

# The 64th Regular Convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Sunday, July 11, 2010

## Bible Study Essay 1: One People Forgiven *through Christ*

This “Bible Study Essay” is the first of five essays that Ted Kober prepared for the 64th Regular Convention of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. It was originally presented on Sunday, July 11, 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.

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*Presented by Ted Kober*

Brothers and sisters, one people forgiven through Christ,

God Himself is present:  
Let us now adore Him  
And with awe appear before Him.  
God is in His temple;  
All within keep silence;  
Humbly kneel in deepest rev'rence.  
He alone  
On His throne  
Is our God and Savior;  
Praise His name forever!<sup>1</sup>

### **It's Not Fair!**

Sometimes we resist, even resent, God being placed into the midst of our conflicts.

The pastor was on the phone in his office when he heard his next appointment arrive in the reception area. A husband and wife had made an appointment for marriage counseling, and they entered the church office arguing loudly. The pastor ended his phone call and went out to greet the couple, who didn't stop their fighting. He motioned for them to enter his office and take a seat, where they continued quarreling for ten minutes.

Finally, the pastor rose from his seat and stood right in front of the couple. They both stopped bickering, looking up at him. He said, “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. You may now continue.”

The couple sat stunned for a moment, and then the

husband blurted out, “That's not fair!”

He was right. It's not fair that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. It's not fair that God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God. It's not fair that the Father has shown such love to us that we should be called the children of God, but that is who we are. Thank God it's not fair!

Although we may resent God being involved in our disputes, he promises to be with us. “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5b).<sup>2</sup> Why? “[Because] I have loved you with an everlasting love” (Jeremiah 31:3b).

Our text for today's study is from Romans 5:6-11:

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

## God Is Present to Forgive

While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Before we were even born and knew that we needed reconciling, God actively involved himself in our conflict with him, and he continues to be present in our conflicts with one another.

We are always in the presence of our almighty God.

He is there when we fight and quarrel, when we slander our brother or belittle our sister, when we sinfully judge one another and commit murder in our hearts, when we send an attacking email, or when we write unwholesome words on a blog. Our failure to live according to his commandments grieves our God, for he despises sin.

And yet, God himself remains present to love us. The Father's love is expressed in the sacrifice of his only Son as a ransom for those who were still his enemies. Christ Jesus made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant in human flesh. He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. The Holy Spirit is here to sanctify us by bringing us to faith in Christ, so that we might have the blessings of redemption and lead a godly life.

God stays near to forgive us. He welcomes us in Holy Baptism to claim us as his own. He comes to us in his very body and blood, to nourish our souls and keep us close to him. He draws near through his spoken and written Word, to admonish us and absolve us. We receive his forgiveness through these means of grace.

Neither our sinful condition nor our sinful behavior moves him to avoid us. For while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

Poor miserable sinners, we come before God as beggars. We have nothing to offer him for what we have done. We sin against God and one another, causing conflict and aggravating disputes.

In spite of our deplorable condition—and because of our sinful nature—we sometimes resist, even resent, God being placed into the midst of our conflicts.

Nevertheless, great is God's faithfulness. "But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

## Distinguishing Reconciliation from Conflict Resolution

Reflect on Romans 5:6-11 and gather together in small groups to answer the questions in your outline:

### Small Group Reflection Questions

- Note that the Bible does not teach that God *resolved* our conflict, but rather *reconciled* us to himself. What is the difference between *conflict resolution* and *reconciliation*? (Note Paul's definition of the ministry of reconciliation in 2 Corinthians 5:18-19.)
- In all of life, with whom is our most serious conflict? (Read Isaiah 59:2 and Romans 5:8-10.)
- What is the consequence of being an enemy of God? (See Romans 6:23a.)
- From God, do you prefer conflict resolution or reconciliation?
- As we respond to our conflicts with others, how can we reflect that same reconciliation that God has shown us?

