

FORGIVENESS OF SINS

The Way of Repentance unto Life



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In this book reference is sometimes made to the Lutheran Confession. The following abbreviations have been used:

AC	Augsburg Confession
AAD	Apology of the Augsburg Confession
SA	Smalcald Articles
SC	Small Catechism (Martin Luther's)
LC	Large Catechism (Martin Luther's)
FC	The Formula of Concord

The English translation of the Latin and German original is the one rendered in *CONCORDIA TRIGLOTTA*, S:t Louis, Mo., 1921.

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1. Why do we need forgiveness of sins?

All life on earth goes back to God. He is the Creator, "the Father, who has created heaven and earth; besides this only One I regard nothing else as God; for there is no one else who could create heaven and earth" (LC). Since God is holy and righteous everything he created was similar to himself. "God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good" (Gen. 1:31). In such a world there was no need of forgiveness of sins. Where there is no sin, no forgiveness is needed.

But what happened? Scripture tells us how our first parents, Adam and Eve, were tempted. They were advised by the devil to look for a better world, or for a complete likeness to God, so that people could be "like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5). They considered those words and stretched out their hands for what was forbidden: the fruit "of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Gen. 2:17). And *so the*

sin was there. What the two had done was *such a great fall that it affects every human being in all times.* We do not inherit the different individual sins, neither all of them, nor the one or the other, but *we inherit the evil heart,* the desire of doing wrong and of acting against God's will. This evil in us is called *original sin.*

Original sin

How do we know about this? Holy Scripture tells us about this evil thing, called *original sin or capital sin.* "This hereditary sin /called in that way because we inherit it/ is so deep and horrible a corruption of nature that no reason can understand it, but it must be learned and believed from the revelation of Scriptures" (SA).

And what is the result of this sin among us today? "Original sin is an unspeakable evil and such an entire corruption of human nature that in it and all its internal and external powers nothing pure or good remains, but everything is entirely corrupt, so that on account of original sin man is in God's sight truly spiritually dead, with all his powers dead to that which is good" (FC).

No human being is excluded from this state of affairs, since we are all sinners. "Since the Fall of

Adam all men who are naturally born are conceived and born in sin, i.e., that they all, from their mother's womb, are full of evil desire and inclination, and can have by nature no true fear of God, no true faith in God" (AAC).

That is what we are, but it is not the end of it. *The end must be death, unless something is done to cure the evil of sin.* If such a cure is not found the end will be death, since "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). And this sin of ours is "even now condemning and bringing eternal death upon those not born again through Baptism and the Holy Spirit" (AC).

This is the teaching of Holy Scripture and, therefore, of the Christian Church. But such teaching is often very much contradicted. Many people say: It is not true, because there are so many things we can do. Of course there are many things we can do. Nobody has denied that! "The works which pertain to the maintenance of external discipline, which are also done by, and required of, the unbelieving and unconverted" are "commendable before the world, and besides rewarded by God in this world with temporal blessings", that is willingly admitted in Scripture and by our confession. But such works "are nevertheless, because they do not proceed from true faith, in God's sight sins, that is, stained with sin" (FC).

From this it will be quite clear what man cannot do because of being a sinner. "The corrupt nature, of and by itself, has no power for anything good in spiritual, divine things, not even for the least, as good thoughts; and not only this, but ... of and by itself it can do nothing in the sight of God but sin (Gen. 6:5; 8:21)" (FC).

What about God?

Now, if that is the position on man's side, how about God? Holy Scripture tells us about him that he is holy, that he loves righteousness and hates wickedness (Ps. 45:7). If he did not act that way, he would not be true God. Every sin in us, therefore, must cause God's anger. "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth" (Rom. 1:18). What can he do then, if not punish men because of their sins? If he did not do that, he would prove that he does not care about the truth, about holiness or righteousness. He would show that he does not care about what we are doing or where we are going. But there would be something still worse: if he acted that way, *he would not be true or righteous himself. He would not be the true God.* It cannot be that way at all. God does not behave in the way we might think or do.

He says: "You hate discipline, and you cast my words behind you. If you see a thief, you are a friend of his; and you keep company with adulterers ... These things you have done and I have been silent; you thought that I was one like yourself. But now I rebuke you, and lay the charge before you" (Ps. 50:17-21). Thus it is clear that God cannot turn away from his righteousness or his holy Law. Instead he will continue to demand holiness from us, and to charge us because of being sinners, and to punish us for having broken his Law.

What can we do?

What about us then? First of all: *We cannot run away from God.* God is omnipresent, i.e. he is present everywhere. Where could we hide from God then? "If I ascend to heaven, thou art there! If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there!" (Ps. 139:8). But if we cannot run away, what can we do? Whatever we do is sin, even if we try our very best to please God. That is because of the fall and our sinful heart. And that is the second point: "Men truly sin, even when, without the Holy Spirit, they do virtuous works, because they do them with a wicked heart, according to Rom. 14:23: *Whatsoever is not of faith is sin*" (AAC).

This leaves us at a crucial point: Is everything hopeless, are we lost for ever because of sin? Yes, we would be, if we were left to ourselves. But God knows our situation: "Before him no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do" (Heb. 4:13). And what God wants to do is also laid bare to us. This is done in his Word. There he tells us *what he wishes to do and what he has already done*. If God only wished to deal with us in wrath we would be lost. But he is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (Ps. 103:8). Therefore he has prepared a way for us, a way that can lead out of sin. "For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh" (Rom 8:3). "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16).

