

Forgiveness and Reconciliation and the Pastor's Role.

**A Paper
Submitted to Dr. Justin Smith
Phoenix Seminary
Scottsdale, Arizona**

**In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for
MI 502**

**by
Troy A. Griffitts
14-August-2006**

Forgiveness and reconciliation from sin fills a large majority of what this short life here, on Earth, entails. God's redeemed people struggle and fall in sin every day. God's entire purpose for leaving His comfort zone, for emptying Himself and becoming a man, all to die, and that, the death of a cross, was to reconcile us to Himself from our sin. He calls each and every one who desires to come after Him and be His disciple, to also pick up his cross and follow Him (Mark 8:34; Matthew 10:38; 16:24; Luke 9:23; 14:27)-- and not without reason do we die, just as Christ did not die without reason (Romans 5:11)-- so we might live for seeing others reconciled to God (II Corinthians 5:18-19). Christians also sin against each other every day. Beginning with our conversion, until our death, or Christ's return, our life is spent as a process of further sanctification. This imperfection gives rise to a ministry within the Church for facilitation of forgiveness and relational reconciliation between the individual members of the Body.

Before we took hold of the grace offered to us by God, before we trusted in Him, His forgiveness, and His reconciliatory ransom for our life, because of our sin, while we still trusted in our works and served our fleshly desires, there was no effectual reconciliation between us and God, for sin. While an individual does not want forgiveness, there is no reconciliation. Those who come to God must first understand that they have done wrong. They have hurt themselves and others, and have disappointed their Creator. They also must believe that God offers them forgiveness completely by His grace, and has, in fact, paid the cost for their wrongdoings. When we come to understand and believe the Heart of God and fully disclose our place of need, we can be fully reconciled and enter into an

intimate relationship with our Creator, ever so enhanced by the experience of reconciliation, itself.

Understanding this *modus operandi* which God implements with us, goes a long way in helping us understand how we should interact with our fellow man.

When we were saved, God gave us a new life; He made us a new person. All of our preconversion sins were paid for and done away with. As we walk with Him now in newness of life, we still find ourselves giving in to sin. How does God handle these postconversion sins? Over the centuries, the historical positions the Church has held over the years on this subject has varied. To the first generation Christians, Christ's quick return was thought to be imminent on any day. Pastoral care was focused on keeping believers pure for the short time before the return of our Lord. Clebsch and Jaekle cite *Διδαχὴ τῶν Δώδεκα Ἀποστόλων*-- an early Christian witness likely written before the turn of the first century-- as a source which states fatal consequences for postconversion sins of believers (Clebsch, W.A., & Jaekle, C.; *Pastoral Care In Historical Perspective*; p. 15). In *The Teachings of The Twelve Apostles*, the writer encourages believers, in light of Christ's imminent return, to

“πυκνῶς (often) δὲ συναχθήσεσθε (gather together) ζητοῦντες (to worship God; to seek) τὸ νικῶντα (what is proper) τὰς ψυχὰς μὴ (for your souls)” ὁ γρ φελοῖσιν
(for, will not profit you) ὁ πᾶς χρόνος τῆς πίστεως ὑμῶν (all the period of your faith),
ἐὰν μὴ ἐν τῷ ἐσχάτῳ καιρῷ (if not in the end time) τελειωθῆτε (you finish).

C&J assert this warns against postconversion sins; however, they cite a poor translation of the term *τελειωθτε*, rendering it as “ye be found perfect”, ignoring the following context.

ἐν γὰρ ταῖς ἐσχάταις ἡμέραις (for in the last days) πληθυνθήσονται (there will abound)
ο ψευδοπροφταῖ (false prophets) καὶ ο φθορες (those who corrupt), καὶ
στραφήσονται (and twist) τὰ πρόβατα (the sheep) εἰς λύκους (into wolves), καὶ ἡ
ἀγάπη (even the love) στραφσεται (they will twist) εἰς μῶσος (into hate).

The writer goes on almost certainly alluding to Paul's writings in II Thessalonians 2.8ff. These seem to be a clear warning not to be deceived by false prophets coming in the eschaton who would cause them to deny the faith. We see similar warnings throughout the book of Hebrews.

And while we can assert that a doctrine of security for believers seems absent, there is no credence to apply this verse toward evidence that the early Church deemed postconversion sin fatal and expected believers to “lead blameless lives with respect to one another and to the world around them.” (Ibid. p15.3)

Later evidence does show that some bishops struggled with the question of postconversion repentance for varying degrees of sin. Approximately 50 years after the writing of The *Didache*, cited above, we can read in The Shephard, by Hermas, that some teachers had been teaching that there is no second repentance for sins after baptism at conversion. Hermas professes that an angel appeared to him and revealed that God will indeed grant forgiveness for sin after conversion, but if a believer continues in sin, “scarcely shall he live.”