For Christians, there is a significant difference between *conflict resolution* and *reconciliation*. The great *I AM* is a God of relationships. He loved us so much that he didn't simply resolve our conflict with him, but rather reconciled us to himself through his only Son.

From God, we definitely prefer reconciliation. But why is it that we more often gravitate towards conflict resolution rather than reconciliation?

Is it not because conflict resolution is easier? We convince ourselves that we understand how to deal with material issues such as money, positions, power, and control. We know how to reorganize, set goals, and persuade others to agree with our positions. Some of us enjoy a good fight, seeing it as a competition to win.

## Confession and Forgiveness Lead to Reconciliation

Reconciliation between people is not so easy because it requires two critical components: confession and forgiveness. "Oh, we know about that—we do that every week in worship." But is it really so easy to do in everyday life?

Our first challenge in reconciliation is to get the log out of our own eye. We have learned to rationalize almost anything. Consider how common phrases self-justify:

- I just made a mistake.
- It was an error in judgment.
- I didn't mean it that way—you are too sensitive.

These are the world's ways of dealing with sin. Because worldly people don't believe in the forgiveness of sins, they have no other choice. They must minimize sin. And we, one people forgiven, can fall prey to the temptation of using these same words to justify ourselves.

When meeting with church board members who were strongly polarized, I discussed reconciliation with them and the need for confession and forgiveness. But both sides were quick to point out, "We haven't sinned. We don't need to confess and forgive. We just have disagreements."

In reality they were denying their sin. I had learned from individual meetings how they met in separate groups to speculate on others' motives and judge the opposing members as evil. I saw emails slandering people from "the other side." They accused one another of manipulation and lies. They held deep resentments and withheld forgiveness that they claimed wasn't necessary.

In short, they were exemplifying what John warns against: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. . . . If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us" (1 John 1:8, 10).

When we deny sin, we deny our need for Christ. We justify ourselves. "Thanks very much for your offer of forgiveness, Lord, but I am doing fine all by myself. I have arrived! I was raised in the church. I go to worship and Bible class. I have been elected as a leader in my church or LWML or LLL. I graduated from Concordia University or Seminary. So, you see, I may make a mistake or error in judgment, but I really don't sin anymore. I don't need your forgiveness and I don't appreciate your presence in my conflicts."

In his book *Grace upon Grace*, John Kleinig contrasts the blessings of being a beggar in need of God's grace with the dangers of being self-sufficient:

Because our spiritual life depends on our receiving from God, Christ teaches us to become beggars together with Him. Like Him, we receive everything from God the Father (John 3:35; 5:19; 8:28). This makes it hard, yet at the same time easy, for us to live as His disciples. It is hard because we take such great pride in our own achievements and self-sufficiency. We do not like to ask God, or anyone, for anything. Far better to do without than to become dependent on others! Yet it is also easy because our spirituality does not depend on our performance but on our receiving from God. No one is more or less spiritually advantaged. To change the picture, we must all become as little children, helpless infants that are totally dependent on their mothers (Matthew 18:3; Mark 10:14-15; 1 Peter 2:2).<sup>3</sup>

So what is a beggar to do? John comforts us with God's promise: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Beggars who bring nothing on their own lean totally on Jesus' blood and his righteousness. In confessing our sins to God, we receive his gift of forgiveness and take on the righteousness of Christ.

Our second challenge in reconciliation is to forgive those who sin against us. If we do not recognize our own need to confess sin, then we can pretend that there is nothing to forgive on the other side. After all, those people are just ignorant and make stupid mistakes. It's not really sin, is it?

Conflict is not necessarily bad, and not all conflict is caused by sin. Disagreements may be caused by misunderstandings, differences, or competition. Resolving those differences is important. We need to debate about our differences to reach godly decisions. We have real material issues to discuss and belief issues for which we need to seek agreement.

