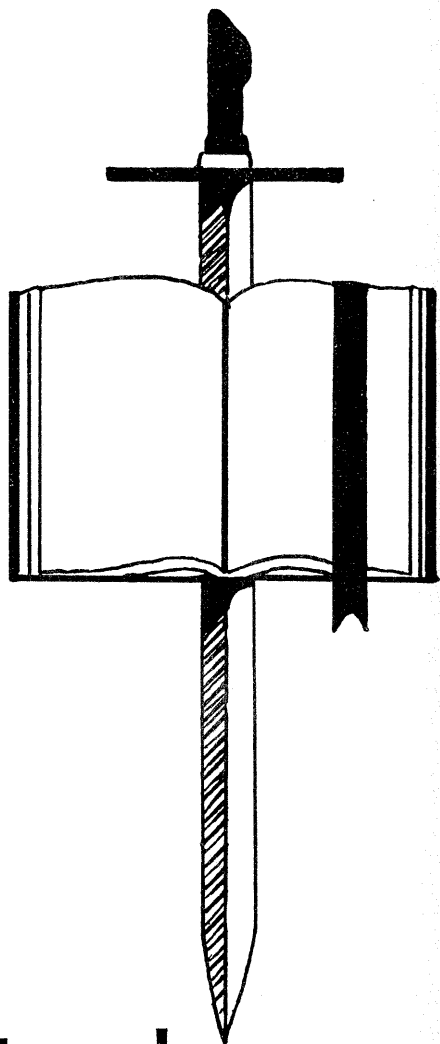


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Book Review Editor: J. B. Madson

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## FOREWORD

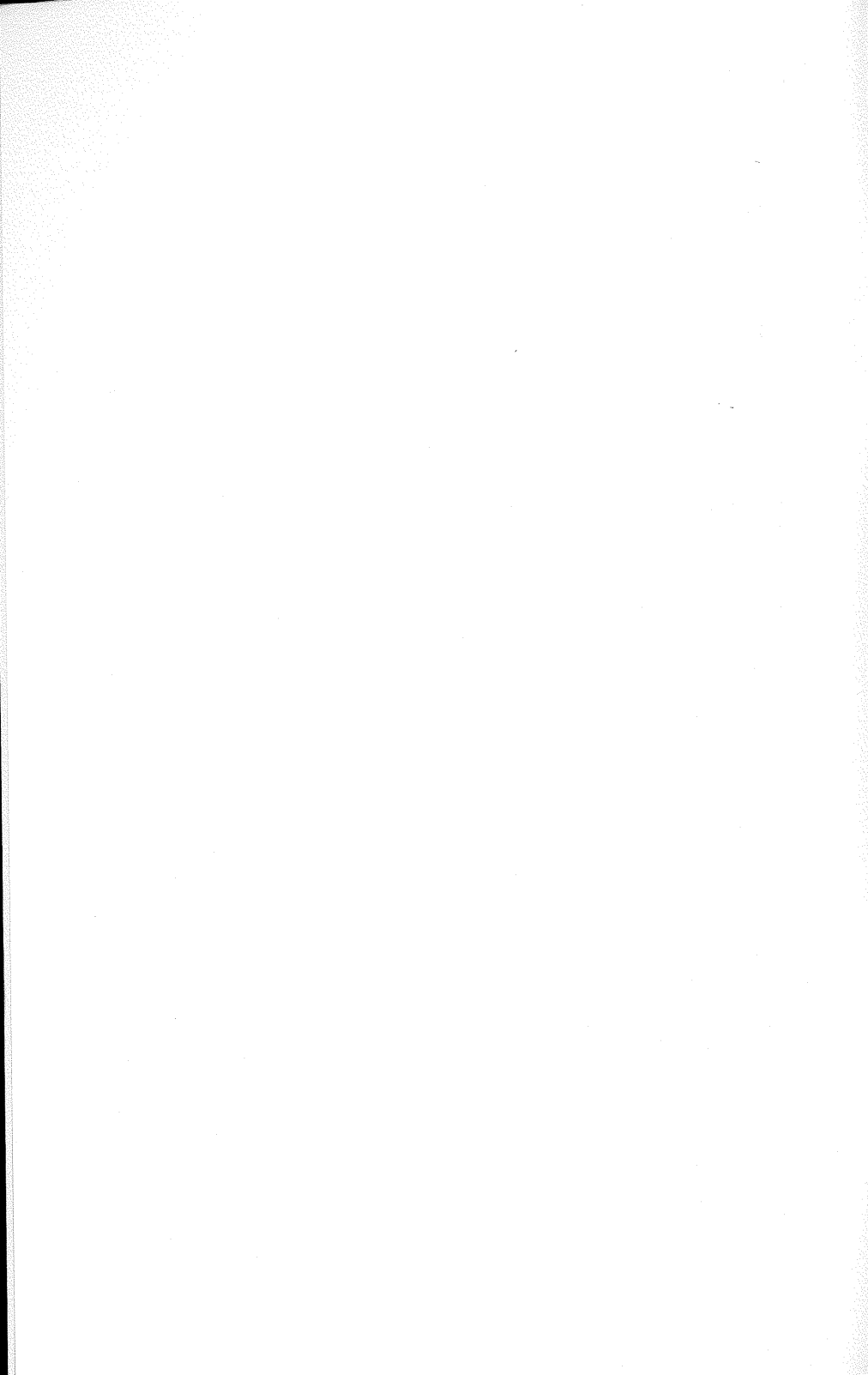
This issue of the Quarterly begins with an Advent message by Reverend Juul Madson, professor of New Testament at Bethany Lutheran College. This sermon was delivered to Mt. Olive Lutheran congregation, Mankato, Minnesota, during this Advent season.

The article Private Confession: Historical Developments, by Reverend James Krikava, pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church, Brewster, MA, will renew our appreciation of private confession which Luther in his Large Catechism describes as "wonderful, precious, and comforting...and we urge that such a precious blessing should not be despised, especially when we consider our great need." Along with this article we include a sermon by Dr. C.F.W. Walther on The Special Comfort of Private Absolution, based on Matthew 9:1-8. This sermon was translated by Reverend Donald Heck and originally appeared in a booklet of sermons by Walther on the Old Standard Gospels. We are grateful to Rev. Heck for granting us permission to reprint the sermon in our Quarterly.

Our pastors will appreciate Pastor Matthew Luttmann's practical and timely article on Helping People with Terminal Illness. One of the most difficult, yet rewarding, tasks of a Seelsorger is to minister to those who have terminal illness. This paper was delivered to the 1988 General Pastoral Conference of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Rev. Luttmann is pastor of Grace Lutheran Church, Madison, Wisconsin.

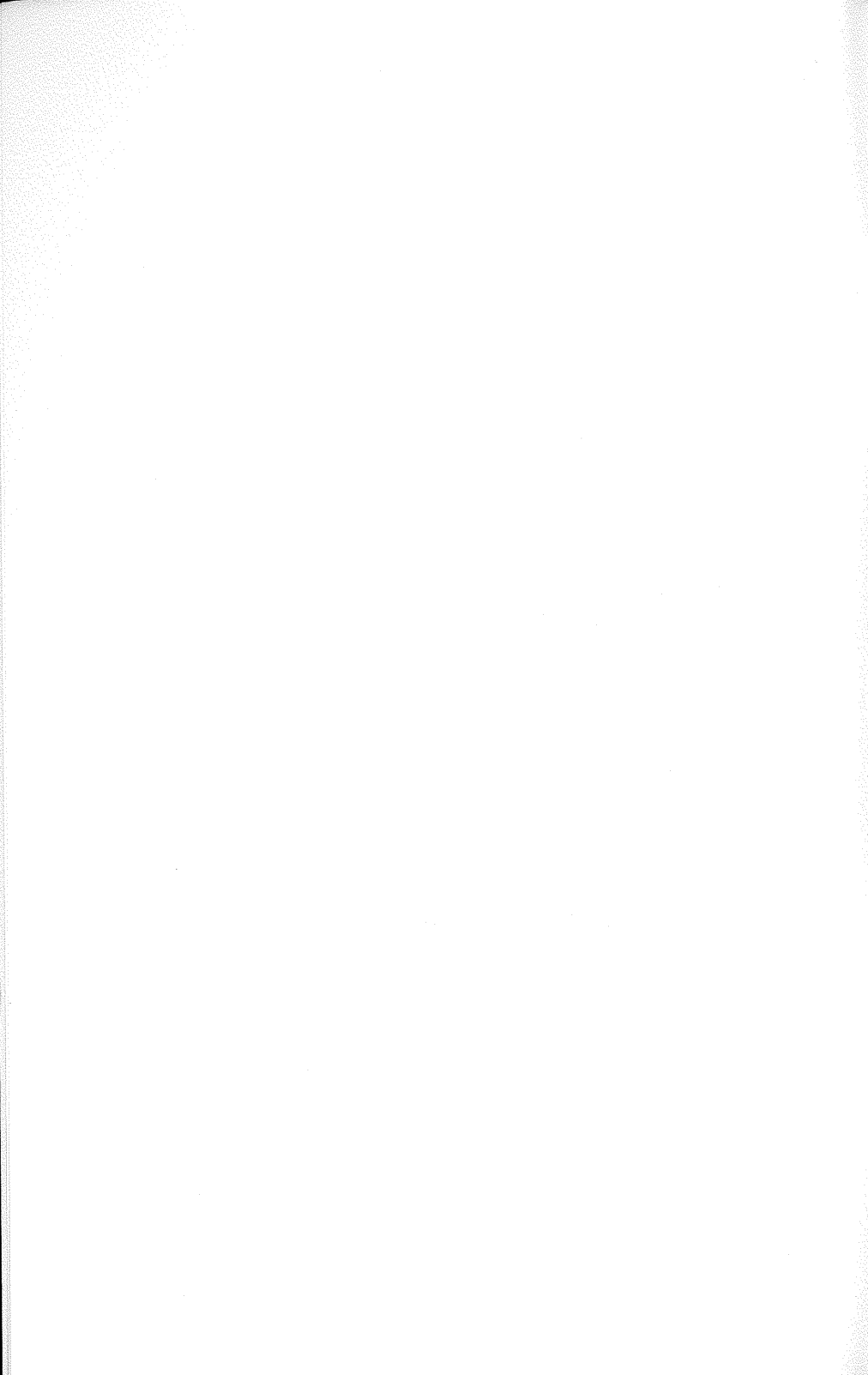
Pastor John Moldstad's comment on St. Paul's letter to Philemon, namely "as to teaching us pastors how to deal with people on a practical level, letting the Gospel do the influencing, this short letter is invaluable," will whet the reader's interest in his exegetical treatment of this "Forgotten Epistle." Pastor Moldstad serves Our Savior Lutheran Church, Lake Havasu City, Arizona

--WWP



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## FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT

SO CHRIST WAS SACRIFICED ONCE TO TAKE AWAY THE SINS OF MANY PEOPLE: AND HE WILL APPEAR A SECOND TIME, NOT TO BEAR SIN BUT TO BRING SALVATION TO THOSE WHO ARE WAITING FOR HIM. *Hebrews 9:28.*

PRAYER: Lord Jesus Christ, let also this Advent season help us to continue in true repentance so that both the anniversary of your coming in lowliness at Bethlehem and the prospect of your return in glory may fill us with joy and gladness. We ask this in your saving name. Amen.

In Christ, our Advent King, fellow redeemed:

It was John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Christ, who had his disciples ask Jesus: "Are you the Coming One or do we look for another?" *Luke 7:19.* All through Old Testament times the faithful were looking for someone to come in fulfillment of the many promises that God had given His people through the prophets. For that reason our Christ is known as THE COMING ONE. And in the season of Advent particular attention is given to this Coming One, as the very word Advent indicates.

But when the coming of Christ is made the object of our attention in this season, it is not merely his coming at Bethlehem that is under consideration. His coming at Bethlehem is history, so we are not now going to Bethlehem to see Christ come again in the way in which He came almost 2000 years ago. As we prepare to commemorate that eventful coming, we are led to consider also two other comings. Let us therefore today be directed to the consideration of

## THE THREE-FOLD ADVENT OF CHRIST

- I. His first coming in lowliness
- II. His second coming in glory
- III. His continued coming in grace.

### I.

His first coming was in great humility. The promise of His coming in the flesh at Bethlehem was an event to which many generations of Old Testament believers had looked forward to. At the very beginning of human history, when Adam and Eve sinned and fell away from God, the promise had been given to them that the Seed of the woman would bruise (crush) the head of the serpent. *Genesis 3*. That our first parents understood this promise as the announcement of an unusual event is indicated by Eve's exclamation at the birth of her first-born: "I have gotten a man, the Lord!" *Genesis 4:1*.

Throughout the history of the Old Testament, as this promise was being reiterated, ever new aspects of the Coming One were being revealed. Moses had prophesied to the people of Israel: "The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear." *Deut. 18:15*.

But this Coming One was to exercise the function also of a priest, who in the Old Testament economy of grace made sacrifice for the sins of the people. This Coming One, however, was to be not only the sacrificer but also the sacrifice itself.

The implication of our text is that in His first advent Christ came in connection with sin. And just what was that connection? Isaiah had prophesied: "The chastisement of our peace was



upon Him." And he knew the reason for that chastisement: "Because He shall bear their iniquities." Even more pointedly the prophet says: "The Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all." *Isaiah 53.*

All of this Christ realized for himself and His mission when He plainly avowed: "The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister AND TO GIVE HIS LIFE A RANSOM FOR MANY." *Mark 10:45.* And the Apostle Paul testifies to the accomplishment of this mission when he writes to the Philippians that Christ Jesus "humbled himself and became obedient to death, even the death of the cross." *Chapter 2.*

Though He himself was sinless, Christ's first coming was in order to overcome sin for us. This overcoming of sin came about through God's remarkable substitutionary atonement, for, as the Apostle says: "God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." *I Cor. 5:21.*

Because He came in great and lowly humiliation, the Son of God was and is for many incognito, i.e., unrecognized for who and what He really is. Therefore the Apostle John writes: "He came to His own and His own did not receive Him." *John 1:11.* Yet those who did receive Him were not disappointed, for "as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name." *verse 12* So Christ, the Son of the living God, has truly come in the flesh and we anticipate the anniversary of that Advent with joy.

## II.

Now we are reminded that the Coming One will make another advent, this time "apart from sin,"

as the text literally says. That is, He will not come the second time to redeem us from our sins by the sacrifice of himself. That is a once-and-for-all completed task, as Paul makes clear in writing to the saints at Rome: "For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all."  
*Romans 6:10.*

Do not then look for His second coming to be in great humility as was His first coming, but rather in glory and splendor. Having accomplished our redemption in an inexpressible manifestation of His love, He has also been highly exalted by His Father and given a name above every name, "that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."  
*Phil. 2:9-11.*

Whereas many failed to recognize Him in His humiliation, there will be no failure to recognize Him when He comes to Judgment, for He will not then come incognito, but in all the majesty of heaven. In describing that return, Jesus himself said: "When the Son of man shall come in His glory and all the holy angels with Him, then shall He sit upon the throne of His glory; and before Him shall be gathered all nations; and He shall separate them one from another as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats." *Matthew 25:31-32.*

For those who are unprepared, the second coming of the Christ will be a time of dread and terror, but for those who are waiting for him, as our text says, "He will appear a second time...to bring salvation." Christ himself said to His followers that when they would see the signs of the end of the world which would usher in His second coming, they

should look up and lift up their heads "because your redemption draws near." *Luke 21:28*. The question then remains for us: "How do we join and remain in the ranks of those who eagerly wait for Him?"

### III.

That question is answered in yet another coming of the Son of Man -- His coming to us now in grace. Between His first and second visible comings our Lord continues to be the Coming One. He comes to us spiritually in His Means of Grace, the Word of the Gospel, and the Sacraments, in which he brings to us His saving love and grace.

Therefore the Sacrament of Holy Baptism is called a "washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost." Because of the fact that when we are baptized into Christ we have put on Christ, the Apostle can flatly state: "BAPTISM EVEN NOW SAVES US." *I Peter 3:21*.

And in the Sacrament of the Altar Christ comes to us with His own body and blood as a pledge of His grace and of the forgiveness of all our sins, for in His institution of the same He clearly stated that the elements which the communicants were receiving were the same body and blood with which he gained the remission of all our sins. That is why Paul could say: "I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes." *Romans 1:16*.

That is also why he pleaded for the conversion of his blood brothers who were caught up in the work righteousness syndrome. The message of the Scriptures is that righteousness is by faith alone, and *that* righteousness says: "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring

Christ down from above) or, "Who will descend into the abyss?" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? "The Word is near you, even in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith which we preach): that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes to righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made to salvation. For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame." *Romans 10:6-11*. It behooves us, then, to hear His Word, in order that we may be among those "waiting for Him" when He comes again.

