

ALIVE TO GOD: CRUCIFIED WITH CHRIST

Study Nine

SIN AND OTHERS—2

We have already made the point that, for those who believe in Jesus, crucified and raised for them, who by faith have been crucified and raised with him, the penalty, power, and pollution of sin has been completely removed. Its presence remains with us, and we are considering how we should deal with that.

We have seen the harmful deficiencies of attempting to put sin out of mind, or to gloss over it with a form of ‘forgiveness’ that underestimates the solemn and awful cost of that forgiveness, both to God who gives it and to those He gives it to.

We never get past the great forgiveness of God in Christ—that is ever-present with us. It can never be overlooked in whatever we do to deal with sin when we find it in ourselves and in others in the present day, particularly in the church. We must learn from the Scriptures how the church in the early days, on that secure basis, dealt with the sin in its midst.

JUDGEMENT IN THE HOUSEHOLD OF GOD

It is primarily with the church that we are concerned in this matter. The community outside the church may have a perception that the church is passing judgement on its sins. Sometimes the public pronouncements made by those inside the church may encourage this perception. Even without such pronouncements, it is doubtful that the church could ever fully shake off such a perception, since the very proclamation of the gospel brings the issues of sin and forgiveness into sharp relief. But the New Testament makes it clear that it is ourselves inside the church that we are to be judging, rather than those outside:

For what have I to do with judging those outside? Is it not those who are inside that you are to judge? God will judge those outside (1 Cor. 5:12–13).

Hand in hand with this is an understanding that God is dealing very directly with those who are His own inside the church with regard to sins. This was certainly the case with Israel in the Old Testament:

You only have I known
of all the families of the earth;
therefore I will punish you
for all your iniquities (Amos 3:2).

Israel’s special relationship with God made her even more directly answerable to God than the other nations. This it appears was not softened, but rather sharpened, for those to whom the gospel came. The gospel is the only refuge for us all. Forgiveness cannot come to those who reject the means of forgiveness in the gospel of salvation:

For if the message declared through angels¹ was valid, and every transgression or disobedience received a just penalty, how can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? (Heb. 2:2–3).

Peter is clear that, in the sufferings that come upon those who bear the name of Christ, the church is not exempt from the judgement of God:

For the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God; if it begins with us, what will be the end for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And

‘If it is hard for the righteous to be saved,
what will become of the ungodly and the sinners?’
(1 Pet. 4:17–18).

We see a particular instance of this in the abuses that accompanied the Lord’s Supper in Corinth:

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body,² eat and drink judgment against themselves. For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world (1 Cor. 11:27–32).

Note that judgement from God is not the same as final condemnation—in fact it serves to keep us from that. In the light of this we are called upon to examine and judge ourselves.

Some of us may wonder: if Christ has taken the judgement for our sins on the cross, how come we are still subject to these judgements? We need to be mindful that ‘the wages of sin is death’ (Rom. 6:23)—eternal and hellish, ‘the second death, the lake of fire’ (Rev. 20:14)—and that we are alive. We are all still subject to the just judgement of physical death—some of us sooner than others—but, as Jesus said: ‘anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life’ (John 5:24); and so ‘whoever keeps my word will never see death’ (John 8:51)—others will see what they call our death, but we will see the Lord (as in Phil. 1:23). There is now ‘no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus’ (Rom. 8:1), but death, disease, and other circumstances of life are still part of God’s armoury in correcting and purifying His church. Ananias and Sapphira were part of ‘the whole group of those who believed’ (Acts 4:32) and so presumably they were saved, but the judgement of immediate physical death came upon them for their attempt to withhold the full truth of their self-preserving action (Acts 5:1–11), and the church in that instance was kept pure from their potentially defiling corruption. We hear in 1 Corinthians 3:10–17 of those whose lives rest on the foundation of Christ, but whose works are tested ‘as through fire’ and are found wanting. They are saved, but arrive in glory no doubt somewhat naked and embarrassed, with little to show for it.

These and other passages make the point that our sure salvation is no light thing, and carries with it great responsibilities.

¹ This is a reference to the giving of the law through Moses, possibly in the light of Deut. 33:2.

² In the immediate context this refers to being divided from and unmindful of the other members of the body of Christ (see 1 Cor. 11:17–22; compare 12:12–27). This is seen as doing despite to ‘the body of Christ’ that was given over to the action of the cross to effect our forgiveness and union with one another (see 1 Cor. 10:16–17; 11:23–26). See further: Martin Bleby, *The Gift of God: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper as Sacraments of the Cross*, NCPI, Blackwood, 2007, pp. 64–6.