At the same time, it does not take long for two passionate people to sin against one another in their disagreements. On the material issues, it may look like this: we argue over our differences and then take an action to resolve the problem. There, the conflict's over. We took a vote and that's that.

But if we fail to reconcile our relationship through confession and forgiveness, a seed of bitterness sprouts, and mistrust grows among us. The next disagreement

seems to reveal a little more tension. Our words about each other become more biting. We manage to find some sort of resolution and move on again. We can resolve all sorts of issues that way, but without reconciliation, we allow relationships to wither and die.

## Our Source of Hope

In the convention workbook, the Progress Report of the Task Force on Synodical Harmony identifies aspects of the present disharmony in synod, some of which include:

- Inability to deal with diversity
- A lack of civility
- A politicized culture
- Distrust

The synod in convention can move all sorts of resolutions to solve our problems, and many may prove to be helpful. But reconciliation can never be voted upon. Trust cannot be built through taking a vote. Can we as a people justify such things as “a lack of civility,” “a politicized culture,” and “party lines?” Or are we willing to confess that some of what we do in the name of “church” is described as sinful in Scripture?

- “For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? For when one says, ‘I follow Paul,’ and another, ‘I follow Apollos,’ are you not being merely human?” (1 Corinthians 3:3b-4).
- “But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another” (Galatians 5:15).
- “And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will” (2 Timothy 2:24-26).
- “Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed” (James 5:16a).

Influenced by our sinful world, Christians may become desensitized to sin and fail to recognize the sinfulness of

behaviors we personally experience and see around us. At times, we accept worldly rationalizations or excuses to avoid acknowledgement of sin. When this happens, we doubt that the Gospel is powerful and effective for addressing life’s tough issues. Instead, we seek to resolve problems using worldly means without applying what God’s Word teaches regarding sin and grace.

Martin Luther said, “The more you minimize sin, the more will grace decline in value.”<sup>4</sup>

Is there any hope for harmony in a church that prides itself in being people of the Word?

“I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:1-6).

We are one people, forgiven through Christ, who have hope, because Christ who forgives is present in our conflicts. Hope is not found in simply resolving conflict. Our hope is not in convention resolutions. Our hope is not in elections of certain leaders. Our hope is not in new structures or old structures.

Together with Edward Mote, we can boldly proclaim:

My hope is built on nothing less  
Than Jesus’ blood and righteousness;  
No merit of my own I claim  
But wholly lean on Jesus’ name.  
On Christ, the solid rock, I stand;  
All other ground is sinking sand.<sup>5</sup>

Will godly people sin against God and one another this week as our work continues? Scripture teaches that we sin daily. But God will never leave us. He is here among us to teach and encourage, and to admonish and forgive, again and again. We are truly one people forgiven through Christ.

# The Power of Forgiveness

What do you believe about the power of forgiveness?

In Psalm 103, David reflects:

Bless the Lord, O my soul,  
and all that is within me,  
bless his holy name!  
Bless the Lord, O my soul,  
and forget not all his benefits,  
who forgives all your iniquity,  
who heals all your diseases,  
who redeems your life from the pit,  
who crowns you with steadfast love and  
mercy,  
who satisfies you with good  
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. (v. 1-5)

Can forgiveness of our iniquity really lead to healing? Can forgiveness actually redeem our life from the pit of depression? Can forgiveness truly satisfy our desires with good things so that our youth is renewed like the eagle's?

Diego<sup>6</sup> was failing as a seminary student. He had become a Christian in his teenage years, committing his life to Christ. He wanted to serve his Lord through the pastoral ministry and so had enrolled at the seminary.

But Diego's past haunted him. As a young boy, he was introduced to sexual activity and engaged in all sorts of deviant behavior. When he came to faith he tried to put away his sinful life. He was able to stop physical contact but continued to satisfy his lusts with Internet pornography. At seminary, he learned just how abhorrent his behavior was to God, and he fell into depression. When he tried to forget, he would replay in his mind the sinful things he had done. It was like a nightmare movie that he could not turn off.