One of the famous paintings of the Christ was inspired by words of our Lord to the church at Laodicea: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any man hear my voice, I will come in to him and dine with Him and he with Me. He who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me in my throne...He who has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." *Rev. 3:20-22*. This picture in turn has led the hymnwriter Landstad to place words of pleading in our mouths:

Behold, He at the door is knocking,  
Hark, how He pleads our souls to win;  
Who hears His voice -- the door unlocking --  
To sup with him He enters in.  
How blest the day, my soul, how blest  
When Jesus comes to be thy guest.

Behold, He at the door is calling,  
Oh, heed, my soul, what He doth say;  
Deny Him not -- O thought appalling --  
And turn Him not from thee away.  
My soul gives answer deep within,  
Thou blessed of the Lord, come in!

"Amen. Even so, come Lord Jesus!" *Rev. 22:20.*  
Come now in the fulness of your grace, and come, in  
Your own good time, in the fulness of your heavenly  
glory! Amen.

-- Prof. Juul B. Madson

---

O Lord, how shall I meet Thee,  
How welcome Thee aright?  
Thy people long to greet Thee,  
My Hope, my heart's delight!  
Oh, kindle, Lord most holy,  
Thy lamp within my breast  
To do in spirit lowly  
All that may please Thee best.

Love caused Thy incarnation,  
Love brought Thee down to me;  
Thy thirst for my salvation  
Procured my liberty.  
O love beyond all telling,  
That led Thee to embrace,  
In love all love excelling,  
Our lost and fallen race!

Rejoice, then, ye sad-hearted,  
Who sit in deepest gloom,  
Who mourn o'er joys departed  
And tremble at your doom.  
Despair not, He is near you,  
Yea, standing at the door,  
Who best can help and cheer you  
And bids you weep no more.

Prolog to

PRIVATE CONFESSION: HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTS

In a piece entitled "The Current Crisis in Remorse," one of our nations's foremost story-tellers, Garrison Keillor, laments the regretless time in which we live. Not only is the social-work community to blame for this guilt-free society, but even the Church must share in the responsibility:

"In 1976 a major Protestant denomination narrowly defeated an attempt to destigmatize the Prayer of Confession by removing from it all guilt or guilt-oriented references: 'Lord, we approach Thy Throne of Grace, having committed acts which, we do heartily acknowledge, must be very difficult for Thee to understand. Nevertheless, we do beseech Thee to postpone judgment and to give Thy faithful servants the benefit of the doubt until such time as we are able to answer all Thy questions fully and clear our reputations in Heaven.'" (Garrison Keillor, "We're Still Married," Viking Penguin Books, 1989)

Perhaps such an insight alone is reason enough to proceed with a paper on private confession.

## PRIVATE CONFESSION: HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTS

### I. Introduction

A paper on "Private Confession: Historical Developments" is an almost impossible undertaking because of the vast amount of material on the subject. Since the assigned title seems to imply a more general, perhaps introductory, treatment of the subject, it will necessarily be incomplete and somewhat arbitrary as far as the choice of its contents is concerned. A decision has to be made as to what historical considerations would be most pertinent and helpful for Lutheran pastors today. This decision will necessarily be subjective to a degree. First, we will limit this study primarily to Luther and the Reformation era. Within that framework our task will be to draw attention to some historical facts concerning private confession which tend to be overlooked or misunderstood. This choice of material has been shaped largely by parish experiences and acquaintances with Christians generally.

### II. The Term

Whether we are discussing private confession as it was taught by the Roman or the Lutheran Church, the term itself is a bit of a misnomer. In both communions it is, strictly speaking, neither private nor does it consist solely in confession. It is not a private transaction between the sinner and God in the sense that it is the individual's private affair. It is a service of the Church, a function of her ministry, and, as such, cannot be limited to one. In this sense it is no different from the other services of the Church: Baptism (which does not allow self-baptizing), preaching

(which requires hearers), and the Lord's Supper (which does not allow a private mass). It is private only in contrast with the common, general confession of sins in the Church's public worship. The privacy consists in this: that the transaction does not admit more than one listener on the human level; namely, the confessor. Thus the Small Catechism's definition: "Confession consists of two parts. One is that we confess our sins. The other that we receive absolution or forgiveness from the confessor as from God himself, by no means doubting but firmly believing that our sins are thereby forgiven before God in heaven."<sup>1</sup>

Outwardly, this concept of private confession was not so very unlike the Roman Sacrament of Penance, which consisted of contrition, confession, satisfaction, and absolution, and which was carried out in the confessional. Even though each of these elements was explained very differently by Luther (to the point of distilling the first three parts of the Roman sacrament into one in the catechism). nevertheless, Luther can say, "As to the current practice of private confession, I am heartily in favor of it, even though it cannot be proved from the Scriptures....For when we have laid bare our consciences to our brother and privately made known to him the evil that lurked within, we receive from our brother's lips the word of comfort spoken by God himself."<sup>2</sup>

A second problem with the term "private confession," or as the reformers often refer to it simply as "confession" (Beichte, its being private understood), is that, for the Lutheran, at least, it is a synecdoche which names the lesser part of the transaction (man's act of confession) for the whole, allowing God's act of absolution mediated through the confessor to be silently understood.<sup>3</sup> In this



sense the term "confession" is not much better than "Penance," except that it does not carry with it the pejorative connotation of "assigned penances."

In the Roman system, the term made a little more sense, since man's act of contrition, confession, and satisfaction constituted an integral part of the whole transaction. Yet even in the Roman system, the goal was the same; namely, absolution. It would be an oversimplification of 16th century Roman catholicism to say that they did not really desire absolution, but in a purely Pelagian way wanted to earn their salvation. To the contrary, absolution was highly sought after. Luther's early life in the monastery reflects this, and as Herman Sasse points out, "...people of the 16th at least spent money to get rid of their sins, while in the 19th century the sale of indulgences would be a very poor business because there were no longer any consciences troubled by sins. Our 20th century seems to have made still further progress!"<sup>4</sup> But with the Roman sacramental system, which required a material element to which the Word could come to make it a sacrament, they robbed the people of the certainty of the absolution by making it contingent on the presence of the material element. The problem, of course, was that the material element, instead of being an element outside of man, was declared to be the penitent's act of contrition, confession, and, beyond the confessional, satisfaction; the sufficiency of which no one could ever be absolutely certain. Thus Chemnitz shows the real cause of dispute between Rome and the Lutherans regarding private confession:

"...the Compendium says that in the sacrament of penance the element consists of the outward actions of the penitent person; namely, contrition of the heart, confession of the mouth, and satisfaction by work. And if the word of

absolution, spoken by the priest, comes to this element, that is, to the human performances, then it thereby becomes a sacrament which effectively causes and confers grace, that is, reconciliation with God and remission of sins. Therefore when a sinner who has fallen after baptism seeks and strives for reconciliation with God and remission of sins, the papalists lead him to human, that is, his own works through the sacrament of penance, in order that these performances may become and be a sacrament when the word of absolution comes to them, that is, the cause which effects and confers the grace of reconciliation with God and the remission of sins. Therefore the following distinction is taught in the *Compendium theologiae*: 'Baptism and the Eucharist depend upon what is done to the one who is sanctified, and not to any action of his, except by way of accident, that is, these are actions of God, who offers and conveys the benefits of the Mediator. We merely receive to ourselves what God by means of His actions conveys in these sacraments. The sacrament of penance, however, consists essentially in an action of the one who is sanctified. And therefore this act of ours is the material of the sacrament.'<sup>5</sup>

This is a classic example of the semi-Pelagian system into which the medieval Church had evolved. The use of the term, "confession," dates from the 8th century, when there was yet no question of any absolution, and where the confession of sins was simply seen as an exercise of humiliation evoking God's mercy.<sup>6</sup> Thus even after the full-blown development of the sacrament of penance, formulated in the Council of Trent, the term "confession" persisted in common usage. While there might be an inclination

to alter our terminology to distinguish Lutheran private confession from Roman, Luther and the Reformers generally retained the old familiar terms, "confession" as well as "penance." No doubt this was for the sake of the common understanding which would associate these words with that transaction which took place in the confessional or before the priest. What mattered to the Reformers was not so much what a thing was called, but what was meant by it. Thus, for example, even Article XI of the Augsburg Confession, primarily on private absolution, is entitled "Confession."

A third problem of terminology is that when reading Luther and other Reformation documents care must be taken to ascertain accurately what is meant by "confession" and the related terms in a given context. As noted, very often it refers to the whole transaction between penitent and confessor. Other times it refers to the confession of sins itself within that transaction, namely, a general confession and the enumeration of sins before the confessor. Other times it refers to "the practice of confession to God alone or to our neighbor alone, begging for forgiveness,"<sup>7</sup> outside of context of absolution.

With this wide usage it becomes possible to make the reformers say just about anything we want them to say concerning private confession. The same Luther can be made to say of private confession, in the same sermon no less, that it is popish tyranny,<sup>8</sup> and that it should not be given up for all the treasure in the world.<sup>9</sup> In the first case, Luther refers to that part which, in practice if not in theory, required virtually a complete list of all sins committed. In the second case, he refers to the entire transaction, culminating in the absolution.

From this confusion of terminology one can see why there has been much discussion as to whether private confession was considered by Luther and the Confessions as a sacrament. It is quite clear that the reformers did not want to argue over human definitions of sacraments, "provided what is handed down in Scripture is preserved."<sup>10</sup> They are quite willing to call private confession a sacrament so long as it is understood that its sacramental character belongs to the second part which "is a work which God does, when He absolves me of my sins through a word placed in the mouth of a man."<sup>11</sup>

For Luther, all the various outward means by which God conveys and imparts the forgiveness of sins won by Christ are sacramental in that Christ and the Holy Spirit come to man by bodily means, suited for man's bodily nature. As Luther said against the spiritualists of his day: Those who deny our dependence on the outward means of grace "tear down the bridge, the path, the way, the ladder, and all the means by which the Spirit might come to you. Instead of the outward order of God in the material sign of baptism and the oral proclamation of the Word of God he (Karlstadt) wants to teach you, not how the Spirit comes to you but how you come to the Spirit."<sup>12</sup>

In this sense, private confession, in which a penitent, upon confession to a brother in the flesh, receives from his lips God's absolution, is certainly a sacrament. Therefore it is listed by Luther among the various forms of the Gospel, all of which carry with them this sacramental character: "(The Gospel) offers counsel and help against sin in more than one way, for God is surpassingly rich in his grace: first through the spoken word, by which the forgiveness of sin (the particular function of the Gospel) is preached to the whole world; second

through Baptism; third, through the holy Sacrament of the altar; fourth, through the power of the keys; and finally, through the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren. *Matthew 18:20*, 'Where two or three are gathered,' etc."<sup>13</sup>

Evidently, with the expression "the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren," Luther has in mind private confession, as indicated by the succeeding articles which follow the outline of the article IV.

### III. The Reformation's Contribution to the Development of Private Confession

A common misunderstanding among some of the lay people and Protestants in general is that one of the great achievements of Luther was that he did away with the system of confessing one's sins to the pastor and won the believer the right of being able to confess his sins to God alone. If one is not careful to determine precisely what Luther is addressing in a given passage, it is possible to get this impression at times. For example, "From all this you see that it is the devil's own doing when the pope commands private confession for everyone on pain of disobedience and mortal sin, and when he consigns to the devil those who do not practice it."<sup>14</sup> However, once again, Luther is reacting against the fact that the people were instructed in confession to focus on how well they made their confession and attempted to enumerate all their sins, paying little or no attention to the absolution. Also, the idea of going to confession by compulsion was repugnant to Luther: "It is this urging and forcing which I condemned when I wrote concerning confession, and I refuse to go to confession simply because the pope has commanded it and insists upon it."<sup>15</sup>

Again, of private confession Luther says,

"If those other two kinds of confession (i.e., a general acknowledgment of one's guilt before God alone and a special confession when we admit that we have wronged a neighbor) take place in public, one is not obliged to make this last kind. God is well aware of your sins."<sup>16</sup> Here Luther does reckon with a possible (but virtually hypothetical) category of pure Christians, known today as Protestants, which do not need private confession. Of them he adds, "one who has a strong, firm faith that his sins are forgiven may let this confession (private) go and confess to God alone." But Luther doubts that there are many, and certainly not the majority, who fit into this category: "But how many have such strong faith?"<sup>17</sup>

Luther, of course, does not deny the Christian the right to confess his sins to God alone. In fact, he holds such confession as "so highly necessary that it dare not cease for a moment, but must constitute the entire life of a Christian, so that without ceasing he praise the grace of God and reproach his own life in the eyes of God."<sup>18</sup> For Luther, however, this confession, as important as it is, was not meant as a substitute for private confession, but rather as a necessity for a beneficial use of private confession. For this confession consisted solely in confessing, i.e., acknowledging one's sinfulness before God trusting God for forgiveness; whereas private confession consisted not only in man's work of confession but also and most importantly, in God's absolution mediated through the confessor. For this reason Luther considered it a privilege to be able to go to private confession:

"There is no private consolation from God. We are priests to each other....those who would have private transactions with God despise God who is in the churches and with my brother."<sup>19</sup>

"If I were to say, I will not go to confession because I have the Word in the Lord's Supper, I will be like him who declares, neither am I going to hear the preaching. The Gospel must ring and echo without ceasing in every Christian's mouth. Therefore we are to accept it with joy wherever and whenever we can hear it ....For in confession as in the Lord's Supper you have the additional advantage, that the Word is applied to your person alone....Ought it not to fill your heart with joy to know a place where God is ready to speak to you personally?....Besides this you have another advantage, in confession you are able to disclose all your failings and to obtain counsel regarding them....This is why it is such an excellent and comforting thing for two to come together, and the one to offer advice, help, and consolation to the other, proceeding in a fine brotherly and affectionate manner. The one reveals his ailment, whereupon the other heals his wounds. Therefore I would not give confession up for all the treasure of the world....we ought never to despise confession, you cannot hear God's word too frequently, nor impress it so deeply upon your heart that it could not be done still better."<sup>20</sup> "Private confession is by no means to be rejected. The reason is this: there is much that is beneficial and precious in it. First of all, the absolution in which your neighbor (the shorter sermon copy has the word "priest") absolves you in God's stead, is just as if God himself were speaking, and that should indeed be comforting to us. If I knew that God were in a certain place and would absolve me, I would not go to some other place, but I would receive absolution in that place as often as I could. Such absolution he has put into the mouth of man,

hence it is most comforting, especially to burdened consciences to receive it there."<sup>21</sup>

"Forgiveness of sins is not to be expected only at one time....but frequently, as often as one needs it, till death. For this reason I have a high regard for private confession for here God's word and absolution are spoken privately and individually to each believer for the forgiveness of sins, and as often as he desires it he may have recourse to it for this forgiveness, and also comfort, counsel, and guidance. Thus it is a precious, useful thing for souls...."<sup>22</sup>

"I will allow no man to take private confession away from me, and I would not give it up for all the treasures in the world, since I know what comfort and strength it has given me. No one knows what it can do for him except one who has struggled often and long with the devil. Yea, the devil would have slain me long ago, if the confession had not sustained me. For there are many doubtful matters which a man cannot resolve or find the answer to by himself, and so he takes his brother aside and tells him his trouble. What harm is there if he humbles himself a little before his neighbor, puts himself to shame, looks for a word of comfort from him, accepts it, and believes it, as if he were hearing it from God himself.... Moreover, we must have many absolutions, so that we may strengthen our timid consciences and despairing hearts against the devil and against God. Therefore, no man shall forbid the confession nor keep or draw anyone from it."<sup>23</sup>

Luther's thought and words concerning private confession are also incorporated into our Lutheran Confessions, which for the quia subscriber, makes his



judgment all the more binding:

"It is taught among us that private confession should be retained and not allowed to fall into disuse. However, in confession it is not necessary to enumerate all trespasses and sins, for this is impossible. *Psalms 19:12*, 'Who can discern his errors?'"<sup>24</sup>

"Confession has not been abolished by the preachers on our side....the people are carefully instructed concerning the consolation of the Word of absolution so that they may esteem absolution as a great and precious thing..."<sup>25</sup>

"We also keep confession especially because of absolution, which is the word of God that the power of the Keys proclaims to individuals by divine authority. It would therefore be wicked to remove private absolution from the church. And those who despise private absolution understand neither the forgiveness of sins nor the power of the keys."<sup>26</sup>

"Thus we teach what a wonderful, precious, and comforting thing confession is, and we urge that such a precious blessing should not be despised, especially when we consider our great need."<sup>27</sup>

"Since absolution or the power of the keys, which was instituted by Christ in the Gospel, is a consolation and help against sin and a bad conscience, confession and absolution should by no means be allowed to fall into disuse in the church....For although ("since" makes more sense, cf. Triglot) private absolution is derived from the office of the keys, it should not be neglected; on the contrary, it should be highly esteemed and valued, like all other functions of the Christian church."<sup>28</sup>

"For this reason (that we believe God's will

toward us with certainty) Christ has the promises of the Gospel offered not only in general but also through Sacraments, which he has attached as a seal of the promise and by which he confirms it to every believer individually. For that reason also....we retain individual absolution and teach that it is God's command that we believe this absolution and firmly hold that when we believe the word of abolition we are as truly reconciled with God as if we had heard a voice from heaven ...."29

The great achievement of Luther was not the absolution of the confessional, but the shift of focus in private confession from the work which the penitent does to the work which God does there: "Therefore when you go to private confession give more heed to the priest's word than to your own confessing; and make this distinction. What you say is one thing, and what he says who hears you is another. Do not place much value on what you do, but give heed to what he says, to wit, that in God's stead he proclaims to you the forgiveness of sins....confession and absolution must be carefully distinguished from each other, that you give attention chiefly to the absolution, and that you attend confession not because of the command, or in order to do a good work by your confessing...."30 As to the first part of confession, Luther even goes so far as to say that "the work of confession is nothing but an occasion on which God is requested to fulfill his promise,"31 and, "The priest has sufficient evidence and reason to grant absolution when he sees that one desires it."32 The confession of sins before the confessor serves, then, more as an indicator than as an act. Therefore the complete enumeration of sins before the confessor was seen not only as impossible, but not at all necessary for the

confessor to be adequately convinced of the penitent's desire for absolution.

