcome these temptations in the future?"

"Okay."

After praying, Andrew sat quietly, waiting for something more. Finally he asked, "That it?"

"That's it, Andrew. Your faith has made you well. Go in peace." And Andrew went back to class.

Two weeks later his parents approached Pastor. "What did you do to our son? We tried everything to get him to stop cursing, but nothing seemed to work. He hasn't done it once since you talked to him."

Pastor answered, "I simply absolved him and prayed with him."

Did absolution cure Andrew of all his sinful ways? No, he still struggles with sin. But God's forgiveness gave him something that the Law alone could not give—power to amend his sinful life.

Praise God that this pastor remembered what to do! However, a Lutheran teacher, two Lutheran parents, and a Lutheran principal all failed to apply the Gospel in helping Andrew overcome his sin. They forgot to proclaim God's forgiveness.

Is it any wonder that we have broken relationships in our congregations, schools, or synod? It is so easy to take God's Word of commands and promises for granted in the everyday conflicts of life.

How can we share the good news about God's forgiveness with unbelievers if we can't remember to share God's peace with a brother or sister in Christ?

Life Together through Confession and Forgiveness

Confession and forgiveness were not meant only for the Divine Service. Our daily worship is to reflect a lifestyle of reconciliation, seeking to be reconciled especially with those in the household of faith. Reconciliation does not mean that we agree with each other on all issues. Instead, it means that we confess how we have sinned against one another in our disagreements and that we forgive each other because Christ has forgiven us. We don't treat each other as the enemy, but rather as a fellow member of the body of Christ.

In his book *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes how the Christian ought to live in fellowship with saints and sinners:

It is an ancient monastic custom that by fixed order in the evening devotions the abbot begs the forgiveness of the brothers for all faults and defaults committed against them, and after the brothers assure him of their forgiveness they likewise beg the abbot's forgiveness of their faults and defaults and receive his forgiveness. "Let not the sun go down upon your wrath" (Eph. 4:26). It is a decisive rule of every Christian fellowship that every dissension that the day has brought must be healed in the evening. It is perilous for the Christian to lie down to sleep with an unreconciled heart. Therefore, it is well that there be a special place of the prayer of brotherly forgiveness in every evening's devotion, that reconciliation be made and fellowship be established anew.⁶

Putting It into Practice

Paul urges us, "What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you" (Philippians 4:9).

There may be people here at convention who need to be reconciled with others in this gathering. Some issues may be recent, based on something said in a floor

committee meeting or on the convention floor. Some situations may relate to what was written and distributed prior to or during this convention. Others may have allowed the sun to set for many days, weeks, or months on their anger, giving the devil a foothold. Corrupting talk, sins against the eighth commandment, wrath, and malice may have not only sprouted but matured into long-term resentments.

Then, there are other relationships that need reconciling outside of this room—those with fellow members of our own congregations, brothers and sisters from our circuits or districts, others within synod, even family and friends.

Thus, it is fitting that during this week together at synod, we put into practice what the Scriptures teach. At the close of business on Friday, we will gather together for a service of reconciliation. This will be a corporate service in which we will confess our sins to God and receive his absolution. We will take time to reflect on what our God has done for us as we seek reconciliation from him and from others.

But in preparation for that service, I urge you to follow Jesus' command from Matthew 5:23-24: "So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift."

Over the next two days, I encourage you to seek out someone here at this convention for reconciliation. In some cases, you may only need to confess a recent offense and ask for forgiveness. In other situations, you may need to gently restore the other person, letting them know in a loving way how they have sinned against you, while also seeking their assistance in getting the log out of your eye. In relationships where hurts are deep, it may be helpful to use the form *Announcing God's Grace* to guide both people in confession and forgiveness.

God promises to give us the strength and courage to act on his directives. We are empowered through the Gospel to do that which we cannot do on our own. Accordingly, during our lunch time today and over the next two days, pastors will be available for private absolution to hear your confession to God and to proclaim God's forgiveness to you. Note that the private absolvers are listed with their respective rooms in Wednesday's edition of *Today's Business* on page 536.

