

A Shift in Focus

From the very beginning Christians gathered together to focus on forgiveness. Sure, they may have liked each other and they may have enjoyed being around one another, but the main reason they gathered together was because of forgiveness. And so it shouldn't surprise us that the worship services of the early Christian Church were based around God's Word – because that's where he informed them about and gave them his forgiveness. And it shouldn't surprise us that the worship services of the early Christian Church contained baptisms because that is where Jesus poured out on them that same forgiveness in a different way. And it shouldn't surprise us that the worship services of the early Christian Church contained the Lord's Supper – because that is where Jesus gave them blessed them with that same forgiveness yet once again. Forgiveness, forgiveness, forgiveness. Again and again and again. Those Christians already way back in the 1st century knew how important forgiveness was and so they crafted their entire worship life around this crowning achievement of Christ's love. And it happened right away.

Just 10 days after Jesus went back up into heaven, forgiveness was already the main topic at hand as Peter preached the crowds in Jerusalem: "**Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off--for all whom the Lord our God will call.**" With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Baptism! And a lot all at once! Not just because it was the thing to do, but because it was for the forgiveness of sins. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching – God's Word, not because these disciples were such great and interesting speakers, but because in God's Word they were reassured of that same forgiveness. And they also spent their time on "the fellowship" and "the breaking of bread." Now we don't know if "the fellowship" is referring to the fellowship of the Lord's Supper or if the phrase "the breaking of bread" is referring to the ancient meal that preceded the celebration of the Lord's Supper, but either way, one of those two phrases has to do with that special event of the bread and the wine, the body and blood of the Lord, given to his people for the forgiveness of their sins. Forgiveness in baptism, forgiveness in God's Word, forgiveness in the Lord's Supper. Forgiveness again and again and again. There was nothing more important to those early Christians than the forgiveness that Jesus had won on the cross and how he distributed it to his people in those three distinct miraculous ways.

We Need It!

But things changed. Over the years, and then as those years turned into centuries, this focus on the forgiveness of sins shifted. Instead of baptism being for the forgiveness of all sins and available for all people (remember that Peter said that "this promise is for you *and for your children*") it soon became nothing more than a tradition and supposedly only forgave a small portion of a person's sins. It wasn't thought of as giving the gift of the Holy Spirit to someone either – the gift of faith. Instead baptism was performed because they thought that the collective faith of the church itself was enough. The Lord's Supper was completely gutted of forgiveness. Instead of a wonderful means through which God shows his grace, the Lord's Supper turned into

a duty carried out by the priests and observed by the people that earned them extra brownie points with the Lord. And forgiveness was separated from the Word of God too. Not because the words of the Lord in the Bible had somehow lost their power, but because the words of the Lord in the Bible were spoken and sung in worship services in a language that the people couldn't understand. Can you imagine showing up to a worship service every Sunday in a language that you don't know? And so by the time the 1500s rolled around – the time of the Reformation – there was very little, if any, forgiveness found in worship services anymore. Forgiveness was not preached, forgiveness was not taught, forgiveness was not even offered to the people who needed it so badly. What a horrendous situation that must have been! What a horrendous situation for any Christian because every Christian needs forgiveness, don't we? We need forgiveness every single day because we sin in so many different ways!

Now that word "sin" is used quite a bit in this kind of venue, but it's not often explained. "Sin" is simply breaking God's law. Sometimes it's purposely, sometimes it's accidental. Sometimes it's failing to do what he asks you to do, sometimes it's doing what he's told you to refrain from. Sometimes sin is an action, sometimes it's a word, sometimes it's a thought, sometimes it's an attitude, sometimes it's just a motivation. Sometimes you are fully aware of a sin, but at other times it was so small or quick or sneaky that you never knew. But no matter what kind of sin it is, each one of them – each one of those "law breakers" needs to be forgiven, washed away, taken off of your record because just one sin disqualifies us from heaven. And so if we take "sin" seriously, we need a lot of forgiveness, don't we? At least I do. I need forgiveness more than you would think.