To obtain this evidence Luther does not object to a certain inquiry in confession: "In confession, if the priest wishes to inquire, or if you want to examine yourself, as to whether or not you are truly contrite, I have no objections. Just so no one becomes so bold in the sight of God that he claims to have sufficient contrition. Such an attitude is presumptuous and fabricated, for no one has sufficient contrition for his sins."<sup>33</sup> Therefore Luther also says, "Confession ought to be brief. If you recall something that you have forgotten, it is not to trouble you; for you confessed not in order to do a good work....but to be comforted by the word of absolution."<sup>34</sup>

Besides the inquiry concerning sin in confession, Luther adds that there should also be inquiry as to the faith of the penitent: "I would allow even that the inquiry be expanded as to whether a person firmly believes the sacrament, that his sins are forgiven him...."<sup>35</sup> His orders for confession before the priest, reflect what he thought was most necessary in the transaction: 1) a statement of purpose: "I beseech you to hear my confession and to declare unto me the remission of sins in the name of God." 2) a general confession of sin: "I, a poor sinner confess before God that I am guilty of all sins." 3) a demonstration that the penitent understands what that means: "Especially have I committed this or that which burdens my conscience." (This part is somewhat optional as Luther indicates: "But if you know of no sin at all [which seems almost impossible], don't confess any particular one, but receive forgiveness upon the general confession which you make to the father confessor before God.") 4) pastoral inquiry as to faith: "Do you believe

that my absolution is God's absolution? Answer: Yes, dear sir." 5) the absolution: "As thou believest, so be it done unto thee. And I by the command of Jesus Christ our Lord, forgive thee all thy sin in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen. Go in peace."<sup>36</sup>

This was the normal procedure for private confession. Occasionally the inquiry as to faith was expanded to include questions of faith concerning the sacrament of the altar as well. For example, after the confession of sins the confessor could ask: "Why do you desire to receive the sacrament (of the altar)? Answer: Because I desire to strengthen my soul with God's Word and sign and to obtain grace. But hast thou not found forgiveness of sins by absolution? Answer: So what! I want to add the sign of God to his Word. To receive God's Word in many ways is so much better."<sup>37</sup>

Because of the pastoral responsibility and accountability to God concerning participation in the Sacrament of the Altar, private confession afforded not only an opportune time, but also an appropriate atmosphere for such examination. Thus the statement in the Augsburg Confession: "The custom has been retained among us of not administering the Sacrament to those who have not been previously examined and absolved."<sup>38</sup> Wilhelm Loehe, who revived private confession in his parish during the 19th century, pointed out that the bane of his generation with regard to the care of souls was that "Men overlooked what is central in pastoral care: the confessional." Since private confession and the examination and absolution connected with it were no longer practiced, the pastor could find neither a dignified, quiet, secluded, unsuspected place for carrying out his care of souls nor a detached holy relationship to the penitent....All other methods

of individual care of souls have proved unsatisfactory and often impracticable substitutes for private confession.<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, this custom of examination was not a replacement for private confession, although later the two often became confused to the point where private confession, "the Lutheran way," was viewed as a sort of pre-sacrament sacrament of purification for the Lord's Supper.<sup>40</sup> But for Luther private confession remained in itself a distinct form of the gospel. When the Reformers confessed its retention in their churches, they envisioned it to be retained essentially the same way Luther described it in the Catechism.

#### IV. General Confession Versus Private Confession

A second common misunderstanding concerning private confession is the thought that the Lutheran Reformation created the institution of a general confession and absolution in the liturgy as a substitute for private confession. First of all, the general confession and absolution (but more of an optative expression than a real absolution) was a part of the mass since the 11th century. But this was in no way intended as a substitute or even an equivalent to private confession. Only the private confession acquired the authoritative "Ego te absolvo," which Luther consciously retained.

Besides this, both of Luther's masses begin with the introit or hymn, with no provision for a general confession and absolution, private confession being presupposed. In the Latin Mass, after the Lord's prayer Luther favors the retention of the Pax Domini "which is, so to speak, a public absolution of the sins of the communicants, the true voice of the gospel announcing remission of sins, and therefore the one and most worthy

preparation for the Lord's Table, if faith holds to these words as coming from the mouth of Christ himself. On this account I would have it pronounced facing the people, as the bishops are accustomed to do, which is the only custom of the ancient bishops that is left among our bishops."<sup>41</sup> Therefore perhaps the Lord's Prayer and the Pax Domini could be considered a general confession and absolution in Luther's liturgy. Other than that, preaching was considered by Luther to be a general absolution.<sup>42</sup>

In some of the Lutheran churches there was a custom of administering a general, public confession immediately after the sermon. In 1533 Luther and Melanchthon became involved in a controversy over this in Nürnberg. The issue was private confession and absolution to the exclusion of public confession and absolution (advocated by Osiander) versus retaining both forms (advocated by the Nürnberg clergy). Luther and Melanchthon were called upon for their opinion. Against Osiander, who evidently saw the public absolution as detrimental to church discipline, they said, "Even if not all believe (the word of absolution), that is no reason to reject (public) absolution, for each absolution, whether administered publicly or privately, has to be understood as demanding faith and as being an aid to those who believe in it....and does not aid those who do not believe it; and yet the universal context of the gospel has to remain (valid)." On the other hand, sympathetic to the concern that private confession might suffer harm, they warned, "Regarding the idea that no one might desire private absolution if one has public absolution and keeps it in use, we say that this is definitely a weighty issue....the gospel has to be applied through Word and Sacrament to each individual particularly.... one is not to abolish private absolution in favor of

public absolution...."<sup>43</sup> When people did begin to neglect private absolution in favor of public, pastors were considered justified in abolishing public absolution in order to coax people back to the confessional. Of course preaching was never abandoned so the public confession was still there.

#### V. Freedom From Compulsion Regarding Private Confession

The much misunderstood freedom from compulsion in the matter of private confession in no way differs from the freedoms in spiritual matters generally in Luther's thought. Matters of faith generally, and of the means of grace particularly, cannot be made subject to compulsion in Luther's understanding. Nothing in the sphere of the Spirit should be undertaken simply because of some external pressure or custom. The Reformation's invective against the requirement of yearly confession was largely motivated by the fact that the people coming to the required confession-communion at Easter time came, not out of true repentance and faith, but out of fear of sacrilege if they disobeyed the Church. In Luther's Easter sermon on confession and the Lord's Supper, the same concept of freedom regarding the Lord's Supper applies to private confession:

"I have often enough said that Christians are not obliged to commune on this particular festive day, but that they have the right and authority to come whenever they desire; for God has established the office of ministers for the purpose that they might at all times serve the people and provide them with God's Word and the Sacraments.... For it is not and cannot be in keeping with the Lord's Supper to force or compel anyone to partake of it; on the contrary, it is intended only for a hungry soul that compels itself and rejoices in being permitted to come; those who must

be driven are not desired....we say the same thing concerning confession....He (God) does not compel you to make a private confession to the priest when you have no desire of your own to do so, and do not long for absolution."<sup>44</sup>

For Luther, the Gospel, in whatever form, is a gift, not a law, and people must be persuaded of their need of it, not compelled by laws. When, in consequence of the intoxicating new freedom from the old church laws and regulations regarding compulsory confession, and under the influence of the Radical Reformers, private confession fell into disuse, Luther headed a determined effort to restore it. The 1528 Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony tell the pastors to exhort communicants "to make confession, so that they may be instructed where cases of doubt arise in conscience, and may be comforted, when true contrition is in their hearts, as they hear the words of absolution."<sup>45</sup>

To impress upon the people the importance and necessity of the individual application of the gospel in confession, the Instructions declare that "Penance also is to be reckoned as a sacrament."<sup>46</sup> While the theologians could debate over whether or not private confession fit the prescribed definition of a sacrament, pastorally speaking, to instill the desire in the people to make use of this means of grace, the reformers knew that the term "sacrament" carried weight. Against the Radicals who abused the evangelical liberty by declaring private confession to be unnecessary, Luther answers:

"Thus you see that confession must not be despised, but that it is a comforting thing. And since we need many absolutions and assurances, because we must fight against the devil, hell, and sin we must not allow any of our



weapons to be taken away, but keep intact the whole armor and equipment which God has given us to use against our enemies. For you do not yet know what labor it costs to fight with the devil and overcome him. But I know it well, for I have eaten a bit of salt or two with him. I know him well, and he knows me well, too. If you had known him, you would not have rejected confession in this way."<sup>47</sup>

Perhaps the straightest path between liberty and license on the matter of compulsion concerning confession is found in the Large Catechism:

"If you are a Christian, you need neither my compulsion nor the pope's command at any point, but you will compel yourself and beg me for the privilege of sharing in it. However, if you despise it and proudly stay away from confession, then we must come to the conclusion that you are no Christian and that you ought not receive the sacrament. For you despise what no Christian ought to despise, and show thereby that you can have no forgiveness of sin. And this is a sure sign that you also despise the Gospel. In short, we approve of no coercion....For here the compulsion must be inverted; we (i.e., pastors) must come under the command and you must come into freedom. We compel no man, but allow ourselves to be compelled, just as we are compelled to preach and administer the sacrament."<sup>48</sup>

## VI. The Administration of Private Confession

For the Reformers, just as preaching the Gospel publicly was offered as a regular service of the Church, so private confession was also offered on a regular basis as a service of the Church, to be used

freely, but used. It was recognized as a part of her ministry, and, as such, one of the marks of the Church. While all the means of grace belonged to the entire Church, and therefore "in an emergency even a laymen absolves and becomes the minister and pastor of another,"<sup>49</sup> under normal circumstances the administration of private confession (like preaching, baptizing, and administering the Sacrament) was the work of the called servant. Thus Luther says:

"Fifth, the church is recognized by the fact that it consecrates or calls ministers, or has offices that it is to administer. There must be bishops, pastors, or preachers, who publicly and privately give, administer, and use the aforementioned four things (pure doctrine, baptism, and Lord's Supper, and the public and private use of the keys) or holy possessions in behalf of and in the name of the church, or rather by reason of their institution by Christ....The people as a whole cannot do these things, but must entrust or have them entrusted to one person. Otherwise, what would happen if everyone wanted to speak or administer, and no one wanted to give way to the other? It must be entrusted to one person, and he alone should be allowed to preach, to baptize, to absolve, and to administer the sacraments...."<sup>50</sup>

Hearing confessions constituted a regular part of the pastor's work in his care of souls. It was expected of a pastor no less than preaching or the administration of the other sacraments.

## VII. Private Confession as an Example of the Sacramental Mentality

The burden of Luther's concern as a pastor and theologian was the consolation of the Gospel and

forgiveness. This is not to say that he did not know the difference between tender consciences and the insensitive, to whom the law has to be driven home at confession as elsewhere. At times Luther withheld absolution when he perceived a lack of repentance on the part of the person before him. At times he insisted on the "fruits meet for repentance" (*Matthew 3:8*) when he saw flagrant abuse of the absolution. But Luther's goal in confession was always and ultimately restorative, by means of Christ's effective word which was sacramentally united with the voice of man.

The recovery of sacramental absolution in private confession from the uncertain contingent absolution taught by Rome is but an example of the Reformation's recovery of the sacramental mentality in general. Luther is quite radical on this point. Christ and the Holy Spirit are really inaccessible to him except "sacramentally" through the brother who is "Christ" to us, and through the sacramental water of baptism and the blessed bread and cup. When private confession is under discussion, Luther says, "it is Christ who sits here, it is Christ who hears (in the person of the confessor), Christ who answers, not just a man."<sup>51</sup> And "to whom are you going to confide your weakness if not to God? And where can you find him except in your brother? He can strengthen (your weak faith) and help you by his words. This is confessing the right way."<sup>52</sup> In other words, for Luther, in private confession it is not simply the pastor informing the penitent of what Christ has done, but it is actually Christ forgiving the sinner in that moment with those very words, with no "ifs, ands, or buts" attached. That was something even the weakest faith could latch on to. And when that forgiveness was imparted individually, it was all the more certain and unmistakable.

## VIII. Conclusion

Beyond the Reformation the history of private confession is a rocky one. Where the sacramental mentality of the Reformation was alive, private confession followed. Where it faltered, private confession fell into disuse. Herman Sasse notes that "it is not accidental that the decay of confession and absolution has always been accompanied by the decay of the Sacrament of the Altar. For the Lord's Supper also is the remission of sins to everyone that receives it in faith."<sup>53</sup> Franz Pieper likewise notes that the doctrine of confession and absolution is the acid test for one's understanding of the means of grace.<sup>54</sup>

In Pieper's discussion of absolution our own synod's controversy over the matter is cited as a victory for the scriptural position. Here our synod has a real advantage over other Lutherans. Whereas most of American Lutheranism is built on a past which even sought to remove Article XI from the Augsburg Confession with the American Recension, our own synod stands on a solid past, grounded on such theses as those presented at the 1861 synodical convention:

"7. In close connection with private absolution stands private confession, which latter is nothing else than a request for absolution. Moreover, it has also this value that it gives the confessor (or pastor) opportunity to examine the people, to teach the Word of God and the Catechism and to give all sorts of advice in difficult cases of conscience. Finally, it is a training in self-humiliation. In brief, it is an application of Law and Gospel.

8. Confession is not commanded by God, but is, nevertheless, most useful.

Consequently it should not be forced upon anyone as a necessary thing; but where it is practiced it should be maintained; where it has fallen into disuse, it should be restored by recommending it and praising its usefulness."<sup>55</sup>

Through our association with Walther we also have a strong advocate for the revival of private confession. Not only in Law and Gospel (cf. pp. 165-192) but particularly from the pulpit does Walther extol the virtue of private confession. Overthrowing every possible argument brought against it in his day, he urges its restoration in parish life.<sup>56</sup> And finally, our liturgy, as well, has helped many of our congregations to at least hold on to the most necessary second part of private confession, namely, the individual absolution upon a general confession.

Indeed, further study could be urged on the matter of private confession, not only from the viewpoint of historical theology, but from the viewpoint of all the theological disciplines; particularly practical theology. Perhaps it is time to start calling private confession and absolution a sacrament again. But whatever may be done, it seems that renewal of this matter can only enhance the Gospel orientation which, as was noted in our convention, "gives our synod its particular character, its flavor, if you will. This is what determines its spirit, its practice in the congregations and its life as a church."<sup>57</sup>

SOLI DEO GLORIA

-- The Rev. James Krikava

## ENDNOTES

1. Tappert, The Book of Concord, SC p. 349
2. Luther's Works, American Edition, Vol. 36, p. 86
3. Referring to private confession and absolution simply as "confession" is somewhat parallel to referring to the Lord's Supper as "Holy Communion," where the word "communion" is often understood to mean man's act of receiving the blessed elements instead of Christ's act of uniting himself with the elements.
4. Sasse, Herman, This My Body, p. 311
5. Chemnitz, Examination of the Council of Trent, Part II, pp. 555-556
6. Fousek, Marianka, Private Confession and Absolution, April 1965, p. 2
7. Tappert, LC, p. 548
8. Lenker, Sermons of Martin Luther, Vol. II, p. 196
9. Lenker, p. 200
10. Tappert, Ap., p. 211
11. Tappert, LC, p. 459
12. LW, 40, p. 147
13. Tappert, SA, p. 310
14. LW, 36, p. 360
15. LW, 51, p. 98
16. LW, 36, p. 359
17. LW, 51, p. 99
18. Lenker, Vol. II, p. 195
19. Fousek, p. 24
20. Lenker, Vol. II, pp. 198-200
21. LW, 36, p. 359
22. LW, 37, p. 368
23. LW, 51, pp. 98-99
24. Tappert, AC, p. 34
25. Tappert, AC, p. 61
26. Tappert, Ap. p. 197
27. Tappert, LC, p. 460

28. Tappert, SA, p. 312
29. Tappert, SD, p. 622
30. Lenker, Vol. II, pp. 198-200
31. LW, 39, p. 28
32. LW, 35, p. 17
33. LW, 35, p. 18
34. Lenker, Vol. II, p. 201
35. LW, 35, p. 18
36. LW, 53, pp. 117-121
37. LW, 53, p. 118
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39. Leohe, Three Books About the Church, pp. 174-175
40. Brunner, Worship in the Name of Jesus, pp. 286 ff.
41. LW, 53, pp. 28-29
42. LW, 50, p. 76
43. LW, 50, pp. 76-77
44. Lenker, Vol. II, pp. 194-197
45. LW, 40, p. 296
46. LW, 40, p. 293
47. LW, 51, pp. 99-100
48. Tappert, LC, p. 460
49. Tappert, PPP, p. 331
50. LW, 42, p. 154
51. Fousek, p. 6
52. Lenker, Vol. II, pp. 200-201
53. Sasse, p. 311
54. Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, Vol. III, pp. 189 ff.
55. Grace for Grace, p. 157
56. Lammert, Richard, Translation of:  
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57. Report of the 72nd Annual Convention of the ELS,  
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## THE NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

Grace and peace be multiplied unto you through the knowledge of God, and of Jesus our Lord. Amen.