None of those serving as absolvers are officers of the

district or synod. No one is to keep track of who goes to absolution and who does not. If you go to a room for absolution and the door is closed, simply wait until the door is opened. You may use a form of confession and absolution from a hymnal, from the catechism, or from *Announcing God's Grace*. Or you may ask to confess your sins without a written form. You may confess generally or specifically, but the primary purpose is to receive God's forgiveness so that you are equipped to do the work that God prepared in advance for you to do. Or you may simply seek private absolution for any particular sin that troubles you. You may also seek absolution from your own pastor, if he is available.

Just a quick reminder about reconciling with key leaders... Some may desire to seek reconciliation with the synodical president or a vice president, a district president, a board member, or other key leader. Please remember that these reconciliations need to take place, but many people may be attempting to reach these same leaders. Don't be afraid to ask for an appointment, but be understanding if one indicates that the meeting may have to be delayed perhaps even beyond this week.

How Good and Pleasant It Is!

Joe was head of the trustees in his church.⁵ He strongly disagreed with the elders. He believed that the elders were simply "yes-men" hand-picked by the former pastor who easily gave in to the pastor's wishes, especially those that Joe felt were harmful to the church. Joe sent out a letter to all the members of the congregation, condemning the actions of the elders, and encouraging people to vote them out of office at the upcoming voters meeting. His letter assumed motives and put the worst construction on things. Joe had met once with the elders a few months before, but he had not talked to them prior to sending out this notice.

Joe rallied a number of people, and the voters meeting was packed. After hours of quarreling, a vote barely passed supporting the elders and keeping them in office. But the church remained sharply divided.

With help from reconcilers, Joe began to understand how he let his passion get out of control, driving him to employ sinful means to protect God's church. In private confession, he received comfort in the words, "God forgives you for Jesus' sake." Joe then asked to meet with the elders.

The elders also received counsel from the reconcilers, and they recognized how they contributed to the severe conflict in their congregation. They not only confessed sins of commission, but also of omission in their responsibilities as the spiritual lay leaders. They agreed to meet with Joe.

Both sides surprised the other when they came prepared to confess and forgive, and they were reconciled.

Because this dispute had polarized the congregation, the elders and Joe stood before the church to publicly confess their sins against the membership, seeking forgiveness. The reconcilers led the congregation in proclaiming God's forgiveness, and then individuals also extended personal forgiveness. Both Joe and the elders offered to resign, but in the end they were affirmed by the congregation and encouraged to remain in office.

Evidence of the miracle of reconciliation occurred when the elders asked Joe to join their board, and he accepted.

Joe loved his church and wanted what he felt was best. His desire for a change in leadership was not sinful until he started trusting himself and worldly ways more than God and God's commands. Joe failed to fear, love and trust in God above all things, a sin against the First Commandment. He justified his sins against the Eighth Commandment by saying he was simply exercising his rights as a voting member. It's just politics, right?

Luther explains the Eighth Commandment: "We should fear and love God that we may not deceitfully belie, betray, slander or defame our neighbor, but defend him, speak well of him, and put the best construction on everything."⁷ In the Fourth Commandment, we are not to despise those in authority nor provoke them to anger, but give them honor, serve and obey them, and hold them in love and esteem. Likewise, those in authority have responsibility not to lord it over others, but to serve with humility and love as Christ demonstrated by his example.

Have your passions ever driven you to use sinful means to protect God's church? I'm guilty of that. If you too are guilty of such sinful thoughts, words, or actions, then listen very carefully to what I say next.

Fellow beggars, our Lord knows more than you and I about how sinful we have been. But because he has poured out his love for us in Christ, he declares us forgiven. Our sins were paid in full on the cross. "The blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).

May the riches of his grace move us to experience what the Psalmist exclaims in Psalm 133:

Behold, how good and pleasant it is
when brothers dwell together in unity!
It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down on the beard, on the beard of
Aaron,
running down on the collar of his robes!
It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion!
For there the Lord has commanded the blessing,
life forevermore.

Taught by our Lord and trusting in his promises, we are bold to pray:

Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be Thy name,
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven;
give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those
who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

¹ John Fawcett, 1740-1817, alt.; "Blest Be the Tie That Binds," public domain.

² Karen Burton Mains, *The Key to a Loving Heart* (Elgin, IL: David C. Cook, 1979), 143-144.

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⁴ True stories; certain facts changed to protect confidences.

⁵ True stories; name and certain facts changed to protect confidences.

⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, translated by John W. Doberstein (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1954), 74.

⁷ *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation*, Concordia Publishing House, © 1986.