2. How can there be forgiveness of sins?

We can write this in short, since there is one, single, and plain answer: JESUS CHRIST, SON OF GOD, SAVIOUR OF MAN.

This way of salvation and forgiveness has not been invented by man. After the fall man could not help or save himself. But even before the sun set on the day of the great fall God had given the promise about salvation: "I will put enmity between you /the serpent/ and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Gen. 3:15). The seed of the serpent, that is the evil things in our hearts, like "evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander" (Mt. 15:19), i.e. what is in us after the fall. But "the Seed of the Woman", that is the One, born without the help of a human father (Lk. 1:34-35; Gal. 4:4). That is the description of Christ, "the only Son from the Father" (Jn 1:14). Once more we come upon this truth: God has done what seemed to be impossible, "what the law could not do" (Rom. 8:3). When this was needed because of the fall, God did it: the righteousness that had been spoilt among men

was restored. But it was done at a tremendous cost: God himself had to become man. So when we ask: How can there be forgiveness of sins? the one, single, and plain answer must be: Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour of man.

What happened, when the Son of God became man?

“God created not only the body and soul of Adam and Eve before the Fall, but also our bodies and souls after the Fall, notwithstanding that they are corrupt ... The Son of God has assumed this human nature, however, without sin, and therefore not a foreign, but our own flesh, into the unity of His person, and according to it is become our true Brother” (FC).

And what happened after that, when Christ had become man? It is rather easy to study the outward work of Christ, i.e. his suffering, his death, etc., *but how does it affect us*, our situation in this world, and our standing before God? To understand that we have to think and speak in a rather simple and childish way. We know from experience that when contact has been

broken between two persons, so that enmity or even hatred prevails, a third person may have to step in to help them to make friendship again. It must be a good and strong person, but also one who is respected by both. Sometimes that sort of mediation work is very difficult. It may even cost a lot to perform it. To go a bit further with our simple way of speaking, such a helper may even have to *go as far as to give his life to establish friendship between the two who have become enemies.*

Now, what about God and man? Well, our example can help us only partly. There are some difficulties with it, because it has been taken from what happens between men. When it comes to matters of God, we must remember that he is always holy and therefore cannot abandon his holiness or his wrath because of sin. But on the other side he wanted to help man to get away from the realm of sin. Secondly, who was that third person who could step in to perform the reconciliation work between God and man? No ordinary human being would do, since they were all sinners and all in need of help. But who could help then?

According to Holy Scripture only one way could be found: God had to do the reconciliation himself: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father" (Jn 1:14). It means that God himself came to us in order to perform what no man could do. If he had counted our sins and trespasses only, we had been lost for ever. But if he had given up his holy Law, then he had given up his position of being holy and righteous also, and then he had not been true God. Therefore, what we could not do he decided to do himself, but for us. "All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself ... God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18-19).

Central theme of our faith

This reconciliation with God is the very centre and the great theme of our Christian faith: "I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won /delivered/ me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, in order that I may be wholly His own, and live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, even as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true" (SC).

But this is not only the central theme or point of our Christian faith. It is also our foundation, the very rock of ages we have to stand on, if we wish to have an eternal hope:

"Man's work faileth, Christ availeth,
He is all our righteousness.
He our Saviour Hath for ever
Set us free from dire distress.
Through His merit We inherit
Light, and peace, and happiness".
(Venantius Fortunatus, c. 600 A.D.).

Christ's work may also be called the source of forgiveness. Christ's life, his death and resurrection for us, on our behalf, is the only foundation of the forgiveness of sins. It is the only reason why our sins can be forgiven. Scripture says: "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool" (Isa. 1:18). "The blood of Jesus ... cleanses us from all sin ... If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn 1:7-9).

Grace of God

This point must be clear to us right through, from the beginning to the end: the atonement and reconciliation is not our own work. It is God's work right through: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). This is called GRACE. We are dealing with the great, undeserved, unspeakable grace of God: "We believe, teach and confess that our righteousness before God is, that God forgives us our sins out of pure grace, without any work, merit, or worthiness of ours preceding, present, or following, that He presents and imputes to us the righteousness of Christ's obedience, on account of which righteousness we are received into grace by God and regarded as righteous" (FC).

In this explanation of what reconciliation means St. Paul also tells us that God "gave us the ministry of reconciliation", "entrusting to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18-19). He speaks about the Gospel, "the good tidings" about Christ. That is the good and blessed message all sinners need, if they are not to be lost altogether. God wants them to receive this good message: "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the LORD GOD, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?" (Ezek. 18:23). In the New Testament it is stated by Jesus Christ himself, who undertook the work of reconciliation and did the suffering for us: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (Jn 3:16-17).

Therefore this word about reconciliation and forgiveness of sins has to go out everywhere: "Christ calls to Himself all sinners and promises them rest, and He is in earnest /=seriously wills/ that all men should come to Him and suffer themselves to be helped, to whom He offers Himself in His Word, and wishes them to hear it and not to stop their ears or neglect and despise the Word" (FC).

Do we need this grace?