In our faithful Savior, dear Christian friends.

The Christian religion and the Christian Church is a religion and a Church of forgiveness. In both the forgiveness of sins is the center around which everything revolves. While in every other religion the main point consists in giving directions for a pious and virtuous life, in the kingdom instituted by Christ the main point is the forgiveness of sins.

That he might win all men is the reason why the Son of God became a man and died on the cross. This was the real purpose, the real goal, of his work on earth. And after Christ by his life, suffering, and death had won forgiveness of all sins for all men, all further works, preparations, and institutions of Christ likewise have no other purpose than to bring all men to faith in the forgiveness earned for them, offer, give, and seal it to them.

First, Christ had his Gospel written. He instituted the office of the holy ministry, that the forgiveness of sins in his name would be preached to all nations and at all times until the end of days. Whoever believes this Gospel preaching has forgiveness of sins, as certainly as God's Word is not a lie but the eternal truth. According to his Gospel, God demands no work or suffering on our part, whereby we must pay for our sins ourselves or earn their remission. God alone wants to have the honor for the rescue of our souls and our salvation; he wants to give it to us all free of charge, without our merit and worthiness, out of pure grace and mercy.



Because Christ knows how depressed a sinner becomes, when he knows that he is a great sinner, and yet should firmly believe that he is still a child of God, he added Holy Baptism to his Word, as the seal to a letter. He did not only give the command, "Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." Mt 28:19; he also connected this command with the promise, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." Mk 16:16. Baptism should be a visible pledge, of that which Christ wishes to give all men; they also share in the forgiveness earned for them. If each baptized person believes, he can say, "If Christ wanted to condemn me immediately, he just couldn't; he has made a covenant of grace with me and as confirmation of it he has given me a pledge, Holy Baptism; it is the first payment, which he has paid me, for my salvation. I can appeal to it in all temptation and doubts, and even some day before his throne. I can say, 'I am baptized, Jesus; if I wanted to doubt, that my sins are forgiven, I must call you a liar. With your baptism you have pledged me your grace; that is why you now absolve and save me.'"

My friends, Christ did not let even Holy Baptism suffice; in order that our faith can constantly renew the pledge of the forgiveness of sins, he instituted his Holy Supper. This holy sacrament has also no other purpose than to provide a new strong support for our faith. Whoever has gone to Holy Communion can say, "How dare I doubt, whether I share in Christ's reconciliation, and whether my sins are forgiven? Christ has given me that very body which he offered God on the cross for the sins of the world. He has given me to drink of that very blood which flowed on Golgatha for the forgiveness of all! What more could Christ do to convince me, that I also belong to the pardoned?"

All doubt must disappear."

However, Christ did not provide just enough to meet the bare needs of his redeemed, so that they could believe in the forgiveness of their sins. He really overwhelmed them with pledges of his grace. He has done superabundantly more than the human heart could every pray for and understand. He has proved that he not only has mercy but that he, as the Scriptures say, is rich in mercy. Christ even permits his Church to say to every sinner in his name, "Be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee." He has promised that such an absolution pronounced in his name will be valid in heaven and that he will confirm it on the last day. Now since in our today's Gospel Christ himself pronounces the absolution on one sick of the palsy, permit me to speak more to you on the special comfort of private absolution.

The text: Matthew 9:1-8:

*And he entered into a ship, and passed over, and came into his own city. And behold, they brought to him a man sick of the palsy, lying on a bed; and Jesus seeing their faith said unto the sick of the palsy, Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee.*

*And behold certain of the scribes said within themselves, This man blasphemeth.*

*And Jesus knowing their thoughts said, Wherefore think ye evil in your hearts? For whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and walk?*

*But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (then saith he to the sick of the palsy,) Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house. And he arose, and departed to his house.*

*But when the multitudes saw it, they marvelled, and glorified God, which had given such power unto men.*

As you have heard, we have in this Gospel an instance of a private absolution; we are told how Christ not only in a general way announced grace to a penitent sinner, but how he particularized the forgiveness of all sins to the man sick of the palsy. Permit me, therefore, to speak to you today on:

#### THE SPECIAL COMFORT OF PRIVATE ABSOLUTION

- I. In What Respect It has Special Comfort,
- II. How It Happens, that This Comfort is so Often Misunderstood.

Lord, Jesus Christ, you did not only win for us all the forgiveness of our sins, but you also strive to make us partakers of the same. You therefore present many means to do this. Oh, awaken us through your Spirit of grace that we hunger and thirst for it; may we eagerly seek and use your means of grace revealed to us. Protect us from indifference and satiety in your spiritual, heavenly gifts, that we do not forfeit them and the salvation of our souls. You must do it, for flesh and blood cling to earthly things. Hear us we pray, and bless us today by the preaching of your Word for time and for eternity. Amen.

#### I.

If we add to the story of our text what Mark and Luke relate, we learn the following. When the Gergesenes prayed Christ never to return, he sailed to the other shore of the Sea of Galilee and visited Capernaum again. Here shortly before he had miraculously healed the centurion's servant, Peter's mother-in-law, and others. Scarcely was it known

that Jesus was again in the city than a great crowd gathered around him. Soon it was so great that many could not find room even in front of the house to hear his word. Now while they were listening four men appeared, carrying one sick of the palsy. They wanted Jesus to help him. But since all avenues to the house in which Jesus was were crowded with people, it was impossible to enter with the wretched man. Yet this hindrance did not discourage the stretcher-bearers and the sick man. They firmly believed that if they could only get to Jesus he would help. What did they do? With their burden they climbed up an accessible side to the roof of the house, broke the roof open, and lowered the bed with the sick man squarely in front of Christ. And what did He do? When he saw their faith, he immediately turned to the man sick of the palsy and said, "Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee." From his words we perceive that Christ must not only have seen the faith of the man sick with the palsy, but he must also have perceived that first of all he needed comfort from his sins, that he was more concerned over his sins than over his sickness.

What does Christ teach us when he especially announced to this greatly worried sinner the forgiveness of his sins? Otherwise, Christ in only a general way announced his grace to sinners. When, for example in Luke 15, many publicans and sinners came to him, he did not say to each individually, "Thy sins be forgiven thee." He told them the precious parable of the lost coin, the lost sheep, and the prodigal sin, and added, "Likewise, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth." Lk 15:10. And when Christ wanted to comfort the chief of the publicans, Zaccaheus he merely said to him, "The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost." Luke 19:10. Why did not Christ proceed the same way with the man sick of the palsy? Why was he

not satisfied with the general sermon, that each repentant sinner can receive forgiveness? --The reason for it is not difficult to find. The man sick of the palsy was so very much alarmed over his sins. They caused him more concern than his serious sickness itself; he needed special comfort. That we do not err in this conclusion, we see in the way Christ treated the woman who was a great sinner. When she drew near to Christ with a crushed heart, cried bitterly, wet his feet with her tears, and dried them with the hairs of her head, Christ again was not satisfied merely to say to this severely assailed soul in a general way that there is grace for all sins, but he especially turned to her and said, "Thy sins be forgiven thee." Luke 7:48.

You see from this, my friends, that private absolution has a very special comfort for us sinners. It is true that private absolution is not the only means whereby God announced forgiveness. God already does this by the general preaching of the Gospel, by Holy Baptism, by the feeding and giving us to drink of the body and blood of his Son in Holy Communion. It is true that whoever in faith firmly relies on these three evidences of God's grace toward all repentant sinners has forgiveness of sins. He can that way be certain of it. But which Christian does not know by experience that the very one who considers God's Word as true, yes, does not doubt in the least that God wishes to be gracious to all sinners if they believe, that he very often doubts whether he dare also comfort himself with the general promise of grace? -- Which true Christian has not often experienced the thought arising in his heart when he reads that those great sinners -- David, Manassah, Peter, and others -- received forgiveness, "Yes, if you were a David, a Peter, if your repentance were also as deep as theirs, then I dare say you would

also believe"? Which true Christian has not thought, when he read or heard, that God wants to show mercy to all, that he loves the whole world and sent his Son, "Yes, I dare say God wants to save me, but have I not by my sins shut myself out from his universal grace"? Which true Christian has not experienced that he was moved to tears, when the riches of divine mercy was described to him, the friendliness of Christ, his shepherd's faithfulness toward the lost sheep, his ardent longing for the salvation of even the greatest sinner, "Oh that I could believe, that God has such ardent longing for also my salvation!'"? Does not the thought and wish often arise in even the most experienced Christian, "Oh that Christ himself would come to me and say especially to me, as to the man sick of the palsy, 'Do not doubt. Thy sins be forgiven thee!'"?

Is it not a great comfort, therefore, that Christ said to the apostles and consequently to his whole Church, "Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them"? and, "Verily I say unto you, whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven"? If a Christian, relying upon that word, receives private absolution, would he not be lifted above all doubts? Must he not say that if forgiveness is announced to him in Christ's name, it is just as if Christ himself came down from heaven and said it to him with his own mouth? Must he not call Christ himself a liar, if he still does not want to believe that his sins are also forgiven? What greater comfort can there be than when someone says to us, "Your sins are forgiven you," since Christ has declared that that is valid also in heaven?

Here is an example. The citizens of a city revolted against their king, were finally conquered, had to flee. At first all of them were condemned

to death, but later the king published a decree in which all were granted full pardon. Trusting such a general pardon, the majority returned without worry. But suppose that the ringleaders had committed several murders. Would they not think, "Perhaps you are not included in the pardon"? Would it not be especially consoling, if they were to receive a separate pardon, one drawn up especially for them, in which the assurance would be given them, that they were also included among the pardoned? Undoubtedly. So you see that it is of special comfort for a Christian who is worried because of his sins, if he hears not only the word, "All believing sinners can be of good cheer," but also, "You be of good cheer: your, yes, your sins are forgiven you."

Read the confessions of experienced Christians and you will find all this confirmed by them. Luther writes in his sermon which he preached against the enthusiast Carlstadt, when the latter wanted to abolish private absolution, "Our God is not so stingy that he had left us only one absolution and only one word of comfort for the strengthening and comfort of our conscience....While we must have much comfort, as we battle and stand against the devil, death, and hell, we must permit no weapon to be taken from us, but our armor must remain complete and the comfort given us by God must remain unmoved. For, Luther adds, "you still do not know how much care and work it is to battle with the devil....I would long ago have been overcome and put to death by the devil if confession would not have preserved me." Luther writes in the following manner in his writings on guarding oneself against Zwingli's teaching and teachers, "If thousands upon thousands of words were mine, I would rather lose all than to let the Church lose the least little bit of this confession....But because the enthusiasts are secure and know nothing

of sadness and temptations, they lightly despise this medicine and comfort." Yet we find such testimony not only in the private writings of the best scholar we have from God; the entire Lutheran Church concurs in her public confessional writings. For example, we read in the 11th Article of the Augsburg Confession, "Of Confession they teach that Private Absolution ought to be retained in the churches." We read in the 12th Article of the Apology, "We also retain confession on account of the absolution which is God's Word by which the power of the keys frees us from sins. Therefore it would be against God to remove the absolution from the churches. Those who despise the absolution, do not know what forgiveness of sins is, or what the Power of the Keys is." Finally, we read in the third part of the Smalcald Articles, "Since Absolution or the Power of the Keys is also an aid and consolation against sin and a bad conscience, ordained by Christ (Himself) in the Gospel, Confession or Absolution ought by no means to be abolished in the Church, especially on account of (tender and) timid consciences and on account of untrained (and capricious) young people, in order that they may be examined and instructed in the Christian doctrine." (Page 493)

You see, my friends, the whole Lutheran Church speaks that way. Do we not therefore reasonably ask how it happens that the comfort of private absolution is so often misunderstood? To answer this question, permit me in the second place to add a few words.

## II.

My friends, one would be most unfair if one would lump all opponents of private confession and absolution in one group. The stern words which Luther used against those who did not want to know



anything about it are not to be applied to all who are still prejudiced against it today. For at that time private confession was in existence and they wanted to abolish it. Today it is almost fallen into disuse and they want to reestablish it. These are different circumstances.

Now the first reason why even many honest Lutherans have a dread these day of private confession and absolution is that they view the arrangement partly as something new, partly as a return to papal usages. This reason, however, does not hold water. That arrangement is, as we have seen from the confessions of our Lutheran Church, not something new at all. Private confession was already in use long before the rise of the papacy and continued in all Lutheran congregations of all lands up to the last century. Only a few enthusiasts had overthrown it. Only when the rationalists, that is, the preachers of reason of the new times, got the upper hand in the Lutheran churches was private confession abolished and the general confession introduced in its place.

A second reason why so many oppose it is this: so many no longer believe that the Christian Church has the power on earth to forgive sins. Many have become like the Pharisees, who, when they heard that a man forgives sins, think in their hearts, "This man blasphemes God," for "who can forgive sins but God only?" Such either do not believe God's Word at all, or they do not bear in mind that forgiving sins in one's own name and in the name of God are two different things. To be sure, only Christ could pronounce absolution in his own name, for God said only to him, "Sit thou at my right hand." But the servants of the Church can remit and retain sins in God's and Christ's name, for Christ himself has commanded them to do it. St. Paul says, "Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God

did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God." 2 Cor. 5:20. In another place the same apostle writes to the Corinthians, "For if I forgave anything, to whom I forgave it, for your sakes forgave I it in the person of Christ." 2 Cor. 2:10. What further proof do we need?

A third reason why many misunderstand the special comfort lying in private absolution is this one. They do not really feel their sins. Many say, "I do not need it; I can comfort myself enough with the general absolution." But is it not possible that a true Christian is at times so oppressed by his sins, just as well as a Lutheran, that he would gladly hear the words, "All thy sins be forgiven thee"? Or do we today actually have such strong Christians as they sought for in vain at the time of the Reformation? Do not men just these days lack a strong faith more than anything else? Oh, certainly everyone, who wants to be easily satisfied as to his comfort, should examine himself whether this contentedness actually arises from strength of faith or whether it does not really come because he can easily disregard his sins! That thoughtless Christians desire no private absolution is, of course, no wonder. Their wounds do not smart, therefore they do not especially desire soothing balm. But supposing a Christian actually were so strong that he does not need the particular assurance of the forgiveness of his sins. Should he not for the sake of those who do need it, use it at times, so that they would be enticed by his example to hurry to this gift of grace?

A fourth reason why many do not want to use private confession no doubt is occasionally this one. It was introduced irregularly into the church the first time. At that time private absolution was pronounced for the most part only to such who

had been gross sinners and repented. They say, is not each Christian free to use or not to use the human arrangements which were made in the Lutheran Church of seeking private absolution before partaking of Holy Communion? -- That is true: this is part of Christian liberty; no Christian should and can be compelled to use it. But it is a different question whether that for which one has the power is also of benefit. Ask yourself that, my dear Christian.

Finally, the fifth reason why so many in our day are prejudiced against the use of private absolution is that they suppose that a detailed confession of their sins must always precede it. They say, should I reveal the secrets of my heart to a man, in whose experience or honesty I may have absolutely no confidence? Must I not fear that a dishonest father confessor might abuse my confession? We answer thus. We never demand that a special confession of sins precede a special absolution. Did not Christ absolve the man sick of the palsy without such a confession? You see, also a servant of Christ will never demand a single confession of sins. This is also forbidden in clear words in the symbols of our Church, for we read in the 25th Article of the Augsburg Confession, "But of confession they teach that an enumeration of sins is not necessary." --

Thus, my friends, I have showed you the great comfort, which lies in the full use of the office of the keys. I have further shown you how the objections which are usually raised against it are actually insignificant and groundless. I therefore say to you, "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good." 1 Thess. 5:21. Ponder further on what was said in the fear of the Lord. But consider also this: Many eyes are turned upon us, who have the reputation of pursuing the goal of a true Lutheran

congregation more earnestly than others. Our responsibility is therefore great. Perhaps thousands will imitate us. Whatever we today let fall of the old salutary usages of our fathers, that our children will search for again even less.