Questions for Reflection

- *What considerations and pressures might make us want to regard the church as a judgement-free zone?*
- *What characteristics might this illusion engender in the life of a congregation?*

COME TO THE LIGHT

We can be assured that there is nothing we think, say or do that is hidden from God:

The LORD looks down from heaven;
he sees all humankind.
From where he sits enthroned he watches
all the inhabitants of the earth—
he who fashions the hearts of them all,
and observes all their deeds (Ps. 33:13–15).

It is in vain that we might seek to avoid God’s gaze or evade His presence:

O LORD, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
O LORD, you know it completely (Ps. 139:1–4).

This knowledge God has of us means that we are answerable to Him:

He who planted the ear, does he not hear?
He who formed the eye, does he not see?
He who disciplines the nations,
he who teaches knowledge to humankind,
does he not chastise? (Ps. 94:9–10).

The action of the word of God exposes us to this accountability:

Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account (Heb. 4:12–13).

So Jesus was able to say: ‘nothing is hidden that will not be disclosed, nor is anything secret that will not become known and come to light’ (Luke 8:17).

This prospect is a frightening one for those who are in guilt. It becomes bearable, and even welcome, for those who know by faith that they have been cleansed from guilt through the grace of God in Jesus Christ, and that God is at work in us, enabling us ‘to will and to work for his good pleasure’ (Phil. 2:13). Even among the redeemed, this will be a touchy matter for those who are still weak in faith and conscience (as in Rom. 14:1; 1 Cor. 8:7). Those secured in the assurance of faith, while no less daunted, will be emboldened, humbled and gladdened to be nowhere else but before ‘the throne of grace’ (Heb. 4:16):

And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that

their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God (John 3:19–21).

The mark of a healthy congregation, secured in the gospel of grace, will be its willingness to ‘come to the light’, no matter what. They will find, perhaps to their surprise and relief, that God has been at work in them, enabling them ‘both to will and to work for his good pleasure’ (Phil. 2:13).

It is with this in view that the Anglican Book of Common Prayer (1662) has provision for a ‘general Confession’ at Morning and Evening Prayer, when the people ‘assemble and meet together’.³ For those who are weak in faith and conscience, the regular repetition of this rite may cause them to think mistakenly that forgiveness can be obtained in weekly instalments, even by virtue of the act, on our part, of confession and absolution itself.⁴ This is clearly not the intention of the Reformers who wrote it. The Confession is made ‘unto the throne of the heavenly grace’, on the grounds of the ‘promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesu our Lord’ by our ‘most merciful Father’, of mercy and restoration for all who are penitent. The reality of forgiveness precedes and enables the open acknowledgement of sin.

Some may say that this provision of a general Confession is there for the benefit of those in attendance who are yet to come to faith and repentance for the first time, but is not necessary for those who have come to this already. This also was not the Reformers’ intention. They had a healthy recognition that sin still remains an issue even among the redeemed, and that the gospel needs to be brought to bear upon it in no uncertain terms. They stated in Anglican Article XV, ‘Of Christ alone without Sin’:

But we all the rest, although baptized, and born again in Christ, yet offend in many things; and if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.⁵

They went on in Article XVI:

After we have received the Holy Ghost, we may depart from grace given, and fall into sin, and by the grace of God we may arise again, and amend our lives. And therefore they are to be condemned, which say, they can no more sin as long as they live here, or deny the place of forgiveness to such as truly repent.⁶

It is on the basis of this understanding—that ‘we ought at all times humbly to acknowledge our sins before God’—that the opportunity of the ‘general Confession’ is offered. Anyone who requires ‘further comfort or counsel . . . to the quieting of his conscience, and avoiding of all scruple and doubtfulness’ is urged to ‘open his grief’ to a ‘discreet and learned Minister of God’s Word . . . that by the ministry of God’s holy word he may receive the benefit of absolution, together with ghostly [spiritual] counsel and advice’.⁷

The introduction to the general Confession speaks of the straightforwardness by which all this should be approached by those who know and are sure of the grace of God towards them:

Dearly beloved brethren, the Scripture moveth us in sundry places to acknowledge and confess our manifold sins and wickedness; and that we should not dissemble nor cloke them before the face of

³ ‘The Order for Morning and Evening Prayer’ in *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments, and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church According to the Use of the Church of England*, Eyre and Spottiswoode, London, n.d., pp. 42f. See further: D. R. Davies, *Down, Peacock’s Feathers: Studies in the Significance of the General Confession*, Geoffrey Bles, London, 1961.