How are we concerned about this? Does it affect us personally? It depends upon how we look upon ourselves. Are we sinners or not, do we need help and salvation or not? But it does not depend on ourselves only. *It might happen that we do not know ourselves, or our sins or our need.* Then we have to believe what God says: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). If we cannot feel like that, we must remember that we cannot rely on what our feelings tell us. "If you cannot feel it, at least believe the Scriptures; they will not lie to you, and they know your flesh better than you yourself. Yea, St. Paul further concludes in Rom. 7:18: *I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing.* If St. Paul may speak thus of his flesh, we do not propose to be better or more holy. But that we do not feel it is so much the worse; for it is a sign that there is a leprous flesh which feels nothing ... If you are quite dead to all sensibility, still believe the Scriptures, which pronounce sentence upon you" (LC).

When the Scriptures pronounce sentence, they declare that we are sinners. What is to be done then? How can the forgiveness of sins be received?

3. How the forgiveness of sins may be received by us

First of all it is a thing we cannot provide for ourselves, nor can we take it with our own power when it is offered to us. "Before man is enlightened, converted, regenerated, renewed, and drawn by the Holy Spirit, he can of himself and of his own natural powers begin, work, or /cooperate/ in working in spiritual things and in his own conversion or regeneration just as little as a stone or a block or clay" (FC). From one point of view we might believe, then, that salvation is impossible, and that no forgiveness can be had for man. But that is not the case. What was impossible to man was possible to God (Lk. 1:37) Therefore there are powers that can work forgiveness: "Before the conversion of man there are only two efficient causes, namely, the Holy Spirit and the Word of God, as the instrument of the Holy Spirit, by which He works conversion" (FC). These powers are needed for another reason also. Man is not only unsuitable for this work of converting himself. He also makes resistance to God, when God wishes to do that work. "In this respect it may well be said that man is not a stone or block. For a stone or

block does not resist the person who moves it, nor does it understand and is sensible of what is being done with it, as man with his will so long resists God the Lord until he is /has been/ converted ... He can do nothing whatever towards his conversion ... and is in this respect much worse than a stone and block; for he resists the Word and will of God, until God awakens him from the death of sin, enlightens and renews him" (FC).

How does God do this?

First of all we have to consider *Holy Baptism*. Baptism is the door of entrance into the Kingdom of forgiveness and grace: "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (Jn 3:5-6). Thus the work of man himself is excluded so far. "The Holy Scriptures ascribe conversion, faith in Christ, regeneration, renewal, and all that belongs to their /effective/ beginning and completion ... entirely, solely, to the divine working and the Holy Spirit" (FC).

There is no difference in this respect between the baptism of children and the baptism of grown up people. "There is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:22-24). The children do not have to grow up before they can receive Baptism. Jesus himself says that it is the other way round: the grown up people have to become children: "Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 18:3).

Thus it is clear that the first door of grace and forgiveness, through which all people have to

pass, is Baptism. And why is it so? It is because Baptism "works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare" (SC).

But how can we explain this? In one way we cannot explain it at all, since all salvation work is God's secret. We can only marvel before "the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God" (Rom. 11:33). But from the teaching of God's Word we can understand it to some extent: "We were buried with Christ by Baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4). This is to say that a new life can begin, when we have died with Christ in Baptism (and thus through his death have been cleansed from our sins), and then with him risen to a new life, which is a gift from God. By Baptism man has been transferred to a new sphere of life. Sin still has power over us, since we live in this world, but there should be a daily fight against sin, and because of Baptism the Christian should make a daily dedication to lead that new life. Baptism thus "signifies that the old Adam in us should, by daily contrition and repentance, be drowned and die with all sins and evil lusts, and, again, a new man daily come forth and arise, who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever" (SC).

The importance of faith

When these gifts are given to man, faith is needed to receive them. But here we have to be careful to express ourselves correctly. Faith is not a good work that gives us merit or deserves praise before God. Faith is like a hand, stretched out to receive a gift. This fact applies to Baptism as well as the forgiveness of sins, whenever we receive it. The grace of Baptism can be given to us because of the righteousness of Christ and the righteousness he acquired for us, when he died for us and rose again from the dead for us. All this is a gift, given to us in Baptism. When we receive this gift in faith, his righteousness is declared to be ours also. "Men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favour, and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who, by His death, has made satisfaction for our sins" (AC).

Where the sins are forgiven, there is righteousness also. But sometimes we speak more about the forgiveness, sometimes we stress the righteousness. This happens because our righteousness is not a righteousness of our own, it is *Christ's righteousness, which is imputed to us, that means, counted as ours, for his sake.* "The righteousness of faith is the forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God, and our adoption as God's children only on account of the obedience of Christ, which through faith alone, out of pure faith, is imputed for righteousness to all true believers, and on account of it they are absolved from all their unrighteousness" (FC).

It is essential that we do not mix this up with our own works or merits, nor with the strength of our faith. It is always essential that good works follow upon a true faith, either this is strong or weak, but the forgiveness of sins does not rest upon the faith, either it is strong or weak. Forgiveness rests solely upon Christ, his work and promise. "*By faith alone in Christ, not through love, not because of love or works, do we acquire the remission of sins, although love follows faith. Therefore by faith alone we are justified,* understanding justification as the making of a righteous man out of an unrighteous, or that he be regenerated" (AAC).

In the following there are two things we have to keep in mind particularly. First there is one thing that must be avoided: the belief and teaching "that man by his own powers, without the grace of the Holy Spirit, can turn himself to God, believe the Gospel, be obedient from the heart to God's Law, and thus merit the forgiveness of sins and eternal life" (FC).