I have done what is my duty; I would be a traitor to our Church if I would not have raised my voice on also this point. Now do what God demands of you. His Holy Spirit guide you and me in all truth to salvation through Jesus Christ.

Amen.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Translation by Rev. Donald Heck and printed by his permission.*

## HELPING PEOPLE DEAL WITH TERMINAL ILLNESS AND GRIEF

In her best seller, Necessary Losses, Judith Voirst writes, "When we think of loss we think of the loss, through death, of people we love. But loss is a more encompassing theme in our life. For we lose not only through death, but also by leaving and being left, by changing and letting go and moving on. And our losses include not only our separations and departures from those we love, but our conscious and unconscious losses of romantic dreams, impossible expectations, illusions of freedom and power, illusions of safety--and the loss of our own younger self, the self that thought it always would be unwrinkled, and invulnerable and immortal." (Voirst, p. 16)

From this statement we can see that loss is an integral part of life. We experience losses of various kinds from birth to death. It is important for us to understand this fact for we, as pastors, are called upon to minister to those who experience loss. It is also important for us to recognize that no matter how great or small the loss in one's life, the reaction to loss by those to whom we minister will, to some extent, follow the same pattern. The individual's emotional response to loss is what we call grief.

"Grief is essentially a deprivation experience. We lose--or have taken from us--something that we cherished and do not want to give up." (Jackson, p. 9) This paper will deal with two specific grief responses. The first will be the anticipatory grief at the loss of self experienced by the terminally ill patient. The second will be the grief response

of those who have suffered the loss of a loved one through death. It cannot be emphasized enough, however, that a similar response will be found in the young person who grieves over the loss of a parent through divorce, the person who loses his job, the elderly person who must give up his home and control over his life when he is required to move into a nursing home or anyone else experiencing a difficult loss. It will be well for us to understand this so we may minister to our members properly.

#### MINISTERING TO THE TERMINALLY ILL PATIENT

One of the most difficult tasks of a pastor is to minister to the patient who has a terminal illness. The reason this is so difficult is that it requires the patient and the pastor to face squarely the last enemy, death.

Facing death is not an easy task. One reason that it is so difficult for us is that we live in a death-denying society. Our society denies death by its emphasis on youth and beauty. Medical technology leads us to believe that we can overcome death. The medical profession views death as a failure. The largest factor, however, is that death has been removed from the experience of most Americans. When a person is about to die he is whisked off to a hospital or nursing home. About 60 percent of people die in institutions. The mobility of our society has also distanced many of us from our aged and dying relatives. We simply are not there to experience the event. Statistics show that the "average American experiences death in his immediate family but once every twenty years. Usually the event takes place not in the home but away in the hospital. Since there is infrequent exposure, death is not viewed as a pervasive factor of life but as a rare impersonal, virtually abnormal event." (Grollman, Guide, p. xii)

The attitudes of our society cause many problems for the terminally ill. Doctors who view death as a failure will not be honest with patients about their condition. Patients have an inordinate fear of disfigurement because beauty is so important. Institutionalization causes problems because the patient loses control over his own life and often is not allowed to participate in major decisions regarding treatment. It also removes the patient from loved ones, whom he needs for comfort and support at this difficult time.

The denial of death in our society causes many problems for those who must face death. The pastor and the church need not participate in this conspiracy. The pastor can help his members tremendously by teaching them the Biblical perspective on life and death.

The pastor should teach his members to live the Christian life. The Christian life is a life of fulfillment. It is defined by the wise prophet in the book of Ecclesiastes when he said, "Fear God and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man." (12:13) The Lord Jesus expanded on this statement when He taught, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind" and "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." (Matthew 22:37,39) This is a life of fulfillment because it is lived according to God's divine will. It is also a life of fulfillment because it is lived under, and as a result of, God's grace which is revealed in His Son.

The Christian life is a sharp contrast to the life which the world prescribes. The world encourages us to live lives of selfishness and self-indulgence. This is futility and does not lead to fulfillment.

Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, the physician who did the famous groundwork study with the terminally ill at the University of Chicago Medical Center, writes, "This is perhaps the greatest lesson we learned from our patients: Live so you do not have to look back and say: 'How I have wasted my life.'" (Kubler-Ross, *Death*, p. xix) Those who feel they have wasted their lives are most reluctant to die. By teaching our members to live in faith and obedience to God, we can show them that life has true meaning and purpose. This will help them face the end of life when the time comes.

The pastor should also teach his members about death. By helping our members to understand death, we will help them to accept it. "When we understand what is happening it is easier to bear it. It is meaningless suffering that is unendurable. When we can grasp the fact that death is part of the cycle of life, then death in general is not so distressing; rather it is the individual death which we contemplate that presents a problem to us. But if the individual death is related to the divine process, we are then able to see it in the larger perspective that understanding adds to the slow wisdom of time." (Jackson, p. 34)

Most psychologists believe that if we can understand that death is a part of the process of life this understanding will help us to accept it. The problem is that people do not understand this. The common attitude toward death is revealed by Dr. Kubler-Ross, "It is inconceivable for our unconscious to imagine an actual ending of our own life here on earth, and if this life of ours has to end, the ending is always attributed to a malicious intervention from the outside by someone else. In simple terms, in our conscious mind, we can only be killed; it is inconceivable to die of a natural



cause or of old age. Therefore death, in itself, is associated with a bad act, a frightening happening, something that in itself calls for retribution and punishment." (Kubler-Ross, On Death and Dying, p. 2)

With this attitude is it any wonder that people do not understand death and indeed fear it greatly? The pastor must help his members understand the nature of death. The Scriptures reveal that death was not a part of God's divine will for man but came into the world as "the wages of sin." (Romans 6:23) Our Lord Jesus has taken away the punitive nature of death by taking our sins upon Himself and by overcoming death. The Christian is not defeated in death, but death is the means whereby we shed this body of sin that we may be welcomed into the righteous presence of God. The body waits in the grave for its redemption at the resurrection on the Last Day. The Christian should view death as the glorious entrance into eternal life. It is truly a gift of God. It is only through death that we are able to live and serve God in His presence. This should be our goal.

Understanding the purpose of death will help people face death and also help combat the fear of death, which is universal. In his beautiful treatise "A Sermon on Preparing to Die" (LW 42, p. 99) Luther deals at length with the fear of death. He writes, "Death looms so large and is terrifying because our foolish and fainthearted nature has etched its image too vividly within itself and constantly fixes its gaze on it. Moreover, the devil presses man to look closely at the gruesome mien and image of death to add to his worry, timidity and despair. Indeed he conjures up before man's eyes all kinds of sudden and terrible death ever seen, heard, or read by man. And then he also slyly

suggests the wrath of God with which he (the devil) in days past now and then tormented and destroyed sinners. In that way he fills our foolish human nature with the dread of death while cultivating a love and concern for life, so that burdened with such thoughts man forgets God, flees and abhors death, and thus, in the end, is and remains disobedient to God." (LW 42, p. 101)

Luther also notes that, along with death, sin and hell torment us at the time of death. "Sin also grows large and important when we dwell on it and brood over it too much. This is increased by the fearfulness of our conscience, which is ashamed before God and accuses itself terribly. Hell also looms large because of undue scrutiny and stern thought devoted to it out of season." (LW 42, 102) Luther especially notes the concern about hell in man's undertaking to delve into the mystery of election.

Against the spiritual enemies of death, sin, and hell Luther offers the comfort of the Gospel. When we think of death, sin, and hell, we are to see our Savior on the cross. There He died for us that we might live. There He took our sin upon Himself and suffered the punishment for us that forgiveness would be ours. There He suffered hell for us in being forsaken by God. When we think of death, sin, and hell we are to think of Christ. This will help us to dispel all fear and despair. Luther also points to the Sacraments for help. Indeed, the Sacrament of the Altar is a blessed sign and seal of the forgiveness of sins won for us by Christ. At the time of death, it can provide great comfort and faith in the heart of the suffering patient.

The pastor, besides his teaching on these important subjects, can do a great service by getting to

know the members of his church. Studies show that "each individual tends to die as he or she has lived, especially as he or she has previously reacted in periods of threat, stress, failure, challenge, shock, and loss." (Schneidman, p. 112)

Finally, the pastor should prepare himself for helping others by reflecting on his own attitudes in regard to death and loss. If we can come to grips with our own mortality and our own feelings, we will be in a better position to help those who are facing loss. This does not mean that we will hide our feelings, but understand and accept the feelings of others. If we cannot accept the feelings of the terminally ill patient we will not be of much help to him.

The preceding suggestions are things the pastor can do to prepare himself and others for the end of life. The following are suggestions for the pastor after the onset of terminal illness:

1. Encourage honesty.

Often well-meaning relatives will seek to hide the diagnosis of terminal illness from their loved one. They do this to "protect" the loved one from "bad news." The pastor should not encourage such deceit on the part of the family or the physician. In Kubler-Ross' studies she found that "the majority of our patients conveyed to us that they would have been better off if their primary physician had been honest with them from the very beginning." (Kubler-Ross, *Living....*, p. 24) Kubler-Ross found that the physician's honesty helped the patient as long as the physician allowed for hope and did not desert the patient.

Hiding the diagnosis of terminal illness from the patient is to be discouraged because it prohibits

the patient from finishing unfinished business at the end of life, such as making financial arrangements, seeking forgiveness for perceived wrongs, saying goodbye to loved ones and making peace with God. Hiding the diagnosis also dispels trust which is needed at this time. Kubler-Ross found in her study that "all the patients knew about their terminal illness anyway, whether they were explicitly told or not." (Kubler-Ross, On Death and Dying, p. 27) Patients know when others are hiding the truth. It is much better to be open and honest from the beginning.

## 2. Listen.

It has been duly noted that God has given us two ears and one mouth. We should use them proportionately. It has also been noted that God gave us the ability to close our mouths but not our ears. This is often difficult for the pastor to remember. Words are the "tools" of our trade and we think that we can solve every problem with excess verbiage. One thing we must never forget is that we cannot provide the answer before we know the question. Ministering to the terminally ill is not a game of jeopardy. Kubler-Ross found that clergy often operate this way. She wrote, "What amazed me, however, was the number of clergy who felt quite comfortable using a prayer book or a chapter out of the Bible as the sole communication between them and the patients, thus avoiding listening to their needs and being exposed to questions they might be unable or unwilling to answer." (Kubler-Ross, On Death and Dying, p. 226)

Our goal should be to help the terminal patient do whatever is necessary to accept his death and die in peace. The only way we can do this is to listen to the patient, find out what his needs are, and assist him in fulfilling them. We are not here

to tell the patient what to do or how to feel, or to impose our feelings to him. We are here to care, listen, and help the patient work through the feelings he has at the time.

### 3. Understand the patient.

In order to help the terminal patient it is important that we understand what the patient is experiencing. In her studies, Kubler-Ross found that most patients go through five stages. They are Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. Most caregivers who treat terminally ill patients accept Kubler-Ross' analysis, but it is common today for the term "stages" to be rejected. It is rejected because it gives the impression that all terminally ill patients experience all of these emotions in the order given. This is not the case. Some patients do not go through all the stages. Some may experience these emotions in a different order. Kubler-Ross' paradigm is helpful for us in understanding the patient's feelings as long as we remember that each individual is different and we use it in a flexible manner.

#### a. Denial

Denial is a typical reaction when a patient learns he is terminally ill. "No, not me, it cannot be true" are words associated with denial. Behavior that indicates denial on the part of the patient is to deny he is ill, to deny the diagnosis is correct, to deny that the diagnosis bothers him, to deny that the illness will change his style of life, to minimize the illness and its implications, to make unrealistic plans for the future, to disobey doctor's orders, to be overoptimistic about surgery or therapy, and similar responses.

Denial is good and bad. Denial is good because like the other emotions of the terminal patient,

it is a defense mechanism which allows the patient to cope with shocking and frightening news until less radical mechanisms can take over. It is important that we do not tear down the patient's walls of defense. We must respect the patient's need for denial while, at the same time, keeping the truth of the situation before him.

Denial is bad if the patient is unwilling or unable to move past this stage. When this occurs, it should be determined whether this is the patient's own problem or whether others are causing it. Kubler-Ross found that patients often remain in the stage of denial because they perceive that their doctor or family members are unable to cope with the truth and can't move beyond the denial stage themselves. The patient depends on these people and needs their support, so he denies his illness because it is expected by others. Concerning the patient's own use of denial, Kubler-Ross found that "when a patient has one human being with whom he can talk openly, he is able to drop his stage of denial and go on to the second stage, the stage of rage and anger." (Kubler-Ross, Living...., p. 35)

An example of denial in the Scriptures is found in Matthew 16:21-23. There Jesus revealed His approaching crucifixion to His disciples, and Peter responded by saying, "Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee."

#### b. Anger

The second emotion that is often experienced by the terminal patient is anger. The question "Why me?" is common in this stage. The patient may vent his anger against his physician, who diagnosed his disease; his nurses, who treat the disease; family, clergy and, often, God. Patients in this stage are

often bitter and resentful. They are difficult to get along with and complain about everything. They are envious of those who have what they don't, healthy bodies and the expectancy of a long life. Sometimes anger is simply a cry for attention by someone who is isolated and alone.

Dealing with angry people is not an easy task. In the situation of terminal illness it becomes more difficult for the pastor because people are often angry at God. As God's representative on the scene, the pastor is the one upon whom the patient unloads his anger. Anger against God is irrational. We must understand it as such and not deal harshly with those who express it. Allow the patient to vent his anger. Usually he will see that it is misguided and repent. It may be helpful at this time to reassure the patient of God's loving care, especially in sending His Son to die for us. It is possible, however, that the patient will reject all efforts at consolation and reconciliation. Anger may last a long time.

Another reason that this stage is difficult for the pastor is the questions patients often ask. "Why me?" and "What did I do to deserve this?" are common. These questions present a dilemma for us because we think that we are expected to answer them. The angry patient often neither wants nor expects an answer. Questioning is a way of venting anger. We must also keep in mind that questions such as "Why me?" often have no answer other than that we live in a fallen world. The patient may or may not find such an answer satisfactory. The pastor need not think that he must defend God or answer all questions that are hidden in His divine majesty. He can help the patient by allowing him to vent his anger without being judgemental. Possibly, irrational thoughts can be discussed with the patient after his anger subsides.

Another serious matter that the pastor may have to deal with during this stage is anger turned toward one's self which manifests itself in guilt. Many people believe that terminal illness, or any other evil in life, is brought on as a direct retribution from God for specific sinful acts. Some people blame God for this, others themselves. Like anger toward others, excessive guilt is often irrational. The pastor will do well to determine if this is the case. If the guilt is legitimate and involves others the pastor should assist the patient in righting wrongs. In relation to God we all have guilt and here the pastor can apply the healing balm of the Gospel. The Gospel will also help be effective. Many patients realize the irrational nature of their guilt if they are allowed to talk about it with someone who will listen without judging them.

An example in the Scriptures of anger as a result of loss would be Job's wife. After she had suffered the loss of children, wealth, and finally her husband's health, she came to him and said, "Dost thou still retain thine integrity? Curse God and die." (Jbo 2:9) These are words spoken in anger.

c. Bargaining.

Another stage that terminal patients experience is bargaining. The language of bargaining is "Yes, it's me, but..." In this stage the patient bargains, usually with God, to accept his condition if God will grant an extended period of time before death. Usually the patient wishes to have this time to finish unfinished business or to live long enough to share in a special event, e.g. marriage of children, birth of a grandchild.

Bargaining is an attempt to postpone the inevitable. "It has to include a prize offered



'for good behavior,' it also sets a self-imposed 'deadline,' and it includes an implicit promise that the patient will not ask for more if this postponement is granted." (Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, p. 73) It should be noted that patients rarely, if ever, keep their end of the bargain.

The bargaining stage is often brought on by the feeling that God did not respond to anger, so possibly He will respond in a favorable manner if He is asked nicely. The promises of the bargaining patient are often associated with guilt. The delinquent member, for example, might bargain with God in this way: "Lord, if you let me get through this mess, I will come to church every Sunday." The person realized the proper behavior, didn't do it, then believed his illness may have resulted from delinquency, and promises to rectify the situation if life is extended.

The bargaining stage is helpful because it shows that the patient has acknowledged his condition. It can be detrimental if the patient believes that God will be appeased by his promised actions. We must respect the bargaining patient's need to go through this stage. We must emphasize, however, that Christ's merits alone appease the wrath of God and bring His blessings to us. If God does grant more time to the dying patient, it is due to His grace alone, not to any bargain that we make with Him.

An example of bargaining in the Scriptures is King David in 2 Samuel 12:15-23. His child with Bathsheba lay dying. David fasted with the hope that God would spare the child. After the child died, David discontinued his fast, saying, "While the child was yet alive, I fasted and wept: for I said, 'Who can tell whether God will be gracious to me, that the child may live?' But now he is dead,

wherefore should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me."

d. Depression

The fourth emotion that many terminal patients experience is depression. In this stage the patient realizes the full impact of his condition. The depressed patient understands, "Yes, it is me" period.