A few of you have told me over the years that you can't imagine that I would sin as much as you sin. Think again. Ask my wife. Interview my kids. Anyone who is around me enough can tell you that I have a whole set of sins that I am fully responsible for. I need forgiveness. That's why I'm here. I'm here this morning not just because it's my job. I'm here because I have stains and blemishes and ugly spots and a slew of imperfections that I need taken away. I need a Savior. A loving Savior, a merciful Savior, a patient Savior. That's why I'm here this Sunday – and every Sunday. I need forgiveness.

Don't you? Don't you have a wide variety of shameful actions and embarrassing words and disgusting thoughts and nauseating attitudes and humiliating motivations that need to be dealt with? Don't you need a Savior too? Don't you need forgiveness? I hope that's why you're here today. I hope that's why you decided to take time out of your Sunday morning to be here and to sit here and listen and to sing and to pray here. You don't need to be entertained. You don't need to get your social fix in. You don't need to just "do your duty." You need forgiveness... again and again and again. And this is exactly where you can get it.

We Get It!

You get forgiveness here! Not *just* here, but especially here! Many of you were baptized in a worship service: the water and the words of God combined to give you the forgiveness of sins. And if you haven't been baptized yet or if your kids haven't been baptized, talk to me. Because baptism is one of the incredible ways Jesus gives us the forgiveness he won on the cross. It's a little water on the head and some simple words that are spoken, but through that brief encounter of water and the Word, you're forgiven.

Next week we'll have the Lord's Supper available once again. It's just bread and wine, but when those everyday ingredients are used in the Lord's Supper, Jesus promises that they are

also his real body and real blood, given to us for the real forgiveness of sins. Not just a reminder of forgiveness and not just a symbol of forgiveness, but his actual, true, authentic forgiveness of sins in yet another mind-blowing way. And if you are not yet a member of this congregation, if you have not yet done the research to see if you really should take the Lord's Supper with this group of Christians, talk to me. Let's sit down and open up the Bible to see what the Lord says so that you can be certain that we teach the truth and so that we can be certain that you believe the truth. What an indescribable blessing it is to take the Lord's Supper with those whom you completely agree with on every point of Scripture and be forgiven once again side by side.

Speaking of being forgiven side by side, all of us stood here side by side earlier this morning as we admitted our sinfulness to the Lord. And then I turned around and said, "God, our heavenly Father, has forgiven all your sins. By the perfect life and innocent death of our Lord Jesus Christ, he has removed your guilt forever. You are his own dear child." You were forgiven! I was forgiven! We were all forgiven through that announcement of Jesus' death, his resurrection, and his promise that he did it all for us.

You are forgiven every time you're here. Whether it's baptism, the Lord's Supper, or that weekly declaration, every sin you've ever committed and every sin you ever will commit, is gone. Of course, that doesn't just happen here. Whenever you go to the Lord in prayer, laying your sins at the foot of his cross and trusting that he has done it all, you're forgiven there too. You're forgiven immediately, you're forgiven completely, and you're forgiven without question. Because that's who Jesus is. That's what Jesus does. He forgives.

Come Back for It

This free and full forgiveness is what was uncovered at the time of the Reformation. Forgiveness in baptism was uncovered so that people could once again revel in its connection to the cross. Forgiveness in the Lord's Supper was uncovered so that people could once again look forward to the body and blood given for their sins. Forgiveness in the clear words of God was uncovered so that people could once again hear and learn and sing about the sacrifice of their Savior just for them. The Reformation is not about a man and it's not about a movement, the Reformation is really about forgiveness: how we get it and why.

So keep coming back here for that same forgiveness again and again. Unless of course you somehow stop sinning! Unless of course you are able to conduct your life in the most perfect way possible, never crossing the line, never making a mistake, never going against God's Word. But if you do, if you do catch yourself in the act, if you do notice that you're not quite as good as people think you might be, if you do realize how skewed your life can get, then come back. Come back here. Come back to worship with this group of Christians in a setting that has always championed baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the Word of God ever since the days of those early disciples who devoted themselves to baptism, the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship and the breaking of bread. Come back for forgiveness. Because when it comes right down to it, you don't need anything else. You don't need anything more. You need forgiveness... again and again and again. And Jesus is happy to give it you again and again and again every time.

Amen.

"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins." – Eph. 1:7