The other thing we have to keep in mind is *the right belief and teaching that we will remain sinners in ourselves, because of original sin*, which is the condition of man after the fall. What happens, then, when we receive forgiveness and are justified by God, by faith in Christ? "The word *justify* here means to declare righteous and free from sins, and to absolve one from eternal punishment for the sake of Christ's righteousness, which is imputed by God to faith, Phil. 3:9" (FC).

4. What does it mean to live in the forgiveness of sins?

We have already seen that because of original sin and all our personal sins there is no worthiness of ours before God. Thus there is nothing we can claim as our right before him. Everything is grace: "God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved) ... For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:4-8). To have the forgiveness of sins, that is to live in the grace of God, it is to be united with Christ by faith. At the same time it is to receive the forgiveness of sins daily, by repentance, by faith, *through the means of grace.*

Jesus Christ self has taught us the daily prayer for forgiveness of sins: "Forgive us our sins" (Lk. 11:4). If we did not need such forgiveness, he would not have taught us such a prayer. But what sort of people are those who pray for forgiveness every day? Are they particularly bad people, who were not properly converted? That is not the case. We can be sure they are ordinary Christians, people like ourselves. They are people who sin daily and thus are in great need of obtaining the forgiveness of their sins. So what does the prayer for forgiveness mean? "We pray in this petition that our Father in heaven would not look upon our sins, nor deny such petitions on account of them; for we are worthy of none of the things for which we pray, neither have we deserved them; but that He would grant them all to us by grace; for we daily sin much, and indeed deserve nothing but punishment. So will we verily, on our part, also heartily forgive and also readily do good to those who sin against us" (SC).

A new way

In the quoted words from Luther's Small Catechism there is something like a new world opening up to us. First of all the words speak about God's grace. That is the foundation of it all. Further they speak about the daily need of grace and forgiveness, since we sin daily. But they also speak about the Christian life, where our neighbour, both friend and foe, is included in our thoughts, because in the way God treats us in love, in the same way we are called to treat our neighbour. All this has got to do with the new life, a new way of living. This new life is started and generated by the Holy Spirit in conversion and faith, and after that carried on in *the continued Christian life, which is called sanctification*. The word sanctification does not mean that we are holy in ourselves. In this connection it means that *we are being made holy in our lives, because we have already been declared holy in justification*, i.e. in connection with Baptism, conversion and faith. From one point of view it can be said that *sanctification is the forgiveness of sins, at the same time applied to our own faith and life and to our neighbour*, when we love him for Christ's sake, because we have been loved by him. "We love, because he first loved us" (1 Jn 4:19). This is what Jesus is describing when he tells us: "Go and do likewise" (Lk. 10:29-37).

But without conversion and faith there is no sanctification. It can be explained in this way: It "is certainly true that in genuine conversion a change, new emotion /=renewal/, and movement in the intellect, will, and heart must take place, namely that the heart perceive sin, dread God's wrath, turn from sin, perceive and accept the promise of grace in Christ, have good spiritual thoughts, a Christian purpose and diligence, and strive against the flesh. For where none of these occurs or is present, there is also no true conversion" (FC).

If we stress the need of conversion, we also stress the need of faith. The grace of God and the forgiveness of sins are accepted by faith only. The one who turns to God in prayer, "Forgive me my sins", has already faith in his heart, although it may be a beginning and only weak faith. This faith, together with the forgiveness of sins, will receive another gift from God, the strengthening and purification of the faith itself. Thus all these things go together: daily prayer, daily conversion, daily repentance, daily forgiveness of sins, daily strengthening of the faith, daily dedication to God and to the work of the Holy Spirit, and a daily surrender to the sanctifying work of this Spirit and to the service of our neighbour and fellow-Christians.

This is to live in the grace of Baptism

When we speak about the Christian faith and life in this way we do not leave behind us what happened in our baptism. It is the other way round: it is to make full use of what we received in our baptism. It is to put into service what was then commenced: "Therefore, if you live in repentance /=
a heartfelt sorrow because of the sins you know you have committed/ you walk in Baptism, which not only signifies such a new life, but also produces, begins, and exercises it. For therein are given grace, the Spirit, and power to suppress the old man, so that the new man may come forth and become strong" (LC). Sometimes it is thought that Baptism has to deal only with the start, and that the grace of Baptism can be considered to be a rather childish stage of the Christian life, whereas later on we may develop into higher stages where we can acquire something like a personal quality of faith and life. This is not so. Nobody can ever manage to develop in such a manner as to move away from the grace of Baptism. "Every Christian has enough in Baptism to learn and to practise all his life; for he has always enough to do to believe firmly what it promises and brings: victory over death and the devil, forgiveness of sin, the grace of

God, the entire Christ, and the Holy Spirit with His gifts" (LC). There is no doubt that much has been very much neglected by many Christians in connection with these things. The aim of all Christians, therefore, ought to be: *Let us develop and carry on, not away from the grace of Baptism, but forwards, in the grace of Baptism, and because of the great call we have received in Baptism.*

We may understand this point better if we consider another side of the baptismal grace: What does it mean to become a Christian, i.e. to become baptized? *It is to be dressed in the garment of righteousness, which has been acquired for us by Christ, through the merit of his suffering, death and resurrection, and because he has kept the Law for each one of us.* When people are advised to receive the grace of Baptism and the forgiveness of sins, it may be done in this way: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38). Sometimes it is also said that they should allow themselves to be dressed in the garment of Christ's righteousness: "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires" (Rom. 13:14). "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal.