The depression of a terminal patient usually takes two forms. The first is reactive depression. Reactive depression is mourning past losses. The patient laments things not done, goals not achieved, relationships broken, wrongs committed, etc. Sometimes there are things that can be done to help. In August (1988) the evening news reported the wish of a dying man from Osage, Minnesota, to see his son one last time. The son had been alienated from his father and they had not seen each other in five years. The son was located in Chicago and it was arranged for him to see his father. Those who assisted in finding the son helped this man to overcome a reason for being depressed and thus helped him to be reconciled to his death.

The second type of depression experienced by the terminal patient is preparatory grief. Preparatory grief is mourning future losses such as the loss of self or the loss of a loved one. Often the patient thinks of things that will never be seen or done, or anticipates a deterioration in condition. The patient experiencing preparatory grief is usually withdrawn, brooding, sad, and unconsolable.

The common response to the patient experiencing preparatory grief is to try to cheer the patient up

or console him. This is often because those around the patient do not want to see him depressed or to be depressed themselves. The patient may not appreciate these efforts. Such efforts may also prohibit the patient from doing the necessary grief work. Those who are trying to help the patient "should know that this type of depression is necessary and beneficial if the patient is to die in a stage of acceptance and peace. Only patients who have been able to work through their anguish and anxieties are able to achieve this stage." (Kubler-Ross, On Death and Dying, p. 78)

The best advise for the caregiver is to be present and listen in order to find out what the terminal patient needs physically, spiritually, and psychologically. A common failing is not to schedule the time to get to know the patient or find out what he needs. Instead, those around the patient assume that they know what the patient is like or what the patient needs without finding this out from the patient.

A possible Scriptural example of depression over loss was Jonah in the Old Testament. Jonah became angry when God revealed that He would spare the people. Jonah then went out to the East of the city to sulk saying, "It is better for me to die than to live." (Jonah 4:8) Jonah's anger and depression were misguided, but his feelings were real nonetheless.

e. Acceptance

The final stage experienced by the terminal patient is acceptance. Not all patients reach this stage. Acceptance can be achieved when the patient has completed his unfinished business and is able to submit to God's will in the matter of his death. Such patients are often at peace and even possess

an attitude of victory, as did the Apostle Paul when he said, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith." (2 Timothy 4:7) The hope of the accepting Christian patient is no longer associated with cure, treatment, and prolongation of life, but with eternal life.

The stage of acceptance is often difficult for the patient's family and caregivers. The patient is prepared to die. He may not want to talk or even to have visitors. He has begun to detach himself from the things of this world, even those he loves most. Loved ones who are not ready to "let go" are often hurt because they misunderstand this stage. Others force the patient to continue to struggle for life and thus bring conflict to the patient's life. Kubler-Ross speaks of a patient who "was sad that he was forced to struggle for life when he was ready to prepare himself to die." She states further, "It is the discrepancy between the patient's wish and readiness and the expectation of those in his environment which causes the greatest grief and turmoil in our patients." (Kubler-Ross, on Death and Dying, p. 78) It is not only the patient who must let go in order to die in peace. The family and caregivers must be willing to let the patient go.

A Scriptural example of acceptance might be Jacob. Genesis 49 relates that when he was ready to die he called his children to him and blessed them. He then died.

The opposite of acceptance is resignation. Those who cannot accept their situation but are resigned to it often experience a loss of hope, feelings of helplessness and uselessness, and are usually depressed. It is estimated that about

80 percent of nursing home residents experience this feeling.

The five "stages of dying" are helpful in understanding the dying patient. There are a number of other things we should keep in mind in ministering to the terminal patient.

a. Like most people, dying patients do not always say what is on their mind. They may approach topics, such as their illness, indirectly. For example, a patient might say, "I've been in the hospital for two weeks and I'm not getting any better." Such a statement may be an attempt to determine if you know something (that the patient does not know) about his condition. A response such as "Have you been getting worried?" may help to draw out the true intent of the patient's statement. It also gives him an opportunity to discuss his feelings.

b. Be aware of the fears of the dying patient. Studies show that the greatest fears common to dying patients are being left alone to die, pain, and suffocation. Additional fears, especially common in cancer patients, are disfigurement, loss of independence, and insanity. Corresponding to the fears of the dying patient are a number of things that cause anxiety for the patient. The things that are most likely to cause anxiety are being a burden to others, separation from loved ones, how loved ones will care for themselves after the death of the patient, and a feeling that life has no meaning or value because death is imminent.

c. Remember that the dying patient is still a living person. As such, he will appreciate talking about family, work, hobbies, interests, and special talents. These are things that are important in the

life of the patient. Beware of talking about trivial or unimportant matters with the patient. The patient may view this as inability to face the reality of terminal illness.

#### 4. Helping the family

We cannot help a terminal patient in a meaningful way unless we also seek to help his family. Obviously, this is not always possible, but it is ideal. Problems tend to arise in crisis situations and this is certainly the case surrounding terminal illness. Family members will often experience a tremendous amount of guilt when a loved one is terminally ill. They will think of wrongs committed and opportunities missed to show love and affection. They may feel guilty about wishing for a quick and painless death for their loved one. They will also experience anger, resentment, and other emotions that accompany preparatory grief. The best thing that we can do is listen to them and help them to work through their feelings.

Communication is extremely important at the time of terminal illness. Many families have difficulty communicating and in times of crisis this problem gets worse. Instead of being open and honest, many people want to keep secrets from the patient or other family members who are deemed to need protection from a bad situation. Such phoniness should be discouraged. It is no help to the patient. He will usually see through it anyway and this will create another barrier between the patient and his family.

Encourage the family members to express their emotions openly and honestly. Many of us find it difficult to express our true feelings. We also have a difficult time when others do, especially if the emotions expressed make us uncomfortable or

are not thought to be socially acceptable. The expression of true feelings is to be encouraged by those who are experiencing the loss of a loved one. We must learn to accept the feelings of others without judging them or even feeling uncomfortable with them. The feelings of others are no reflection on us, no matter what they are. Listen to them, accept them, then seek to help the family member with God's Word.

#### 5. Minister to the family with God's Word

God's Word is the only source of comfort and hope that we have in the face of death. It will be helpful to the patient if we take the time to find out what his specific spiritual needs are and minister to them. It may also be helpful to find out what passages of Scripture are particularly meaningful and comforting to the patient and use them for devotions. This approach is probably more effective than assuming that we know what the family needs and what will comfort them.

The diagnosis of terminal illness is a crushing blow to patient and family. The pastor will want to provide as much help as possible. The pastor can be of great help if he is available, promotes honesty, accepts feelings, and applies God's Word with compassion and understanding. The pastor should be present to offer friendship, forgiveness and hope. The pastor should also encourage others, such as the elders of the church, to visit the terminal patient. The pastor may not have enough time to give to the patient. Others can also minister to the patient, and indeed, others may be desired by the patient. This should not offend the pastor. The pastor should also accept the ministrations of other caregivers such as hospital chaplains. The chaplain is often available when the patient needs to talk and the pastor is not.

Most chaplains will not seek to impose religious ideas on the patient, but simply provide a willing ear and a word of encouragement. Terminal patients need all the help they can get. We should not make them feel guilty for seeking help wherever they can find it (within reason, of course).

### MINISTERING TO THE BEREAVED

Some studies indicate that the death of a spouse is the greatest loss a person can experience. The loss of a close family member or friend is not much less stressful. The pastor is called to minister to those who have suffered such losses. It is not an easy task, but it is usually very much appreciated and thus very rewarding.

Many of the principles that apply in ministering to the terminal patient apply also in ministering to the bereaved. I will make every effort not to be too repetitive although some points are important enough to mention again.

Grief is a part of life because the loss of loved ones in death is part of life. If we are to learn to live well, we must learn to grieve well. This is difficult because we have few opportunities for personal experience in this area. It is also difficult because children are often "protected" from death and grief by well-meaning parents. Thus we have no background in these matters. Grieving well is important to help us accept loss, but also because many difficult situations result for those who are unable to grieve properly. Unresolved grief, studies show, can lead to illnesses such as colitis, ulcer, cancer, and mental illness. Hostile acts against society and juvenile delinquency often result in those who are unable to resolve their grief after loss. One study in the Santa Clara



Juvenile Probation Department revealed that 11 out of 14 delinquents had suffered the loss of a parent in early years. "Their behavior later in life was the 'acting out' of feelings of anger against what seemed to them an injustice: events that had deprived them of security and happiness." (Jackson, p. 27) Good mental and physical health dictate that we learn to grieve well.

The pastor is often called upon at the time of death. He may wonder what to do? Should he visit the bereaved immediately or not? The pastor will have to make the decision himself. Usually, if asked, the bereaved will say that it is not necessary, that there is nothing that can be done anyway. The pastor should not be dissuaded by such logic. If he thinks immediate support is required, he should supply it. Two factors that may have a bearing on his decision are the nature of the death and the relationship between the pastor and the bereaved. A sudden, unexpected death will usually result in a grief situation in which an immediate response is desirable. The long, drawn out death of the terminal patient, on the other hand, is often met with relief by those who have had a chance to prepare for it. In this case, an immediate response may not be required. The relationship the pastor has with the bereaved will also be a determining factor. This is only natural. When those whom we love and care for are suffering, we will want to be there to help.

The pastor may be asked to take the news of death to loved ones of the deceased. If this is the case, the pastor should relay this news in person, if at all possible. The news of death should be presented in simple and direct form. Phrases that obscure the reality of death, such as "passed away" or "gone on" should be avoided. Present the news as calmly as possible. Finally,

the pastor should stand by to accept the emotional response to loss. Sustaining the bereaved in those first moments is very important.

After death occurs, there is the matter of the funeral. Here the pastor has a key role, at least in the service itself. The pastor may be asked by the bereaved member to assist in making the funeral arrangements. Such assistance should be given. The pastor can offer an objective opinion in regard to the arrangements whereas the recently bereaved may be too emotional to put things into perspective. An example would be the tendency to spend an unnecessary amount of money on the funeral as a memorial to the deceased.

Assisting the bereaved member in making funeral arrangements also gives the pastor an opportunity to develop a working relationship with the local funeral director. Funeral directors, for the most part, are very cooperative and helpful. They are especially interested in working well with pastors since pastors are sources of future referrals. The pastor is thus in a good position to make sure the funeral arrangements are made in accordance with the wishes of the family and sound Christian practices.

Other matters that may arise are the nature of the service for the deceased and the location of the service. It is common for bereaved loved ones to consider foregoing the traditional funeral in favor of a memorial service after a private interment. Most bereavement counselors suggest that the traditional funeral, with viewing hours at the funeral home, is best. Seeing the dead loved one reinforces the reality of death. The "wake" and funeral service also allow for the support of friends when it is sorely needed. The question of

the location of the service also frequently arises. For Christians it would seem that the church would be preferable. A funeral service is a worship service. We worship our Creator and commit the deceased to God's eternal care. The church is a logical location for such a service. Many dedicated Christians do wish to have funerals at the funeral home. We must not make the location of the service a litmus test of one's faith. Allow for the wishes of the family.

Concerning the funeral service, one pastor has said, "This is what the funeral is for: the worship of God and aid to the mourner. There can be no more certain guide as to what is 'right' or 'wrong' in a funeral than one's understanding of the people who are confronted with death." (Jackson, p. 92) The funeral is of no value to the deceased. It does have value for the church and for the mourners.

The funeral service is of value to the community of believers in that it provides an opportunity for them to affirm their faith in the face of the last enemy, death. Death is the most profound preaching of the law, for the Scriptures tell us that it is the wages of sin. Its power over sinful man is universal. There is no escape. At the time of death, it is natural for the mourner to contemplate his own death and his eternal destiny. It is a time when most people will welcome instruction from God's Word on the issues of life, death, and immortality. The funeral service grants an opportunity to provide such instruction.

The funeral service is of value to the church in that it is a celebration of the victory over death that we have in Christ. It is a solemn testimony to the fact that those who die in the faith will be saved and live forever with Christ. It is

a declaration that our church stands on the Word of God and does not teach universalism or some other perversion of the Word. The pastor should not bring an element of doubt in regard to Christian doctrine by agreeing to bury those who have given no evidence of faith.

The funeral sermon should not be a glorified eulogy of the deceased. (Let the deceased's life speak for itself.) The sermon should be a clear and direct presentation of law and gospel. The universal nature of the curse of the law should be proclaimed so that all present will understand their own sinfulness. The gospel, however, should predominate. For the Christian, death is a celebration. It is a celebration of the forgiveness of sins and eternal life that we have in our Savior, Jesus Christ. It is shedding this mortal body of sin in order to enter into the presence of God. It is waiting in God's presence for the glorious day when our Savior will return and raise our bodies in an immortal state to be rejoined with the soul to live and reign forever with Him.

These are the truths that should be presented in the funeral sermon for the comfort of those who mourn. We should not be surprised if the mourners do not celebrate along with the deceased Christian. God's Word does bring comfort and hope, both of which are sorely needed, but it does not take away the pain of loss. The funeral sermon, by presenting the truth of eternal life, comforts the family with the fact that the present separation is not permanent. The service also provides an opportunity for family, friends, and loved ones to gather together and console one another in their pain.

The pastor recognizes that the bereaved will experience many different feelings at the time of,

and following, the loss of a loved one. Like the terminal patient, the bereaved experience emotions that are common when loss occurs. When reviewing these feelings it is important to remember that each individual will respond to loss in his own way. Some factors that will have an impact on the way that the individual responds to the loss of a loved one are (1) the relationship with the deceased, including the amount of contact with the deceased, (2) the nature of the death, (3) the emotional make-up of the bereaved, (4) the past experience of the bereaved in dealing with loss.

### The Stages of Grief

#### 1. Shock and Denial

Most people will be shocked by the news of the death of a loved one. This is true whether death is expected or not. A numbness or lack of feeling may be experienced. This is a temporary protective mechanism to help absorb the pain of loss. Shock is usually accompanied by denial. Initially, denial is helpful in that it gives us time to accept news that is shocking and painful.

#### 2. Physical Complaints

Physical complaints and illness are common among the bereaved. This should come as no surprise since it is a well-known fact that stress impairs the body's immune system. Colds, flu, sleeplessness, difficulty concentrating, weight loss, nervousness, restlessness, incessant crying, incessant talking, and compulsive behavior are experienced by those who have suffered loss. Serious illness may also occur, although this result of bereavement is widely debated in medical circles.

This response to bereavement should be relatively short-lived, although it may last for several months. The bereaved should be encouraged to follow good

health practices during this time. Exercise, proper diet, and plenty of rest are recommended. The bereaved should be discouraged from the use of alcohol and drugs, such as sleeping pills, to help it through this difficult time. Drugs should not be offered by well-meaning relatives or friends. If needed, they should be prescribed by a physician who has had the opportunity to examine the patient.

### 3. Anger

Anger is common in the bereaved. The bereaved may be angry at the deceased, the funeral director, the pastor, God, or others. Anger allows the bereaved to express frustration in the fact of a situation over which he has no control. It is usually best to assure the bereaved that this is normal and try to be understanding and supportive.

### 4. Guilt

Guilt is a very real problem for the bereaved. Guilt often shows itself in statements like, "If only I would have (done such and such).... my loved one would not have died." Guilt is often very acute in the bereaved if closely associated with the deceased. Death eliminates all possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation between the two. Usually guilt is unreasonable, but if it is legitimate, the pastor will want to supply the gospel to help the bereaved be released from such guilt.

Guilt is also a problem when the bereaved feels guilty because he is glad the deceased is dead. In the case of terminal patients who have been ill for a long time, it is common for the family to experience a sense of relief when the loved one finally dies. Many people feel guilty about having these feelings. Such feelings are understandable and we should not make people feel more guilty for experiencing them.

## 5. Depression

The loss of a loved one is depressing. The bereaved will experience sorrow at such a loss. Crying is common. The bereaved may also experience anxiety and fear. He may wonder what will happen in the future. How will life go on without the one on whom he has depended? Loneliness is common. The loss of identity is experienced by those whose perception of themselves is in their role as husband or wife, father or mother. The loss of self-esteem is often experienced by those who are "role conscious." They feel that they are no longer needed, wanted, desirable, or useful. These are all reasons for being depressed.

The person who is depressed will often be withdrawn, refuse offers of help, do and say things he would not normally do or say, sleep excessively, develop chemical dependencies, and adopt other behavior patterns that are abnormal. Suicide may be mentioned. Such thoughts should be dealt with constructively. They should not be dismissed lightly, although few bereaved individuals are serious about taking their own life.