⁴ See Martin Bleby, *The Vinedresser: An Anglican Meets Wrath and Grace*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1985, p. 9.

⁵ The Anglican Church of Australia, *A Prayer Book for Australia*, Shorter Edition, Broughton Books, Alexandria, 1995, p. 479. See also Article IX, ‘Of Original or Birth-sin’, p. 478.

⁶ *A Prayer Book for Australia*, p. 479.

⁷ ‘The Order of the Administration of the Lord’s Supper, or Holy Communion’, *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 298.

Almighty God our heavenly Father; but confess them with an humble, lowly, penitent, and obedient heart; to the end that we may obtain forgiveness of the same, by his infinite goodness and mercy.⁸

Dissembling and cloaking (as in Genesis 3:8; compare Job 31:33–34) belong to those who still do not know the grace of God; not to those who do.

Questions for Reflection

- *What has been our experience of coming to the light of God's judgement?*
- *What has made it bearable or welcome?*
- *What in the life of our congregation might deter or hinder us from coming to the light?*

IF A BROTHER OR SISTER SINS

What did Jesus have to say on the matter of sin in the community of the redeemed?

If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector (Matt. 18:15–17).

Because some manuscripts include the words 'against you' after 'sins' in verse 15, this passage is sometimes taken to be referring to conflict resolution, and is treated accordingly. It will certainly give us good counsel in that regard. There are four steps to be taken here, each one to be taken only if the previous one has failed:

- 1) One on one face-to-face engagement.
- 2) Meeting in the presence of one or two others.
- 3) Involvement of the church more widely.
- 4) Exclusion.

This order is the opposite to that which often prevails in the world. Often what happens when someone offends is first that we ostracise them immediately. Then we are likely to tell all and sundry about it—anyone but the offending person—often causing irreparable damage and harm. If we confront the offending person at all, it is likely to be with one or two others to back up the accusation and enforce capitulation. The last thing we might think of doing is to talk with the person face to face alone, to sort it out—which by then is likely to have become impossible. Jesus reverses that order, in a way that is much more likely to bring about reconciliation.

However, a number of manuscripts do not have the words 'against you', in which case it is speaking about what is to happen if 'another member of the church sins', whether against you personally or not. How do we handle that? This is more like Galatians 6:1:

My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.

Here it is a sinner's forgiveness and restoration that is in view.

⁸ *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 42.

The Gospel Applied

The forgiveness and restoration of one who has sinned can be brought about only by an application of the gospel to the person in that situation. The Second Letter of Peter speaks of our need and capacity to be established in faith, goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, mutual affection, and love, and goes on to say:

For anyone who lacks these things is nearsighted and blind, and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins (2 Pet. 1:9).

Where there is a sinful deficiency in any of these things, there needs to be, first of all, not an accusation regarding a breach of the law so much as a reminder of ‘the cleansing of past sins’. John in his First Letter draws attention to the same reality:

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:1–2).

In a situation of sin, the believer’s first responsibility is to know the grace of God. This is what those who set out to ‘restore such a one’ should bring to bear. Perhaps that is why the apostles acted the way they did when ‘the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food’ (Acts 6:1). They appointed ‘seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom’ (Acts 6:3) to attend to the distribution of food, while they devoted themselves even more ‘to prayer and to serving the word’ (Acts 6:4). It could be they knew that no amount of administrative correction, however godly, could bring about reconciliation after such a lapse, without a reassertion, at the heart of the community, of the word of the gospel.

If we take it that the forgiveness and restoration of a believer who has sinned is in view in Matthew 18:15–17, then those who go to the one who has sinned bring the gospel with them first of all. They go in the sure knowledge that the gift of repentance and the forgiveness of sins (as in Acts 5:31; 11:18) is powerfully available to God’s people. On the basis of this knowledge, they are able openly to name and ‘point out the fault’ (Matt. 18:15) without evasion, fear, or any spirit of accusation. While our propensity might be to stay out of it and not get involved, the apostles thought otherwise, often with salutary results. We see this with Peter’s rebuke of Simon in Samaria, who had previously practiced magic, and had believed and been baptised (see Acts 8:9–13):

Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money, saying, ‘Give me also this power so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.’ But Peter said to him, ‘May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain God’s gift with money! You have no part or share in this, for your heart is not right before God. Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and the chains of wickedness.’ Simon answered, ‘Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may happen to me’ (Acts 8:18–24).

