



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 19.4 – The Doctrine of the Forgiveness of Sins

The Distribution of God's Forgiveness in Christ

Through His perfect obedience in life and in death our Lord Jesus has won for all mankind the forgiveness of sins. Jesus completed His work of redemption and reconciliation. But now it is necessary that this forgiveness be transmitted or conveyed to individual sinners so that they may take hold of it and apply it to themselves. For this reason, God's forgiveness must be distributed to the world and it must be received by individuals so that its benefits may be enjoyed. This is the specific work of God the Holy Spirit.

In his explanation of the Third Article of the *Apostles' Creed* in his *Large Catechism*, Martin Luther discussed the distribution of God's forgiveness in this way: *"Neither you nor I could ever know anything about Christ, or believe in Him and receive Him as Lord, unless these were offered to us and bestowed on our hearts through the preaching of the Gospel by the Holy Spirit. The work is finished and completed; Christ has acquired and won the treasure for us by His sufferings, death, and resurrection, etc. But if the work remained hidden so that no one knew of it, it would have been all in vain, all lost. In order that this treasure might not remain buried but be put to use and enjoyed, God has caused the Word to be published and proclaimed, in which He has given the Holy Spirit to offer and apply to us this treasure, this redemption"* (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 436, emphasis added).

If, for example, a large city needs food or its people will starve, and the food it needs is stored in a warehouse in a neighboring city, but there is no way to bring the needed food to that city, then the stored food will do the starving people no good at all, even though the warehouse contains enough food for all. The food must be distributed; it must be brought to the starving citizens so that they may eat it and survive. In the same way God's forgiveness that Jesus has won for all must be distributed to those who need it; otherwise there is no benefit, and the sinners whose forgiveness Jesus has won will still be lost because the forgiveness has not been brought to them by means of the Gospel of Christ.

God offers and conveys His gift of forgiveness by means of the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. This is what the apostle Paul calls **"the word of reconciliation"** (2 Corinthians 5:19): **"God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation."** Those who know what Jesus has done for the world through His suffering and death are to let others hear this Good News of what Jesus has done. When believers in Christ speak this Gospel to others or support others who speak this Gospel in their name, they are involved in the distribution of forgiveness, or what Paul calls **"the ministry of reconciliation"** (2 Corinthians 5:18): **"Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation."** In this way we become **"ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God"** (2 Corinthians 5:20).

In His ministry on earth Jesus Himself conveyed the forgiveness of sins to individual sinners. He could do this, because He knew what He was going to do on the cross. For example, a paralyzed man was lowered from the roof in front of Jesus. Jesus did not at once heal the man, but He said to him: **"Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you"** (Matthew 9:2). Then Jesus said to the crowd: **"The Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins"** (Matthew 9:6).

On the evening of Easter Sunday, the risen Savior gave to His followers this power and authority to distribute God's forgiveness to others. We read: **"Jesus said to them again, 'Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.' And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them'"** (John 20:21-23). He gave them their marching orders to go into all the world with the Gospel of forgiveness. He said to them: **"Repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations"** (Luke 24:47).

The Holy Spirit spoke through Peter on the day of Pentecost: **"Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins"** (Acts 2:38). Baptism conveys the forgiveness of sins, as does also the Lord's Supper. For Jesus said: **"This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins"** (Matthew 26:28).

Since Jesus has given the authority to distribute His forgiveness to His followers, and the totality of His followers makes up the Christian Church, it is the Christian Church which has the authority to distribute God's forgiveness everywhere. For this reason, Luther says in his *Large Catechism*: *"We believe that in this Christian community we have the forgiveness of sins, which takes place through the holy sacraments and absolution as well as through all the comforting words of the entire Gospel. This encompasses everything that is to be preached about the sacraments and, in short, the entire Gospel and all the official responsibilities of the Christian community"* (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 438). *"Before we prayed for it or even thought about it, He gave us the Gospel, in which there is nothing but forgiveness"* (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 452).

So also in the *Smalcald Articles* Luther wrote: *"The Gospel ... gives guidance and help against sin in more than one way, because God is extravagantly rich in His grace: first, through the spoken word, in which the forgiveness of sins is preached to the whole world (which is the proper function of the Gospel); second, through baptism; third, through the holy Sacrament of the Altar; fourth, through the power of the keys and also through the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters"* (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 319).

Thus, the Holy Spirit distributes Christ's forgiveness to us by giving us the Gospel, the Good News. This Gospel comes to us through Baptism, through the spoken Word, through the written Word, through the Lord's Supper, through general or private absolution after we confess our sins, and even through ordinary conversation, when a Christian tells someone else that his or her sins are forgiven because Jesus paid for them by His suffering and death and that Jesus rose from the dead to assure us that they have truly been removed.

Questions

1. Why does the forgiveness of sins won by Christ need to be distributed?
2. Which Person of the Triune God has the task of distributing forgiveness?
3. How is Christ's forgiveness distributed to individuals?
4. What is meant by the ministry of reconciliation and the word of reconciliation?
5. When did Jesus give His disciples the authority to distribute forgiveness?
6. Why must we call Baptism and the Lord's Supper ways by which forgiveness is distributed?
7. What other ways does Luther mention as ways to distribute forgiveness?