## 6. Reconciliation

The final stage of grief is reconciliation. The bereaved recognizes the loss of the loved one, has survived the experience of grief, and is ready to move on in life. This does not mean that the bereaved no longer has feelings for the deceased or did not love him or her. It means that life goes on without the presence of the deceased and the bereaved is able, finally, to be a part of it. The bereaved will be able to enjoy himself and laugh. He will be able to enjoy the company of others and seek new relationships. He will be able to think about the future instead of dwelling on the past. Self-esteem will return. He will recognize that

pain exists, but life goes on. He can accept the here and now and not try to make things the way they were. Perhaps the best thing we can do for the bereaved is to assure them that there is hope for them that they will be able to attain the goal of reconciliation. The task of the caregiver is to do this without minimizing the pain of grief and without trying to prescribe to the bereaved a schedule for recovery.

In order to achieve the stage of reconciliation the bereaved has five needs which must be accomplished. (Wolfelt, pp. 74-79) They are (1) to experience and express outside of oneself the reality of death, (2) to tolerate the emotional suffering that is inherent in the work of grief while nurturing oneself both physically and emotionally, (3) to convert the relationship with the deceased from one of presence to a relationship of memory, (4) to develop a new self-identity based on a life without the deceased, (5) to relate the experience of loss to a context of meaning.

In order to achieve these goals the mourner will have to experience and accept his own feelings. The care and nurture of friends will also help. Besides these things the goals of grief are achieved by the passage of time. Time has its own healing quality. It allows the mourner to put things into their proper perspective. Understanding what has happened also helps the mourner achieve the goals of grief. Understanding makes things easier to bear. The pastor can have a key role in helping members understand the meaning of life after death. The comfort of eternal life and the hope of a future reunion with the loved one are both very helpful in allowing the bereaved to be reconciled to the loss of a loved one. The ongoing processes of life also help the mourner achieve the goals of mourning. Life has a certain built-in momentum to it.



One has to return to work or other activities. The bills have to be paid, the yard has to be mowed, etc. One must meet the problems that arise. The effort to do all of these things helps the bereaved to live beyond grief.

The question is frequently asked about the length of time that it takes for a person to "work through" grief. Traditionally, the answer to that question has been one year. Many experts in the field today are suggesting that two years may be a more accurate estimate. The time that a person will grieve is an individual thing. We should not try to impose on anyone a minimum or a maximum time during which he must grieve. People must be allowed to grieve in their own way. Generally, it can be said that a person's severe grief response after the loss of a loved one should have passed after one month. Certainly the person will grieve after that but the symptoms of excessive crying, sleeplessness, loss of appetite, nervousness, etc. should return to normal in about one month.

### Complicated Grief

If a person continues to manifest intense grief responses over an extended period of time, that person may be experiencing complicated grief. (Wolfelt, p. 87) The mourner who is experiencing complicated grief does not progress through grief in a productive way. Two contributing factors that lead to complicated grief are our social conditioning which teaches us to suppress pain and suffering, and our lack of experience with the mourning process.

Complicated grief can be classified in four categories. (Wolfelt, pp. 90,90) The first is absent grief. In absent grief no feelings of grief seem to be expressed. While denial is normal in the initial stages of grief, absent grief indicates

that the mourner is unable to move beyond the shock and denial stage.

The second category of complicated grief is distorted grief. Distorted grief is a distortion of some aspect of the grief process that will not allow the person to move beyond a certain stage. The two most common stages in which distorted grief appears are anger and guilt.

The third category of complicated grief is converted grief. In converted grief the mourner experiences some form of distress but fails to relate it to the context of loss. An example would be physical problems that have no organic origin. The mourner may continue to go to the doctor for diagnosis when the doctor can find nothing wrong.

The last category of complicated grief is chronic grief. Chronic grief is a prolonged intense grief response. Essentially the bereaved is trying to keep the deceased "alive" by continued focusing on that person or his belongings, and by excessive brooding. Perhaps such a person believes that this is necessary to show how much he loved the deceased.

The diagnosis of complicated grief is not always easy to make. The duration and intensity of grief are key factors. Another key factor is the person's ability to move on in the grief response. Getting stuck in one stage often indicates a complication in grief. Some things that do not seem to indicate complicated grief are sadness around holidays and anniversaries, crying in church, excessive talking about the deceased, talking as if the deceased were still alive, longing for the deceased, etc. If complicated grief is suspected, the mourner should seek professional help. There are many qualified professionals who are trained to assist mourners' progress to the stage of reconciliation. Few

pastors are trained sufficiently in this area. Fortunately, the pastor and friends can provide love and understanding which is all the help most people need to sustain them in their grief.

The pastor can be a great help in preparing individuals to face death. The pastor can do this by teaching his members about death and its meaning for the Christian. This will provide the members with understanding. He should proclaim the gospel, which supplies forgiveness of sins. He should teach his members about resurrection and eternal life, which provide hope for the future. Spiritual understanding, forgiveness, and hope are needed by all, but they are even more important to those who have experienced the loss of a loved one. The spiritual understanding found in the Word of God also helps the bereaved control fears and anxieties, assures him of God's abiding presence when he otherwise may be left alone, and strengthens faith that God does provide and help us in every need.

The pastor can also help simply by caring and being a friend. The following is a list of suggestions for friends and relatives of those who have experienced the loss of a loved one (O'Connor):

1. Get in touch.
2. Say little on an early visit.
3. Avoid cliches and easy answers.

Do not attempt to minimize the loss by justifying or explaining it. Trying to comfort the mourner with pat answers such as, "It was God's will," will not help. In fact, it is upsetting for the mourner to think that it is God's will that he should suffer so much. Many mourners cannot see past their own pain in the initial stages of grief. This is why statements like, "It was for the best" or "Death was a mercy" are no consolation. The mourner is not

thinking of the deceased, but of himself. It is extremely insensitive for anyone to tell the mourner not to cry or not to feel bad. Those who grieve feel bad. Most of the time they will cry. We should allow them to express their feelings.

4. Be yourself.

5. Keep in touch.

6. Attend to practical matters.

Prepare a meal, clean the house, take calls, or do other things that need to be done.

7. Encourage others to visit or help.

8. Accept silence.

The mourner should be allowed to direct the conversation in the way he needs it to go. This does not mean that the pastor cannot have a prepared devotion. Perhaps we should, however, be familiar enough with Scripture to be flexible in this matter if the situation arises that a passage of Scripture other than the one we have prepared would be more appropriate.

9. Be a good listener.

Being a good listener is not always easy when listening to a mourner. It is important to allow the mourner to express his feelings no matter what they are. This means that we will have to accept the emotions expressed by the bereaved, accept crying, accept anger--even at God or ourselves. We will want to avoid the desire to rebuke the bereaved for his feelings. Neither should we try to change the subject because we are uncomfortable with it or tired of hearing about it.

10. Do not attempt to tell the bereaved how he feels or how he should feel. Learn from the mourner how he feels and deal with those feelings. Trying to instruct the mourner about how he should feel will be viewed by the mourner as an inability to accept legitimate feelings. In most cases you will be able to assure the mourner that his feelings are normal.

11. Do not probe for details about the death.

Most of the time the bereaved will want to tell you what happened, so you will not have to ask for details. It is therapeutic to allow the mourner to tell the story over and over again. Allow him to do this if he so desires. Do not think that you have to spare the mourner this task, unless the mourner indicates a desire to be relieved from it. When the mourner wants to talk about the details of the death, listen with understanding.

12. Comfort children in the family.

Often children are neglected at the time of loss. They have feelings too. Someone should attend to them, listen to them, and seek to answer the questions that they have about death and loss.

13. Avoid talking about trivia in the presence of the bereaved. This will be resented if it is done to try to distract the mourner. Do talk about the deceased. Dwell on the good things, ignore the bad. Many people think that the bereaved will be upset if they talk about the deceased. Usually the opposite is the case. The deceased is on the mind of the mourner. He is what they will want to talk about. This is also true a long time after death. Do not act like the deceased never existed.

14. Allow the "working through" of grief.

Let the bereaved grieve in his own way and in his own time. Do not be hasty to remove clothing or pictures of the deceased. The mourner will dispose of these things as he sees fit.

15. Write a letter.

A letter is better than a card. Perhaps both would be best of all. In the letter speak of the one who died and relay care and concern for the bereaved.

16. Encourage postponement of major decisions until after the period of intense grief.

17. In time, gently draw the mourner into quiet outside activities.
18. When the mourner returns to social activity, treat him as a normal person.

Bereaved individuals will often feel that they are only half there after losing their spouse. They may lose their social contacts with the death of their spouse. They may feel left out and unwanted in any group. Try to make them feel wanted. Avoid pity. Acknowledge their loss, but don't dwell on it.

19. Be aware of needed progress through grief.

These suggestions are primarily for friends and relatives. The pastor will naturally have friends in the congregation. He will want to respond as such at the time of loss. There are others in the congregation that the pastor may not necessarily consider to be friends. These he can still serve in a caring and professional manner when the need arises.

There are also some suggestions for churches in caring for the bereaved among them (Murphey, p. 52):

1. Invite the bereaved to dinner or outings.

The bereaved feel left out and unwanted. Their self-confidence may be gone. Someone in the congregation should extend a special invitation to these people to attend social events.

2. Send or deliver a gift.

The Ladies' Group at many churches send food at the time of death in a family. This is a great way to show concern. The gift of a plant or a book is also fitting.

3. Send a letter or card.

The church, as a community, should acknowledge the loss of loved ones among its members.

4. Classes or programs for the bereaved.

This gives the bereaved a chance to meet with others who have experienced a similar loss. They will

have a chance to express their feelings, listen to others share their experiences, and offer friendship.

5. Visit the bereaved.

The pastor will usually visit the bereaved, but it is also helpful that others from the congregation do so. If the bereaved is an active member this will normally take place. Do not forget about the bereaved after the funeral is over.

6. Send a tape of the morning service.

Sometimes bereaved individuals will not feel up to coming to church for a period of time after their loss. Encourage them gently to do so; but if they are not able, offer to send them a tape of the service. Do not let use of the tapes become an excuse for not coming to church.

7. Pray for them by name in the morning service.

8. Assign a prayer partner to them from the congregation.

The words of the Apostle Paul are certainly appropriate when we think of loss and the pastor's role in dealing with it. The Apostle writes in 2 Corinthians 1:3-7, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort; who comforts us in all our afflictions so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ. But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer; and our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our comfort."

The human condition requires sufferings, as Jesus said, "In this world you have tribulation"

(John 16:33). This was true for Paul. It is true for us. God comforts us in our trials that we may comfort others who are placed under our spiritual care. Our own sufferings and losses should help us to understand others and give us the desire to bring our members comfort from its only source -- our loving heavenly Father who comforts us through His Word. This is what God calls us to do.

Soli Deo Gloria

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Prepared by Matthew Luttman  
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## A STUDY OF PAUL'S LETTER TO PHILEMON

Rarely is much attention given to this very short epistle in the New Testament. Not many sermons have been based on a text from this letter, even though references may have been made at times to the story of Philemon and Onesimus, in order to illustrate the employer and employee relationship. The fact that many Christians are so unfamiliar with Philemon led a pastor to write an excellent essay on this letter in 1949. The essay appeared in the Concordia Theological Monthly under the heading: "The Forgotten Epistle."<sup>1</sup> The essay states:

Strictly speaking, this epistle is not a historical, doctrinal, hortatory, or prophetic book of general interest, but a private letter to an otherwise unknown individual, in which the writer, the Apostle Paul, reveals himself as a true friend, intercessor, and psychologist as well as a man of sterling character and unimpeachable integrity. And while numerous lessons may be drawn from it, none of its twenty-five verses is so constituted as to lend itself readily for use as an independent sermon text; which explains sufficiently the silence that exists in our literature concerning it. Yet in spite of this character, it is a book which may be studied with great profit, not only because it is part of the inspired Word of God, which was given to us for our learning, but also because it presents to us such a goodly measure of applied Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

During the years when our country had to deal with the slavery question, Philemon no doubt was

studied with a little more fervor by Christians who found themselves caught in a dilemma as to which side to favor. Progressive sociologists are upset that Paul did not take an immovable stand and condemn slavery once and for all in this little letter. But most of the conservative commentators would agree with Lenski: "Here we have no law of outward compulsion to forbid slavery but a gospel spirit of love which so changes the heart that slavery automatically withers and becomes impossible."<sup>3</sup>

It should be pointed out that, in relation to all of Paul's epistles, this one is unique as the only strictly private letter which has been preserved. The Pastoral Epistles are addressed to individuals, but they discuss important matters of church discipline and government, thus showing a wider scope. But this little letter (Philemon) is apparently addressed to a dedicated layman. (It finds a likely parallel in this regard to John's third epistle, which is addressed to Gaius.) Admittedly, Philemon is not what we would call a dogmatic epistle, such as Romans or Galatians. But as to teaching us pastors how to deal with people on a practical level, letting the Gospel do the influencing, this short letter is invaluable. "Nowhere is the social influence of the Gospel more strikingly exerted; nowhere does the nobility of the Apostle's character receive a more vivid illustration than in this accidental pleading on behalf of a runaway slave."<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther, in his Preface to Philemon, has remarked: "This epistle gives us a masterful and tender illustration of Christian love.... What Christ has done for us with God the Father, that St. Paul does also for Onesimus with Philemon. For Christ emptied himself of his rights (Phil. 2:7) and overcame the Father with love and humility, so that the Father had to put away his wrath and rights, and receive us into favor for the sake of Christ, who so earnestly advocates our cause and so heartily

takes our part. For we are all his Onesimuses if we believe."<sup>5</sup> (Note: The name Onesimus in Greek means profitable, helpful, useful.)

This short letter of Paul's was sent to Philemon by means of Onesimus--the now converted but once runaway slave of Philemon--along with Tychicus, who apparently was making the journey to Colossae with Onesimus (Col. 4:7-9). Tychicus also was carrying with him Paul's letter to the Ephesians) (Eph. 6:21ff.) Robertson speculates that these three epistles (Philemon, Colossians, and Ephesians) were carried to the province of Asia at the same time.<sup>6</sup> Probably Paul wrote Philemon with his own hand, rather than giving dictation as on other occasions, for verse 19 mentions a note in his own hand to Philemon for what Onesimus may owe him. Paul was in prison at Rome at the time of his writing, and it is safe to place the date between 60 and 63 A.M.

A natural outline that suggests itself for the purpose of our study of this letter is as follows:

- I. The Address and Apostolic Greeting (vv. 1-3)
- II. Paul's Joy Over Philemon's Exemplary Spiritual State (vv. 4-7)
- III. Paul's Plea to Philemon on Behalf of Onesimus (vv. 8-21)
- IV. Personal Remarks, Greetings, and Benediction (vv. 22-25)

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I. The Address and Apostolic Greeting (vv. 1-3)

1 Παῦλος δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ καὶ Τιμόθεος ὁ ἀδελφὸς Φιλήμονι τῷ ἀγαπητῷ καὶ συνεργῷ ἡμῶν 2 καὶ Ἀπφία τῇ ἀδελφῇ καὶ Ἀρχίππῳ τῷ συστρατιώτῃ ἡμῶν καὶ τῇ κατ' οἶκόν σου ἐκκλησίᾳ· 3 χάρις ὑμῖν καὶ εἰρήνη ἀπὸ θεοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν καὶ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ.

Translation:

"Paul, prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy, the brother, to Philemon, the loved one and our fellow worker, and to Apphia, the sister, and to Archippus, our fellow soldier, and to the church at your home: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ."

This is the only salutation where Paul begins by calling himself "a prisoner of Christ Jesus." Paul does not dwell on this fact here, and Sohn sees significance to this: "He was the prisoner of Jesus Christ and was suffering this injustice for righteousness' sake. The very fact that he states this situation so nonchalantly makes it evident that he is not resentful nor sullen because of this ill fortune, but rather, like Peter, considers it an honor for which he should glorify God, I Peter 4:14-16."<sup>7</sup>

"Philemon" was a common name in Phrygia, due to a legend that was popular at that time. He appears to have been a native, or at least an inhabitant, of Colossae, or he may have been in Ephesus on business, and in this way heard the Gospel from the Apostle Paul. Let us remember that the church in Colossae was founded by Epaphras (Col. 1:7,8; 4:12,13). The title "loved one and fellow-worker" testifies to Philemon's zeal for the Gospel and for Christian charity. Lending his house for use of worship was just one of the ways that his hospitality was spoken of highly. Apphia seems here to have been his wife, while Archippus seems to have been their son and a leader among the Christians who gathered in Colossae.

Tradition says that Philemon subsequently became bishop of Colossae and then suffered martyrdom. But this is purely speculation.