Paul was no less bold in his rebuking of Peter’s inconsistency, which compromised faith in Christ:

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, ‘If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?’ (Gal. 2:11–14).

Paul also encourages Timothy not to mince matters in this regard, with soundness of faith in view for those rebuked:

It was one of them, their very own prophet, who said,

‘Cretans are always liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons.’

That testimony is true. For this reason rebuke them sharply, so that they may become sound in the faith (Titus 1:12–13).

This directness is to occur first of all ‘when the two of you are alone’. This shows direct love, honours the other person as a wise person who will accept rebuke (see Prov. 9:8; 12:1), and offers the most likely setting where a change of heart may take place, without others present (where loss of face could make it more difficult). This may well be sufficient to effect the desired restoration: ‘If the member listens to you, you have regained that one’ (Matt. 18:15). Full reconciliation, not castigation, is the whole object of the exercise.

Only if the person does not listen, are we to ‘take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses’ (Matt. 18:16). The first purpose of having these present is for the sake of the offender: the first person may have been wrong, and the matter can be assessed more justly by others. Or, if the offence is real, others may be able to approach the offender in a way that prevails, when the first one has failed. The principle of having ‘two or three witnesses’ is to ensure that justice and truth is being done, and that no malicious personal vendetta is being pursued by the first person (see Deut. 17:6; 19:15; Num. 35:30; 2 Cor. 13:1; 1 Tim. 5:19).

The third step, of opening the matter to the whole community (which at this point would include the leadership, if it has not already), is taken only after the second step has failed.

All who attend to this matter are to be those who themselves are subject to the gospel—as redeemed sinners who have been deservedly crucified with Christ and raised with him in justification (as in Rom. 4:25; 6:3–11). So they have no illusions about their own sinfulness or the propensity of their own flesh to fall into sin (as in Mark 7:21–23; Rom. 7:14–25; Gal. 5:17). For this reason the warning is given:

Take care that you yourselves are not tempted (Gal. 6:1).

A similar warning is in place for those involved in the appointing and disciplining of an elder:

do not participate in the sins of others; keep yourself pure (1 Tim. 5:22).⁹

Exclusion and Readmission

The fourth and most drastic step is taken only after the failure of the first three. What is meant by: ‘let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector’ (Matt. 18:17)? Some point to the way Jesus ministered to Gentiles and tax collectors (see Matt. 8:5–13, the centurion; 12:17–21, ‘in his name the Gentiles will hope’; 15:21–28, a Canaanite woman;

⁹ While the immediate context is that of the laying-on of hands in connection with the gift of ministering (1 Tim. 5:22; compare 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6), the wider context is that of disciplining elders ‘who persist in sin’ (1 Tim. 5:19–21). In the late fourth century *Apostolic Constitutions* (2.41) there is reference to a laying-on of hands in the process of restoring a penitent sinner (*Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 7, eds A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, Hendrickson, Peabody, 1995, p. 415). It has been suggested that this might be the reference in 1 Tim. 5:22. ‘There is a difference of opinion whether the ordination ceremony is here in view, or the restoration of penitents after due discipline’ (Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction and Commentary*, 2nd edition, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1990, p. 119). Mounce summarises the weight of opinion that this ‘does not refer to the later church ritual of reinstating a penitent sinner’, but rather to that person’s appointment as an elder (William D. Mounce, *The Pastoral Epistles*, WBC vol. 46, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 2000, p. 316).

9:9–17, Matthew and his friends) by including them in his new kingdom community. These conclude that Jesus is saying that inclusion must be the end of the process. Be that as it may, the immediate reference is more likely to be to treat the person for a time as an outsider, as a Gentile and a tax collector would have been under the terms of the old covenant (see Eph. 2:12; and the usage in Gal. 2:15).