How could God stand such a sinful creature as he? Surely he was unworthy of the high calling he was pursuing. Diego could not forgive himself.

His concentration slumped and his grades fell. Some days he couldn't get out of bed to go to class. He lost hope as his depression increased. None of his friends or professors could console him.

Diego sought counsel from a reconciler, who helped him see that his lack of forgiveness for himself was a

form of idolatry. Diego placed the importance of his personal forgiveness above God's forgiveness, and he took the place of God by condemning himself. Just like Jonah wanted God's forgiveness to be withheld from the Ninevites, Diego determined that he was unworthy of God's absolution. Therefore, he withheld forgiveness, even God's forgiveness, from himself.

As Diego began to see his act of withholding forgiveness from himself as idolatrous, the reconciler reminded him that as sinner and saint every one of us struggles with our sinful flesh. He asked Diego to read Romans 7:19-24:

For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

Diego exclaimed: "That is me! I have read these words before, but I never thought how my own struggles are like that of St. Paul's."

The reconciler directed, "And now read Paul's answer in verse 25."

"Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"  
Diego's eyes began to fill with tears.

The reconciler reminded Diego that there is nothing he can do on his own to earn favor with God or even himself. But he need not do that. God through Christ has done it all already. He asked Diego to read Romans 8:1, inserting his own name into the verse.

"There is therefore now no condemnation for [Diego] who [is] in Christ Jesus." Diego wept for minutes at this good news.

"Diego, read those words again." Diego cried some more. "One more time." The third time Diego was too spent to cry.

This led to a time of private absolution, where Diego confessed those things that tormented him, and he heard those precious words for him, "God forgives you for Jesus' sake. You are forgiven. Christ himself

bore your sins in his body on the tree, that you might die to sins and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.”

Because Diego had rehearsed his evil images for so long, the reconciler gave him some Bible verses with God’s promises of forgiveness to read out loud to himself whenever he doubted. Diego praised God for forgiveness in Jesus Christ.

Diego’s depression left him. His grades improved dramatically, and today he is serving as a pastor who knows the power of forgiveness.

Fellow beggars, hear this good news. God is with you now. He knows everything about you, and nonetheless, he loves you and forgives you for Jesus’ sake. Through Christ, he makes us One People—Forgiven!

What do you believe about the power of forgiveness for One People—Forgiven?

For as high as the heavens are above the earth,  
so great is his steadfast love toward those  
who fear him;  
as far as the east is from the west,  
so far does he remove our transgressions  
from us.  
As a father shows compassion to his children,  
so the Lord shows compassion to those who  
fear him.  
Bless the Lord, all his works,  
in all places of his dominion.  
Bless the Lord, O my soul! (Psalm 103:11-13, 22)

We pray.

O God, we come before you as beggars, for we have nothing good to bring on our own. Forgive us for our sins against you and others and for minimizing our sin. Thank you for loving us so much that you intervened in our conflict with you. We bless you, Father, for giving us your only Son. We glorify you, Jesus, for reconciling us while we were yet sinners. We praise you, Holy Spirit, for giving us faith and life in Christ. Be with us always, Lord, as you promise. Fill us with your hope that we might never forget the gift of your forgiveness. Empower us to live as your children, forgiving others as you have forgiven us. We ask this in the precious name of Jesus. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Gerhard Tersteegen, 1697-1769, abr; tr. Frederick W. Foster, 1760-1835, and John Miller, 1756-90, alt.; “God Himself Is Present,” public domain.

<sup>2</sup> All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

<sup>3</sup> John W. Kleinig, *Grace upon Grace: Spirituality for Today* (St. Louis: CPH, 2008), 29.

<sup>4</sup> Luther’s Works, Volume 1 (St. Louis: CPH, 1958), 142.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Mote, 1797-1874, alt. “My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less,” public domain.

<sup>6</sup> True story; name and certain facts changed to protect confidences.