Though there is no grand statement in this letter pertaining to justification through faith in the merits of Christ, the very important word "grace" cannot be overlooked, either in the introduction or in the closing of this letter. This "grace" is *favor Dei propter Christum*, and the peace mentioned here is "the objective state of reconciliation which exists between God and the world through Christ and from which the personal, or subjective, peace of heart and mind on the ransomed sinner's part flows."<sup>8</sup>

## II. Paul's Joy Over Philemon's Exemplary Spiritual State (vv. 4-7):

4 Εὐχαριστῶ τῷ θεῷ μου πάντοτε μνείαν σου ποιούμενος ἐπὶ τῶν προσευχῶν μου, 5 ἀκούων σου τὴν ἀγάπην καὶ τὴν πίστιν ἣν ἔχεις πρὸς τὸν κύριον Ἰησοῦν καὶ εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἁγίους, 6 ὅπως ἡ κοινωνία τῆς πίστεώς σου ἐνεργῆς γένηται ἐν ἐπιγνώσει παντὸς ἀγαθοῦ τοῦ ἐν ἡμῖν<sup>1</sup> εἰς Χριστόν. 7 χαρὰν γὰρ πολλὴν ἔσχον καὶ παράκλησιν ἐπὶ τῇ ἀγάπῃ σου, ὅτι τὰ σπλάγχνα τῶν ἁγίων ἀναπέπαιται διὰ σοῦ, ἀδελφέ.

### Translation:

"I thank my God always, making remembrance of you in my prayers, hearing about you the love and the faith which you have for the Lord Jesus and (love) for all the saints; that the sharing of your faith may be active in knowledge of every good thing among us in Christ. For I have had much joy and encouragement over your love, that the hearts of the saints are refreshed through you, brother.

The Apostle Paul was well-schooled in the art of persuasion. When Paul was before King Agrippa (Acts 26), he rightfully acknowledged his respect for him before presenting his case. Here, too,

Paul--with no hypocrisy about it--commends Philemon for his Christian virtues before he comes with his special request of him.

There is a peculiar construction in the Greek in verse 5. "For while it is proper to speak of Philemon's love toward Christ and all the saints, it would not be proper to speak of his faith toward Christ and all the saints. We have here the figure of speech called chiasmus, that is, an inverted parallelism, examples of which we have in Matthew 7:6; Phil. 1:15ff.; 3:10; I Thess. 5:6."<sup>9</sup> (A chiasm, deriving its name from the Greek letter X, indicates a crisscross construction. In verse 5 we have the four words: love, faith, Jesus, saints. Of these, faith and Jesus belong together, while love crosses over to connect with saints.)

Not only does Paul thank God for Philemon, he also asks something of God for Philemon. This is brought out by the ὅπως clause, which here does not denote purpose, but is simply an object clause; ὅπως is typically used after verbs of asking. But what is it that Paul asks? Lenski answers: "Philemon's faith puts him into fellowship with all the saints (v. 5). The faith of some lets this fellowship remain rather passive; it take whatever good this fellowship directs its way but does little or nothing toward its Christian brethren; it also lets the flesh lame its activity. Paul prays that Philemon's fellowship must not be ignorant; so much of it is. We often do not properly know the good in our own midst and fail to make use of it in our brotherly fellowship."<sup>10</sup> And Sohn comments:

Philemon seems to have been a man of considerable means, well able to own and maintain slaves. It is always a source of Christian satisfaction when one is able to draw into the field of Christ those who according to human standards are wise

and well-to-do and mighty. A true pastor will of course be happy over the accession of even the poorest pauper and treat him just as cordially as he treats those who have been blessed with great bounty. Yet, since Christ Himself refers to the greater difficulty of the rich man so far as the entrance into heaven is concerned, it seems a greater victory when by the power of God's Holy Spirit we are able to persuade the high and mighty of this world to kneel before the Cross of Christ in sincere repentance and faith....

To this day, humanly speaking, the Christian Church owes a great measure of its expansion, under God, to the Christian love and generosity of people like Philemon who, besides giving personal and financial support to the work of the Kingdom, freely grant the use of their homes for divine worship until a suitable chapel or church can be erected. Many of our prosperous churches began in that manner.<sup>11</sup>

In verse 7 we have translated, "that the hearts of the saints are refreshed through you." Actually the word *σπλάγχνα*, "bowels," is employed by the Greeks to indicate the heart, liver, lungs, etc., as the seat of violent passions such as anger or love. The point is here that these really deep feelings of love on the part of the fellow Christian had been refreshed through the Christian example of Philemon. The word *ἀναπέπαιται* is the 3rd sing. (typically used with neuter plural subjects) pluperfect passive of *ἀναπαύω*, "to give rest; refresh."

Before going on to the next section, it might be wise for our own edification to ask ourselves three questions which are prompted by what we learn here of Paul and Philemon. 1) Like Paul, do we



have an eye to, and are we grateful for, the good things that are done by our parishioners, rather than to bemoan their sins and shortcomings? 2) Are we cultivating the habit of regular prayer, not merely for ourselves, but also on behalf of our parishioners, even to the extent of possibly having a prayer list? 3) Do we set our standards high, so that we may encourage our members to abound yet more and more for the Lord's sake--not only in faith and knowledge, but also in good works.<sup>12</sup>

III. Paul's Plea to Philemon on Behalf of Onesimus (vv. 8-21):

8 Διό, πολλήν ἐν Χριστῷ πάρρησιάν ἔχων ἐπιτάσσειν σοι τὸ ἀνῆκον, 9 διὰ τὴν ἀγάπην μᾶλλον παράκαλῶ,<sup>a</sup> τοιοῦτος ὢν ὡς Παῦλος πρεσβύτης, νυνὶ δὲ καὶ δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ—<sup>a</sup> 10 παρεκαλῶ σε περὶ τοῦ ἐμοῦ τέκνου, ὃν ἐγέννησα ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς Ὀνήσιμον, <sup>b</sup>11 τόν ποτέ σοι ἄχρηστον νυνὶ δὲ [καὶ] σοὶ καὶ ἐμοὶ εὐχρηστον,<sup>b</sup> 12<sup>c</sup> ὃν ἀνέπεμψά σοι, ἅυτόν, τοῦτ' ἔστιν τὰ ἐμὰ σπλάγχχνα.<sup>2</sup> 13 ὃν ἐγὼ ἐβουλόμην πρὸς ἐμαυτὸν κατέχειν, ἵνα ὑπὲρ σοῦ μοι διακονῇ ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς τοῦ εὐαγγελίου, 14 χωρὶς δὲ τῆς σῆς γνώμης οὐδὲν ἠθέλησα ποιῆσαι, ἵνα μὴ ὡς κατὰ ἀνάγκην τὸ ἀγαθόν σου ἢ ἀλλὰ κατὰ ἐκούσιον. 15 τάχα γὰρ διὰ τοῦτο ἐχωρίσθη πρὸς ὦραν ἵνα αἰώνιον αὐτὸν ἀπέχῃς, 16 οὐκέτι ὡς δούλον ἀλλὰ ὑπὲρ δούλον, ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν, μάλιστα ἐμοί, πόσω δὲ μᾶλλον σοὶ καὶ ἐν σαρκὶ καὶ ἐν κυρίῳ.

17 Εἰ οὖν με ἔχεις κοινωνόν, προσλαβοῦ αὐτὸν ὡς ἐμέ. 18 εἰ δέ τι ἠδίκησέν σε ἢ ὀφείλει, τοῦτο ἐμοὶ ἐλλόγα. 19 ἐγὼ Παῦλος ἔγραψα τῇ ἐμῇ χειρὶ, ἐγὼ ἀποτίσω.<sup>d</sup> ἵνα μὴ λέγω σοι ὅτι καὶ σεαυτὸν μοι προσοφείλεις. 20 ναί, ἀδελφέ, ἐγὼ σου ὀναίμην ἐν κυρίῳ· ἀνάπαυσόν μου τὰ σπλάγχχνα ἐν Χριστῷ.

21 Πεποιθὼς τῇ ὑπακοῇ σου ἔγραψά σοι, εἰδὼς ὅτι καὶ ὑπὲρ ἃ λέγω ποιήσεις.

Translation:

"Therefore, although having much frankness in Christ to command you (to do) the appropriate things, on account of the love rather I exhort, being such a one as Paul--an old man, but now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus. I exhort you concerning my child, Onesimus, whom I begot (while) in the chains; (he is) the one who once was useless to you but now both to you and to me useful. This one I have sent back to you; he is my very heart. I was wishing to retain him for myself, in order that on your behalf he might serve me in the chains of the Gospel. But without your decision I desired to do nothing, so that your good would not be according to compulsion but according to a willingness. For perhaps it was on account of this (that) he was separated for a time in order that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but above a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more also to you both in the flesh and in the Lord.

If therefore you have fellowship (with) me, receive him also as me. And if there is anything he has done wrong to you or owes (you) charge this to me. I, Paul, have written with my own hand, I will pay back; lest I say to you that even yourself you owe to me. Yes, brother, may I have benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.

Persuaded in respect to your obedience, I have written to you, knowing that you will do even beyond what I say."

With the  $\Delta\upsilon\omicron$  Paul now gets to the central matter in his letter, and he indicates that what follows is based on good reasons. Paul speaks boldly and frankly, but he is careful to do so only "in Christ." "A man like Philemon would not be offended when he

is frankly told what he ought to do.... This is a sincere compliment to Philemon. Not every Christian is ready to bow to direction from others; we, too, often feel that we cannot frankly tell them what is the proper thing for them to do in a given case. Philemon is a man of a higher type.... Nowhere in this lovely letter does Paul give an intimation of authority or a hint that Philemon needs authority in order to move him. Paul knows a much more powerful motive, namely the appeal of Christian love, which has aptly been called the greatest thing in the world."<sup>13</sup>

There is a variant reading for the word *πρεσβύτης* in v. 9. J. B. Lightfoot postulates that in koine Greek *πρεσβύτης* may have been written indifferently for *πρεσβευτής*, since the two forms are interchanged by scribal confusion in the manuscripts of the Septuagint. But it must be said that the manuscripts support the reading *πρεσβύτης* ("an old man").<sup>14</sup> Robertson calls our attention to the fact that in Acts 7:58, at the stoning of Stephen, Paul is called *νεανίας* (young man). Perhaps now Paul was a bit under sixty.<sup>15</sup>

It appears that the name Onesimus was quite common among slaves in that region. He was a thief and a runaway. So often slaves would be tempted to pack up some of their master's goods and then head off for the cesspool of Rome. His name means "useful," and there is no question that Paul has a play on words here when he refers to this slave's former uselessness but now his great usefulness in the Lord; also this can be seen in verse 20 with the use of the word *ὀναίμηνον*. Probably Paul and Onesimus had become linked up in Rome after Onesimus may have experienced hunger pangs that moved him to seek out the one who was known for Christian charity. It could also be the case that Onesimus may have had

a guilty conscience, and thus went to Paul for counsel. We don't know. But we do know that Onesimus listened to Paul present the Gospel to him through which he was converted and baptized. Lightfoot has said: "The slave of Philemon became the freedman of Christ."<sup>16</sup>

But now there was a dilemma: Onesimus had repented, but he had not made restitution to his master, Philemon. Let us remember that "the alternative of life or death rested solely with Philemon, and slaves were constantly crucified for far lighter offences than his. A thief and a runaway, he had no claim to forgiveness."<sup>17</sup>

Slavery per se is not ruled out in Scripture. The idea of the master and servant relationship is upheld, with each having particular responsibilities in their God-ordained roles. However, slavery that is abusive to the human being, slavery that treats men like animals, slavery that has no respect for the soul, slavery that knows only force and punishment and not love and concern--such slavery is forbidden. There is no indication in this letter that Philemon had ever practiced abusive slavery. Nevertheless, Paul wants Philemon to realize that his slave is now returning to him as a "freedman in Christ," and therefore he will be even more useful in his physical service.

"Paul shows perfect tact in this letter. He calls out all that is noble in Philemon. He touches all the motives that will induce Philemon to receive Onesimus back in a Christian manner. No excuse is offered for the slave's running away. He ran away as a pagan, Paul returns him as a Christian..... Read Eph. 6:5-8 and Col. 3:22-25 and see how these passages were written with Onesimus in mind."<sup>18</sup>

In verse 14 the NIV does a poor job in rendering ἀλλὰ κατὰ ἐκούσιον. The NIV has "spontaneous and not forced" in reference to how Paul wanted Philemon to make the right decision as to whether or not to possibly even have Onesimus go back to Rome and serve Paul in prison. But ἐκούσιον emphasizes not just a spontaneous decision but a decision that is characterized by "willingness." "Well might Paul have reasoned that Philemon should have no objections to his retention of Onesimus, even as few people would have thought the worse of Paul for keeping him. But the Apostle was most scrupulously honest and conscientious. Having learned that Onesimus belonged to Philemon, the thought of the Tenth Commandment would not permit him to retain Onesimus without first obtaining the consent of his lawful owner."<sup>19</sup>

Vincent draws our attention to the fact that in verse 15 Paul does not say to Philemon that Onesimus ran away, for this could easily have irritated Philemon. He uses the passive voice ἐχωπίσθη, "was separated," indicating that Onesimus' flight was "divinely ordered for good," similar to the way Joseph's ordeal was viewed by him in retrospect (Gen. 50:20).<sup>20</sup>

Paul gets Philemon to think about what the fellowship (κοινωνόν) means in terms of the economic levels of Christians. If Philemon regards himself as being in fellowship with Paul (as he is), due to the common faith in Christ the Savior, then he should also realize he has this same "oneness" with this slave who has just been brought into Christ's family. Robertson quotes Meyer appropriately: "In the flesh Philemon had the brother for a slave; in the Lord he had the slave for a brother."<sup>21</sup>

IV. Personal Remarks, Greeting, and Benediction  
(vv. 22-25):

22 ἄμα δὲ καὶ ἐτοίμαζέ μοι  
ξενίαν, ἐλπίζω γὰρ ὅτι διὰ τῶν προσευχῶν ὑμῶν χαρι-  
σθήσομαι ὑμῖν.

23 Ἀσπάζεται σε Ἐπαφρᾶς ὁ συναιχμάλωτός μου ἐν  
Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ, 24<sup>c</sup> Μάρκος, Ἀρίσταρχος, Δημᾶς, Λου-  
κᾶς, οἱ συνεργοί μου. 25 Ἡ χάρις τοῦ κυρίου<sup>3</sup> Ἰησοῦ  
Χριστοῦ μετὰ τοῦ πνεύματος ὑμῶν.<sup>4</sup>

Translation:

"And at the same time also prepare a guest  
room for me, for I hope that through your  
prayers I will be received by you.

Epaphras, my fellow war captive in Christ  
Jesus, greets you; (also) Mark, Aristarchus,  
Demas, Luke, my fellow workers. The grace  
of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit."

When Paul talks about Philemon preparing a  
ξενίαν for him, this may mean either a room at an  
inn or a room at a private house. It was Paul's  
hope to be able to come to Colossae and observe  
how Philemon was responding to the request in his  
letter. One cannot but notice the plural "your  
prayers" and "you," which may indicate that Paul  
is thinking ahead not only to Philemon and his  
family, but also how Onesimus would join in the  
praying for Paul to come, as well as in the recep-  
tion later on.

In the final greetings Epaphras, the apparent  
first evangelist of Colossae, is mentioned (Col.  
4:12), along with Aristarchus and Mark, who were  
circumcised believers (Col. 4:11), while Demas and  
Luke were Gentile Christians. All of these no  
doubt were known to Philemon, who probably himself  
was a prominent citizen of the Colossae community.

Paul closes the letter in the same way that he closed his letter to the Galatians and his second letter to Timothy. This standard Pauline blessing shows how the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, in bringing about the complete redemption of sinners, is always foremost in the Apostle's mind both in his public preaching as well as in his private communications.

What should be our attitude toward slavery in general? Lightfoot says:

The Gospel never directly attacks slavery as an institution: the Apostles never command the liberation of slaves as an absolute duty. It is a remarkable fact that St. Paul in this epistle stops short of any positive injunction. The word "emancipation" seems to be trembling on his lips, and yet he does not utter it once. He charges Philemon to take the runaway slave Onesimus into his confidence again; to receive him with all affection; to regard him no more as a slave but as a brother; to treat him with the same consideration, the same love, which he entertains for the Apostle himself to whom he owes everything. In fact he tells him to do very much more than emancipate his slave, but this one thing he does not directly enjoin. St. Paul's treatment of this individual case is an apt illustration of the attitude of Christianity towards slavery in general.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, Sohn draws attention to the relationship between Paul as pastor and his parishioners, Philemon and Onesimus. He says:

And may we not add a word on pastor-people relationships? Paul makes it prominent here. He reminds Philemon of his debt of gratitude for having been sought and won for the Gospel

by him. So even today Christian people must never be permitted to forget what they owe to their pastors and teachers, namely, their very selves. And if pastors and teachers minister spiritual blessings to them, have they not the right to expect material support in return? Yes, Christian people must ever be reminded that they which preach the Gospel should live of the Gospel and that they which are taught the Word should communicate unto them which teach in all good things. If church members were kept mindful of these things and, like Philemon and the other Colossians, prayed for their pastor and teachers, there would not be such carping critics as are frequently found in our churches. Nor would they expect their spiritual leaders to exist on a meager pittance, but they would honor them all the more for their work's sake and do all in their power to give tangible proof of their gratitude for the great blessings received.<sup>23</sup>

SOLI DEO GLORIA!



## ENDNOTES

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By J. A. Moldstad, Jr.

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