This would appear to be what is put into practice in 1 Corinthians 5:1–5:

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not found even among pagans; for a man is living with his father's wife. And you are arrogant! Should you not rather have mourned, so that he who has done this would have been removed from among you? For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present I have already pronounced judgment in the name of the Lord Jesus on the man who has done such a thing. When you are assembled, and my spirit is present with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

Note there that even this step of 'excommunication' is 'so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord'. The person is to be removed from the protection afforded by the community of those who are forgiven and saved through faith in Christ, to be exposed to the horrors of being in the world exposed to Satan's accusations apart from that protection. Such is the confidence of Paul in God's saving sovereignty even in that situation that he still holds out the hope that this one will be saved, perhaps 'as through fire' (see above on 1 Cor. 3:10–17). It is the good of the sinner, rather than the needs of the church, that is still primarily in view. What follows in 1 Corinthians 5:6–13 is also instructive on this theme: the intention is anything but trying to keep ourselves undefiled at the expense of others.

We do not know whether 2 Corinthians 2:3–11 refers to the same situation as 1 Corinthians 5:1–5, or to another similar case.¹⁰ Here we see a mitigation of the discipline imposed:

I wrote as I did, so that when I came, I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice; for I am confident about all of you, that my joy would be the joy of all of you. For I wrote you out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain, but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.

But if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but to some extent—not to exaggerate it—to all of you. This punishment by the majority is enough for such a person; so now instead you should forgive and console him, so that he may not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I urge you to reaffirm your love for him. I wrote for this reason: to test you and to know whether you are obedient in everything. Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. What I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ. And we do this so that we may not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.

Here again, while the seriousness of the offence, and the pain caused by it, is not played down, the good of the offender is in view. Only a great atonement could make this other than compromise or inconsistent double-think.

Another application of this procedure is in 2 Thessalonians 3:14–15:

Take note of those who do not obey what we say in this letter; have nothing to do with them, so that they may be ashamed. Do not regard them as enemies, but warn them as believers.

While we may be quick to regard those who do not accept the word of the apostle Paul as heretics, Paul urges us to treat them still as believers (lit. 'brothers')—albeit estranged—and not as enemies.

¹⁰ See the discussion in Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1962, pp. 59–72, where Hughes supports the traditional association of the two.

How could we ever be qualified to exercise such weighty judgements? The assumption behind that very question is flawed. It is the Lord himself, and his word, that pronounces the judgement (see John 8:16; 12:48). Note how Paul emphasises that any part played by him and the church, both in judgement and forgiveness, is ‘in the name of the Lord Jesus’, ‘with the power of our Lord Jesus’, and ‘in the presence of Christ’. In this, the gospel is paramount. Paul’s instructions in 2 Timothy 2:10–26 set this out clearly. Having already said that God ‘desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth’ through Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 2:4–6), Paul states his prime focus in the light of the gospel:

I endure everything for the sake of the elect, so that they may also obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory. The saying is sure:

If we have died with him, we will also live with him;
if we endure, we will also reign with him (2 Tim. 2:10–12).

He then sets out the disastrous consequences of denying Jesus as Saviour:

if we deny him, he will also deny us;
if we are faithless, he remains faithful—
for he cannot deny himself (2 Tim. 2:12–13).

Paul is not saying here that Christ’s faithfulness will override our faithlessness, true as that may be in the setting of temporary lapses of ‘faith’ (as in Luke 22:31–34). The reference here is to the final refusal to believe (as in Mark 8:38)—Christ will be true to himself in denying us if we deny him. Timothy is to hold the seriousness of this before those who are inclined to be contentious, while ‘rightly explaining the word of truth’:

Remind them of this, and warn them before God that they are to avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth. Avoid profane chatter, for it will lead people into more and more impiety, and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth by claiming that the resurrection has already taken place. They are upsetting the faith of some (2 Tim. 2:14–18).

While taking the necessary measures, we never finally pronounce on anyone’s status in the Lord—that is God’s business. We are to be sure where we stand ourselves, and to act accordingly:

But God’s firm foundation stands, bearing this inscription: ‘The Lord knows those who are his,’ and, ‘Let everyone who calls on the name of the Lord turn away from wickedness’ (2 Tim. 2:19).

Paul then expands on this, tells Timothy again how he is to conduct himself in the midst of it, and returns to his focus on salvation and restoration:

In a large house there are utensils not only of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for special use, some for ordinary. All who cleanse themselves of the things I have mentioned will become special utensils, dedicated and useful to the owner of the house, ready for every good work. Shun youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. Have nothing to do with stupid and senseless controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kindly to everyone, an apt teacher, patient, correcting opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant that they will repent and come to know the truth, and that they may escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will (2 Tim. 2:20–26).