When it became evident that Christ had tarried beyond first generation believers, the question became not merely how to reconcile believers to God, keeping them persistent till the end, but how to minister to a more immediate need: how to reconcile relationships between believers who, it now seemed, would have to spend quite some time together before being perfected in heaven with our Lord. Clebsch and Jaekle assert that this new ministry of reconciliation between believers posed an entirely new aspect to pastoral care. But was this, indeed a new facet to pastoral ministry? In Acts we read about firsthand accounts of broken relationships and restoration, like that between Paul and Mark. Mark was deemed by Paul, for a time, unsuitable for ministry. And this decision was not unanimous, as Barnabas was still willing to have Mark serve in similar ministry with him. Approximately 3 years later, we find witness in II Timothy 4:11, Paul has by this time considered Mark again useful for ministry: "Pick up Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for service." (II Timothy 4:11) At another time Paul encourages two women to be reconciled to each other: "I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord." (Philippians 4:2) We are not left solely to examples, but see direct pastoral reprimand for sinning against brothers:

"Is it so, that there is not among you one wise man who will be able to decide between his brethren, but brother goes to law with brother, and that before unbelievers? Actually, then, it is already a defeat for you, that you have lawsuits with one another. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded? On the contrary, you yourselves wrong and defraud. You do this even to your brethren. Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither

fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor *the* covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.” (I Corinthians 6:5-11)

Here we see Paul chastising brothers who wrong each other, labeling their actions the same as their behavior before conversion. Paul then reminds them of their cleansing and justification in the court of Heaven, when they consider taking matters against brothers to earthly court. In another letter, we find Paul pleading with the congregation at Philippi:

“Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus...” (Philippians 2:1-5ff)

He then continues to describe the Chief Example of this humility and love which places others above oneself and actively seeks reconciliation.

During times of persecution, pastors had to struggle with reconciling to the Church, apostates

who had denied the Faith to save their lives. Major sins like adultery, murder, and renouncing the Faith during persecution, were often times thought to be unforgivable. Leaders such as Tertullian, Novatianus, and Hippolytus were separated from a large body of Christians because of their reluctance to reconcile lapsed Christians with Church (C&J, p18). Their strict position did not prevail and the Church developed policies of repentance for degrees of renunciation of Christianity.

When Christianity became the sanctioned religion, being a member of the Church was mandated by government. Pastors not only had to find ways to assimilate diverse cultures, but instead of debating about the possibility of reconciliation for the transgressor, had to figure out ways to deal with moralizing a nation.

Today we live in a world diverse with changing religious climates. In 3rd millennial United States of America, we've recently moved from national Christianity sponsored, if not by government, by social norms, to a self-centered, secular society of skeptics-- skeptics of everything, both Christian and other. The Church is faced with an opportunity to return from being a moralizing social club, to being an agent for God's saving ministry of reconciliation. People no longer assume, by default, they are Christians. We once again have an opportunity to share Christ's saving message to a world who admits they don't have the answers.

How does a modern pastor implement policies of forgiveness and reconciliation? How does God call us to execute this ministry He has entrusted to us? We are to use the model God has set

before us as an example. Christ says to His Church, “For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.” (Matthew 6:14-15) Like God, we should offer our forgiveness to all those who have done wrong against us. For our part, forgiveness should always be extended to the sinner. When the sinner comes acknowledging their sin by confession to us, and accepts our forgiveness, the process of reconciliation can begin. Often times, the offer, itself, of genuine forgiveness can be the agent which solicits sincere repentance. God tells us “that the kindness of God leads you to repentance” (Romans 2:4) God's work to cover our sins by sacrificing His life for us is the kindest act ever exemplified. Christ speaks of His sacrifice knowing the drawing to repentance it will evoke: “ 'And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.' This he said, signifying what death he should die.” (John 12:32-33) If Christ's sacrifice to offer forgiveness to us is what draws us to Him, then how far might our willingness to offer sincere, graceful forgiveness to others go in the process of their repentance and reconciliation? We've already been mandated to do so, and we're told the work of reconciliation is our ordained ministry: “And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation;” (II Corinthians 5:18) This grace we see offered to us in Jesus Christ, ought to be offered so much more by us to those who are our petty debtors (Matthew 18:23-35). As pastors, we need to teach our congregation the weight of the sin born for us, so our people recognize the lightness, by comparison, of anything done against us.

Forgiveness and relational reconciliation is a mandate from Scripture. How does this effect the responsibilities entrusted to one after they have sinned. Sins which directly effect our ability to

function as servants can sometimes remove us from positions of service. After forgiveness and relational reconciliation has begun, there still remains the duty of responsibility in ministry. God often takes away certain ministry roles from those who have fallen in certain ways. We read in I Timothy 3 and Titus 1 that “An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach.” (I Timothy 3:2) The sin of divorce causes one to become disqualified for the position of ἐπίσκοπον or πρεσβυτέρους (bishop/overseer or elder). Just a few verses later we are told the reasoning behind this instruction: “He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?),” (I Timothy 3:4-5) Therefore we see that God calls us to unconditionally love, forgive, and relationally reconcile, as He does with us, but not to be unwise in who we appoint for ministry. If a sin has damaged a person's reputation in the eyes of the world, it would not be prudent to make them your ambassador to such. If another sin shows a person a poor manager of worldly things, it might not be prudent to entrust to such a one the stewardship of Godly things.

In conclusion, the role of a pastor in the ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation is one modeled to us in a great way by God, Himself. Pastors must teach their congregation the weight of their own sin toward God, so as to make it understood the triviality of sin committed against them. A congregation humbly and eagerly offering forgiveness to a wayward soul will promote true repentance in the sinner and make the ground fertile for sincere forgiveness and relational reconciliation. Sins carry consequences, and some sins carry worse consequences than others. Pastors must be wise in

their appointment of ministry leaders, so as not to promote further sin, to protect the helpless, and to present to the world the most credible witness of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.