3:27). After that dressing, which is carried out in Baptism, the new life of sanctification can go on, through the daily forgiveness of sins: "*Put off your old nature* which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, *and put on the new nature*, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph. 4:22-24). Thus our confession is definitely standing on proper Biblical ground when teaching like this: "Let every one esteem his Baptism as a daily dress in which he is to walk constantly, that he may ever be found in the faith and its fruits, that he suppress the old man and grow up in the new. For if we would be Christians, we must practise the work whereby we are Christians. But if any one fall away from it, let him again come into it ... If, therefore, we have once in Baptism obtained forgiveness of sin, it will remain every day, as long as we live, that is, as long as we carry the old man about our neck" (LC).

The importance of the means of grace

It has already been pointed out (p 23) that the means of grace are needed if a Christian is to live in the forgiveness of sins. The Word of God and Baptism have already been mentioned as such means of grace. It remains to stress what Holy Communion (or the Sacrament of the Altar) and Confession can do in this connection.

There is nothing like Holy Communion to show us our sins but at the same time also show us what Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour, has done to forgive our sins and to remove their guilt. When we receive the blessed bread and the blessed wine the Saviour himself is in our midst. He gives himself to us. When we receive his body and blood we also receive the blessed outcome of his salvation work. "That is shown us in these words: *Given, and shed for you, for the remission of sins*; namely, that in the Sacrament forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given us through these words. For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation" (SC).

Thus there is *a great comfort available to sinners in the Holy Communion*. Even if a Christian will blame himself for having only a very weak faith,

still the gift of forgiveness is offered to him in this Sacrament: "We believe, teach, and confess that no true believer, as long as he retains living faith, however weak he may be, receives the Holy Supper to his judgment, which was instituted especially for Christians weak in faith, yet penitent, for the consolation and strengthening of their weak faith /Mt. 9:12; 11:5, 28/" (FC).

This may also serve as an answer to another question that is often raised among Christians: *What is to be done, if I do not feel the burden of my sins properly, or if I do not see my unworthiness in the way I ought to?* A good answer to such questions has been worded in this way: "Look about you and see whether you are also in the world, or if you do not know it, ask your neighbours about it. If you are in the world, do not think that there will be lack of sins and misery ... Try this and practise it well, and do but examine yourself, or look about you a little, and only keep to the Scriptures. If even then you still feel nothing, you have so much the more misery to lament both to God and to your brother. Then take advice and have others pray for you, and do not desist until the stone be removed from you heart. Then, indeed, the distress will not fail to become manifest, and you will find that you have sunk twice as deep as any other poor sinner" (LC).

Confession with Absolution

There are many occasions when we need something besides the Holy Communion to be assured of the forgiveness of our sins. This is not, however, something besides the Word of God. *But we may need the Word of God spoken to us in a more direct and personal way than it can be done in the service of the congregation or in our daily reading of the Bible.* The reasons for this special need may be different. Perhaps somebody's personal situation has become so complicated that he cannot see clearly what he has done or what the outcome of it may be: what is my part, and what is somebody else's part?; he does not see clearly what is sin and what is not sin in what has happened; he does not know what he can do to become quiet or to settle things with somebody or with some people who may have suffered through what he has done. In such cases it is not only advisable, *it is necessary to confess all before the servant of the Word of God* (the pastor or minister). There are many advantages with such a confession. Let us mention three particularly. First, the pastor can know, from training and experience, much better than we do ourselves how to handle and how to

look upon such cases. Secondly, he is bound by his position as a pastor to keep absolutely silent about what we tell him. If he tells anybody what he has heard in our confession, according to the Law of the Church he has to be removed from his vocation and cannot be a pastor any more. Thirdly, *confession is a way of removing all doubts about the forgiveness of sins: when they are confessed and forgiven, they are forgiven.*

Confession was instituted by Jesus Christ himself. It was done when he said to his apostles: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (Jn 20:22-23).

Thus there are two parts in every "confession": "Confession embraces two parts: the one is, that we confess our sins; the other, that we receive absolution, or forgiveness, from the confessor, as from God himself, and in no wise doubt, but firmly believe, that our sins are thereby forgiven before God in heaven" (SC).

How to confess

There may be several questions arising about *how to confess*. One question reads *What sins should we confess* before the pastor who receives our confession? If anybody would suggest that we mention all sins, one by one, he does not know what he is talking about. We do not know all our sins, how could we mention them then (Ps. 19:12)? Sometimes we do not even remember all those sins we have come to know. Therefore it can be said that *we should confess the sins we remember, and particularly those sins that worry us*, either because of their badness, or because of their complications, or because of the difficulty we find in judging them according to the Word of God.

Sins are also different because of our work and our position in the family and the community. Those things will have some influence upon our confession: You have to consider the different sides of your life and your position in the community, "whether you are a father, mother, son, daughter, master, mistress, a manservant or maidservant; whether you have been disobedient, unfaithful, slothful /lazy/; whether you have grieved any one by words or deeds; whether you have stolen, neglected, or wasted /anything/, or done other injury" (SC).