Questions for Reflection

- *What situations can we think of where this process of restoration has been well implemented, with positive results?*
- *What situations of this nature can we think of in our experience where things could have been handled better? What still could be done to improve them?*

ELEMENTS OF RESTORATION

How are we to know when full restoration of a sinner has taken place? A number of elements can be listed. None of them can be legalistically imposed as pre-conditions for restoration. All of them derive directly only from the saving action of God in Christ, through the gospel. Together they describe what true restoration of a sinner will look like, and the wise will do well to take note.

Conviction

Jesus said that the Holy Spirit ‘will prove the world wrong about [or, *convict the world of*] sin and righteousness and judgment’ (John 16:8). The Spirit does this by testifying to Jesus (John 15:26–27), and showing that they do not believe in him, when in his death and resurrection he has been vindicated as righteous by the Father, and the devil has been condemned (see John 16:9–11). An example of this conviction coming to unbelievers is in 1 Corinthians 14:24–25, when the prophetic word is spoken in the gathering of believers and ‘the secrets of the unbeliever’s heart are disclosed’, resulting in an acknowledgement of God present among them.

Conviction can also come to believers as ‘godly grief’:

Now I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because your grief led to repentance; for you felt a godly grief, so that you were not harmed in any way by us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death (2 Cor. 7:9–10).

The law of God brings conviction to bear:

You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors (James 2:8–9).

Conviction is part of what is to happen when the message of the gospel is proclaimed:

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince [convict], rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching (2 Tim. 4:1–2).

Repentance

For the forgiveness of sins to be received in the first place, repentance is essential. After telling of the death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus, Peter exhorted his hearers:

Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38).

Forgiveness of sins comes on account of Christ's death on the cross (see Matt. 26:28). Proclamation of 'repentance and forgiveness of sins' (Luke 24:47) follows in the wake of his resurrection. They are the gift of God to Israel (Acts 5:31) and to the Gentile nations (Acts 11:18). Paul 'testified to both Jews and Greeks about repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus' (Acts 20:21). We see from this that 'repentance' is not so much sorrow for sin as a movement towards God, involving a reorientation in love of mind, heart and attitude.

While 'repentance' mostly refers to this over all initial turning to God, believers are also required to be in repentance with regard to specific sins:

Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you (Acts 8:22; compare 8:13).

Whole churches, or members of churches, are called upon to repent from particular sins:

Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent (Rev. 2:5).

Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and make war against them with the sword of my mouth (Rev. 2:16).

I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her fornication. Beware, I am throwing her on a bed, and those who commit adultery with her I am throwing into great distress, unless they repent of her doings (Rev. 2:21–22).

Remember then what you received and heard; obey it, and repent. If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you (Rev. 3:3).

I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent (Rev. 3:19).

Note that these appeals are made on the basis of the gospel of forgiveness that has already been 'received and heard', and come directly by the word of Christ himself.

Confession

The apostle John shows that, where sin has been committed, confession of sin has a place in the lives of believers:

if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses¹¹ us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:7–9).

By 'confess' is meant here a simple and open acknowledgement of sin committed, not necessarily a detailed list of sins, to clear each one. John makes clear, in the light of the great atonement, that sin is by no means to be a normal or necessary expectation, and that all forgiveness comes, not by virtue of the act of confession, but from the Father's propitiation provided in Jesus Christ:

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:1–2).

¹¹ The present continuous tense has the sense of 'goes on cleansing'.

To refrain from confessing our sin leaves us in great anguish, just as to confess our sin brings great relief:

While I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.
Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,'
and you forgave the guilt of my sin (Ps. 32:3–5).

Note that the relief comes, not from the act of confession itself—in the sense of 'getting it off your chest', which is what is sometimes meant by 'confession is good for the soul'—but from God's forgiveness of the guilt of our sin, which Paul says, quoting this Psalm, comes by trusting God 'who justifies the ungodly' in Christ (see Rom. 4:1–12).

In the context of praying for healing of the sick, James instructs us:

The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective (James 5:15–16).