When it comes to the practical side of confessing such things, it is not always possible to mention all things, because many of them are very much the same at every occasion. Some of them are of such a kind that they are done by almost everybody and known by everybody, e.g. carelessness, love of oneself, being forgetful of some duties, etc. To repeat everything of this kind every time would soon result in the forgetting of those things that have to come to the forefront always and everywhere. Therefore this rule is given: "Before God we should plead guilty of all sins, even of those which we do not know, as we do in the Lord's prayer. But before the confessor we should confess those sins alone which we know and feel in our hearts" (SC).

At this point we may find a new problem in connection with our confession. There are occasions when *we are not troubled by any particular sin* but still wish to obtain the forgiveness. What can we do then? We are not supposed to search for sins, nor may we invent things in order to have something to confess. But there is a way. "If any one does not find himself burdened with such /sins that have been mentioned above/ or greater sins, he should not trouble himself or search for or invent other sins, and thereby make confession a torture, but mention one or two that he knows ... But if you know of none at all (which, however, is scarcely possible), then

mention none in particular, but receive the forgiveness upon the general confession which you make before God to the confessor" (SC).

The second part of confession is *the absolution*. When the Christian says he has finished his confession, the confessor asks him if he wishes to receive the forgiveness. If the confessor has found that the Christian is particularly worried in his mind and finds it difficult to believe in the grace of God, he may also put this question: "Do you believe that my forgiveness is God's forgiveness?" (SC). When that question has been answered in the affirmative, the absolution is given to the one confessing. It may be done in these words:

"As you believe, so be it done unto you. And by the command of our Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you your sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen. Depart in peace" (SC).

Forgiveness is a great gift

From all this it can be seen that the forgiveness of sins is a great thing and something that is to be esteemed as a very great gift. Therefore it is essential that it is preached and taught properly and strongly about this thing, first that it has been instituted by Christ and is available in the Christian Church and every congregation, secondly why it is used, and thirdly how it is to be received and used. There is no doubt that such preaching and teaching will bring a very great blessing to all Christians, to the local congregations, and to the Church as a whole.

Of course objections to such preaching and teaching may be heard also. From the world, and also from Christians with a somewhat Pharisaic mind, we may get words like these: "It is wrong to allow the sinners among us to get away in such an easy manner from what they have done." But it is not an easy way, if sins are confessed in a true Christian way. First of all, to be a sinner, that is to stand before the Supreme Court of the holy and righteous God. There we all have to confess: "Woe is me! For I am lost" (Isa. 6:5). Secondly, the cleansing from sin is a hard and difficult thing that will cause much pain: it

means that we are treated with the fire of the Lord (Isa. 6:6-7), "for he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap" (Mal. 3:2). Thirdly, *the forgiveness of sins does not encourage an easy life or the committing of new sins*. It is definitely the other way round: When everything has been confessed and forgiven, Jesus says: "Your sins are forgiven ... Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (Lk. 7:48-50). "Do not sin again" (Jn 8:11).

This last word may cause some doubts on our side. Can we manage this, "not to sin again"? Of course it is the will of our Lord that we should not sin again. But on the other hand he knows how weak we are, and therefore his Word tells us: "If any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and he is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 Jn 2:1-2).

5. What happens when the sins have been forgiven?

If we wish to be quite clear about what forgiveness of sins mean, there are two things we must not mix up. Those things are, first the forgiveness itself, secondly the results of the sins, remaining among men, in the human relations and the human society.

If we wish to see clearly for ourselves that there is such a mixing of two things, let us speak to a person who has committed, say the sin of stealing. We say to him: "Have you returned the stolen property?" Perhaps he will answer: "Return what? I am not a thief any longer, and there is no stolen property any longer, I have received forgiveness for everything!" Everybody must understand that there is something wrong in this way of speaking. But what is wrong, and where is it wrong?

First we must understand what forgiveness is, i.e. the forgiveness itself. We may get some help from an example of what may happen between two persons. If one of them has been harsh or angry with the other one, he might say to him: "I am very sorry for what I have done. Forgive me!" If the other one says: "I forgive you", then that matter is settled. It is finished, it does not exist any more. That is the main principle of forgiveness between people. The same principle is at work in our matters before God also. When we pray to him, "Forgive us our trespasses", and he says "Your sins are forgiven", then *they are forgiven, they do not exist any more in our relation to God, they do not exist any more*. That means that the relation between God and us has been restored. God does not remember our sins any more, *unless we dig them up again, because we do not wish to live with the mind of forgiveness* (Mt. 18:28-35). But as far as God is concerned he wants the sin to be gone for ever: "You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea" (Mic. 7:19). Whatever we may see or say from another point of view, this is always true of God: what he has forgiven is forgiven.

Remaining consequences of our sins

The matter of our sins has another side also. We may find that side if we think of those people who have been hurt or who have suffered damage through a sin or several sins committed by somebody else. That sin or those sins have been confessed and forgiven. But what about those people who have suffered? What do they think now? How do they feel? We have already mentioned the example of theft. We can mention other examples as well: forgery, lies, slander, false evidence, fornication, and adultery. In all these cases there must be people who have suffered, perhaps over years. Maybe they are still suffering from what somebody has done to them. Can he forget about them, just telling himself: "Those things do not concern me any longer, since I have received forgiveness from God"? What about if he meets those people? Does he talk to them by chatting this and that only? What about if they ask him about the old matter or matters? Will they be satisfied, if he says: "It is all forgiven by God, why do you trouble me?" Or take it another way: It is reported to him that those people, to whom he has done that harm, are still suffering or at least very sorry. What will he do then? Can he shrug his shoulders and say: "It is no business of mine any longer! It is all forgiven and forgotten!"

To sort things out here we must admit that all these matters are of very different kinds. Therefore they cannot all be looked upon or treated in the same way. If we think of a lie or a case of slander it may have happened years ago. Although it was very bad at its time, the situation may be different today. The person who suffered most has passed away years ago, and his family has moved away, and its members are scattered. Nobody talks about the case any more. There is nobody who suffers from the case any longer. Such a matter can be considered to be finished, *if the one who has caused it has repented, and confessed and received God's forgiveness*. If the person who caused the harm long ago tries to settle things of this kind, he may cause new harm. Then the best thing to do is to leave the matter. But then it may happen that he has to carry a burden himself. There may remain some pain from the memory. That is a burden. If it was your fault, there is no human being you can ask to forgive you.

Then we take another example, that of theft. You are very sorry for what you have done. Perhaps it has troubled you for a long time, and now you have confessed the theft and received God's forgiveness. But as a matter of fact the pastor forgot to take up the matter of what happened to the stolen property, either money in cash, or a bicycle, a watch, some bags of corn, or some other things. Perhaps the pastor got the impression from what you told him that the money or the property had already been returned. But now, after the confession, the stolen things are still in your hands or your custody. That is your problem just now! Therefore your problem is: *Can you have at the same time the worldly benefit of your sin (= the things that you have gained or stolen) and the forgiveness for having committed that sin?* To be able to answer such a question we have to look back. *Forgiveness of sins always goes together with repentance.* True repentance means that we confess the sins from the bottom of our hearts, that we feel deeply sorry because of what we have done, and that we wish to be delivered from our sins. *This deliverance cannot mean that we go on living with them or wish to eat their fruits.*

Other sides of the matter

We can understand this matter more fully if we look at it from three or four other sides as well. First: How will fellow-Christians look upon such a thing as the unsettled matter, if they know about it? If they know, then they also know that a fellow-Christian of theirs has done a bad thing. Perhaps they have been very happy to find that he has repented, and confessed, and received forgiveness. And now they hear that he does not wish to settle matters after his sin! Then they can see for themselves that *he wants to remain with the fruits of his sin in order to be able to eat them.* And the badness of this evil is spreading! Because of fellowship and relationship and such things *some Christians are tempted to support him and to take his side.* Is it because they want to sin and eat the fruits of their sins also? *Such things bring shame over the Christian name.*

Secondly, let us look at the same matter from a worldly point of view. What will the outsiders say, those who are not Christians themselves? Will they not say, at least some of them: "The Christians are the greatest rascals and humbugs of all!" Among the worldly people there is often a great sense of honesty and fair-play. What about

if that spirit is missing among the Christians? What will the people of the world say, if the Christians pretend to be stricken by the holy Law of God, and confess wrong things, and ask for forgiveness, and then continue to eat the fruits of their sins?

Thirdly, let us look back at the moment when the pastor was busy with the congregation, giving instruction before the service of the Holy Communion, or when he was taking the confession individually and secretly from a Christian. What happened? Did the pastor speak clearly about what must happen to the stolen things, or the forged certificates of examination, or the pregnant girl-friend, or the baby she was going to deliver later on? *Or did he say, "I forgive you", before he had enquired about the penitent mind and the willingness to settle things?* It is in the individual talk and confession many of these things can be arranged. It will be much more difficult afterwards.

Fourthly, let us turn to the confessing Christian again. What about his way of confessing? What is he confessing? Is it only his sorrow because of his own bad feelings? Is it his fear that he will be discovered or talked about among people? Or is it a real sorrow because he has done wrong? Is

there a deep sorrow in his heart because he has offended the holy and righteous God? It is the duty of the pastor to try to put the confessing Christian right on these points. So what is a right confession after all? What does it mean to be honest before God? In Acts 5 we are told about a married couple and how they tried to deal with God in a certain case of offering money and getting a good reputation before the apostles and the Christian community. They sold a piece of land, and then they brought *part of the money* to the apostles and said: This is our gift to God, it is what we received, it is the total amount for the piece of land. This was a lie, because they wished to deceive God. – That is exactly what many people wish to do when confessing. They come to the pastor or to the confession service and say: “We wish to settle with God.” *But they do not wish to do that. They want to keep some things to themselves. They have not confessed really, they have not surrendered their hearts or lives to God.*

Jesus himself tells us about the only power that can force us to go and see our brother to settle things with him: that power is at work, *when you come to the altar* and “remember that your brother has something against you”. Jesus says: go and see to it, that you become “reconciled to your brother” (Mt. 5:23-24).

When is it possible to settle things, and when is it not?

Matters and cases are different, also when they have been confessed and forgiven. Zachaeus, the tax collector, had been forgiven what he had done wrong, but yet wanted to settle things in a good way: "The half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold" (Lk. 19:8). But if a tax collector, or store assistant, or clerk, or cashier has defrauded some people but cannot trace them, what can he do then? There are very many faults, and mistakes, and sins of that kind: We cannot trace those people any longer, whom we have hurt, or defrauded, or caused suffering in other ways. What a tremendous sorrow on our side then, when we start to take things seriously! Shouldn't that teach us to be careful every day in our dealing with our neighbour? We might not see him any more! If we find one day that we have done wrong to him or harmed him, we might not trace him before we meet him in eternity!