The prayers are of those who are 'righteous' and have 'faith', so it has to do with any among the believing justified community who have 'committed sins', and advises them to 'confess your sins to one another'. In certain settings this practice has arisen spontaneously when revival of faith, hope and love has occurred. While open to formalisation, self-preoccupation and abuse, this public confession at best has helped to give expression to a corporate acknowledgement of participation in sin, and of the power of God to bring freedom and transformation, the need for mutual support in the midst of a shared sense of shame and unworthiness, and a shared experience of the joy of forgiveness in the greatness of the grace of God in Christ.¹²

Absolution

The word concerning the forgiveness of sins through the death and resurrection of Christ, which is the heart of the gospel, needs to be constantly proclaimed in the midst of the saved community, especially at times when sin has been recognised and confessed. This comes not so much through any formal pronouncement of absolution as by a declaration of the gospel. This is what the risen Jesus meant when he said to his disciples:

Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained (John 20:22–23).

While this has been taken by some as an empowerment of certain individuals to bestow or withhold absolution on others, the true sense of it is conveyed by the parallel passage in Luke's gospel:

Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from

¹² See Colin Reed, *Walking in the Light: Reflections on the East African Revival and Its Link to Australia*, Acorn Press, Brunswick East, 2007, pp. 112–116.

Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high (Luke 24:46–49).

The disciples are to proclaim the gospel. Where the gospel is accepted, sins will be forgiven; where the gospel is not accepted, sins will still be there and guilt will remain.

It is possible to have a formal pronouncement of absolution that is also a declaration of the gospel, such as: ‘God pardons all who truly repent and believe his holy gospel’.¹³

Reconciliation

The proclaiming of the gospel is a ‘ministry of reconciliation’:

that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us (2 Cor. 5:19).

This reconciliation to God makes it incumbent upon us to be reconciled with each other:

We love because he first loved us. Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child (1 John 4:19–5:1).

The forgiveness we have received from God is the forgiveness that we are to be in with each other:

Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Eph. 4:31–5:2).

To withhold this forgiveness from others is not to know it for yourself:

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Matt. 6:14–15; compare 18:21–35; Luke 6:37–38).

Reconciliation with others, then, is an urgent priority:

So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny (Matt. 5:23–26).

This willingness to be reconciled is to remain, even when it is not reciprocated: ‘If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all’ (Rom. 12:18).

¹³ *A Prayer Book for Australia*, p.5.

Restitution

With reconciliation necessarily goes restitution by the offender to the offended party, in so far as that is possible. This was recognised in the Old Testament:

When any of you sin and commit a trespass against the LORD by deceiving a neighbor in a matter of a deposit or a pledge, or by robbery, or if you have defrauded a neighbor, or have found something lost and lied about it—if you swear falsely regarding any of the various things that one may do and sin thereby—when you have sinned and realize your guilt, and would restore what you took by robbery or by fraud or the deposit that was committed to you, or the lost thing that you found, or anything else about which you have sworn falsely, you shall repay the principal amount and shall add one-fifth to it. You shall pay it to its owner when you realize your guilt (Lev. 6:2–5).

Atonement is then made and forgiveness received by means of a guilt offering. Zacchaeus, when salvation came to him through Jesus, far exceeded the law's requirements: 'Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much' (Luke 19:8)!

Amendment of Life

A sustained change of behaviour will also follow from the full receiving of true forgiveness of sin, in accordance with Jesus' saying: 'you will know them by their fruits' (Matt. 7:20; compare 12:33). Fruit often needs to be given time and encouragement to grow (as in Luke 13:6–9).

A PRACTICAL APPLICATION

In the previous study we looked at something of what it means for true forgiveness to come in situations where abuse has been perpetrated. Can we also look to see what the restoration of a sinner might look like in that situation? This is a fraught and testing area, that has often been mishandled, at severe cost. Confronting as this may be for some of us, the Anglican Church of Australia has needed to address the involvement of known and suspected sexual abusers in parishes of the Church. Such attention requires open-eyed godly wisdom:

Abusers are not beyond the reach of God's love. Just as much as primary and secondary victims, abusers need to receive from the church community acceptance, love, a place to worship and join in fellowship, and people to provide support in attempting to live faithful lives for Christ . . . At a theological level, it must be recognised that Christian conversion does not cure the propensity or the temptation to abuse. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting what the abuser has done, treating the abuser as wholly reformed and cancelling the abuser's obligations. Rather forgiveness should encourage the abuser to take responsibility for the damage caused and to make reparation where possible. Participation in the life of the church does not confer any right to hold office.¹⁴

¹⁴ Anglican Church of Australia, Professional Standards Commission, 'Model Guidelines for the Pastoral Supervision and Support of Known and Suspected Sexual Abusers in Parishes', pp. 2, 6. Available from their website: www.anglican.org.au/docs/PSCModelPastoralSuptSupervision2006.pdf.