But what about if the person that has been harmed is still alive and known? How about the matter of money, stolen or cheated? There are difficulties on those points also. On money belonging to other people there is very often

interest. £ 10 ten years ago will be worth much more today, partly because of the interest, partly because the value of money was higher by that time. You cannot hand back the same amount in today's money and count it as the value of the good old money. But what about grain or cattle? They also give interest, the grain in new harvests, and the cattle in calves. That has to be counted, if anybody wishes to settle what he has stolen.

There are more difficulties. What about if the one who has stolen cannot pay? On this point we have to be very careful when dealing with confessing people, or when assisting people to settle an account of old sins. Some people will not hesitate to do as Ananias and Sapphira did, and thus they will try to store away perhaps half of their own property, or even more than that, and then say: "Look! I am very poor, I cannot pay back all, but let me pay a little." In all cases of such settling after a sin *there is need of a good Christian spirit that comes from real repentance, real conversion and Christian faith.* Where such a spirit prevails, the confessing Christian will say: "I cannot pay back all my dept today, but I am willing to pay it in full. Please allow me to pay it in instalments, until it has been fully paid."

There are still more difficulties. There are cases, in which there would arise very great trouble if

somebody turned up personally and said: "I have stolen from you, now allow me to pay what I owe you." Why would there be trouble? Perhaps the one who had suffered would say: "Perhaps you have stolen much more than you say. I must take you to court." Maybe there would arise a great quarrel between the two families, the two villages, and so forth. Sometimes, therefore, when people wish to settle things of this kind, it is advisable to ask some good adviser to show how to do it. The pastor may serve as such an adviser or helper. He might even undertake to hand over the stolen money or property to the owner, get a receipt for it, but still keep it as a secret where the money or the property comes from.

There are many sides of these matters that we cannot explain in this booklet. Such matters have to be explained in confirmation classes, parishional meetings, church councils, pastors' conferences, and in the talks between the pastor and the confessing Christian, and so forth. We have taken our examples particularly from the field of money, partly because cases of money are common among people, partly because we understand matters of money better than many other things. Matters concerning money sometimes can be rather easy to handle, sometimes they are very difficult. Other cases can be still more difficult. We cannot mention all sorts of

cases here. But there are cases of bearing false witness, matters between boys and girls, and bad behaviour in that field, matters of broken promises between a young man and a young woman, matters before anything has gone visibly wrong, and *matters that are visibly wrong*. If two persons are concerned in a certain matter, it may happen that one of them confesses, the other one does not. What is to be done then? If a young woman has born a child, "father unknown", but a young man knows that he is the father, how can such a matter be settled? "Confession", meaning confession before the pastor + absolution, is a way of receiving the forgiveness of one's own sins. But how can the mother live by herself, with the baby only? And how can the child live? What about its future in this world, and what about its eternal welfare? Nobody should manage to get away with the forgiveness of his/her own sins and then leave the remaining consequences to other people to look after.

All matters and cases of this kind have to be remembered and dealt with in the preaching and teaching work of the pastors, congregations and churches. And it is always better to inform people in advance of what trouble and suffering sin will cause, than to step in later to do the sweeping and cleaning work, when the sins have already been committed.

6. Conclusion

Forgiveness of sins is a great gift from God. It is given to us, because "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." This was done, "not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (Jn 3:16-17). Since we are all sinners, this is the only way of being saved, by obtaining the forgiveness of our sins, for Jesus' sake. "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

But to live with the forgiveness of our sins also means to "live in Christ" or "to be in Christ", which also means that he should live in us: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). This kind of life does not fit together with the old way of living (Eph. 2). Where there is a clash between those two ways of living *the old way must be abandoned*.

Where God's forgiveness has been received it must work continuously in our lives. That is shown already in the Lord's prayer: "... for we ourselves forgive every one who is indebted to us" (Lk. 11:4). But God's forgiveness must work in us in another direction also: not only upon what others have done to us, but also upon what we have done to other people. Where we have done wrong and caused harm to other people, "forgiveness" should not be the easy way of running away from the difficulties we have caused them. The forgiveness we receive from God is the only way of having our childhood before God restored, but then the practical every-day relations to our neighbour have to be solved also. The forgiveness we receive from God should be the reason, the force, and the inspiration to establish good relations to our neighbour and all fellow human beings. Our relation to God and our relation to our neighbour, therefore, must go together, and for sure they do. Jesus has shown us that *if we refuse to come to an agreement with our fellow-servant, the forgiveness we have just received from our Lord will be cancelled and the great debt counted again*: "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you besought me; and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" (Mt. 18:32-33). There is only one suitable answer to that question: "Yes." It is completely right, if the Lord wishes us to show in

our lives, by words and deeds, that we have received his love and forgiveness. One way of doing that is to show love and to forgive other people, as we have been forgiven by God. Another way is *to try our very best to give to people what is theirs according to their right*, either it has been stolen from them, or defrauded from them, or taken away from them through a broken promise, or we have caused them harm or suffering in other ways.

Of course every Christian family, village, congregation or town will be found short of such love. What can be done about that, then? The only thing that can help will be to turn to God in fervent prayer and say: Forgive us this sin also, and: Give us more of your own, great, real, and pure love.

GLORY BE TO THE FATHER,
AND TO THE SON,
AND TO THE HOLY SPIRIT,
AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING,
IS NOW,
AND EVER SHALL BE,
WORLD WITHOUT END

AMEN