

Healing from Abuse

Logia Forum 33.3 (2024)

While the Lutheran pastors have traditionally been taught how to offer pastoral help to those who have sinned and seek forgiveness, they have, by and large, not been shown how to minister to those who have been sinned against, the victims of sin. This issue has been brought to our notice recently by the problem of sexual abuse in the church. Yet even apart from that, this neglect requires urgent attention, for the victims of sin also suffer just as much spiritual damage as those who have sinned (Matt 18:6-9; Luke 17:1-3).

The cycle that sets in with the experience of abuse is much more complex and convoluted than the cycle of guilt from sin. People who are been hurt by wrongdoing usually become angry with those who have wronged them and want them to be punished for what they have done. As they dwell on their hurt, their anger breeds bitterness and resentment, ill will and malice, hatred and rejection, slander and revenge. It often incites angry people into self-righteous retaliation in reaction to those who have injured them. What's more, the devil keeps reminding them of the injury and exaggerates it in order to arouse resentment and hatred towards the offender; he also urges 'justified' revenge and raises doubts about the goodness and providence of God. Then the devil attacks conscientious people by making them feel guilty about their anger, ashamed of themselves, and worthless in the eyes of other people and of God. This, in turn, often generates self-pity, self-hatred, depression, and despair of God's grace, which results in withdrawal from participation in public worship and Christian fellowship. So, while the presenting symptom for sin is a guilty conscience, the presenting issue for those who are victims of abuse is most often repressed or expressed anger. Anger is the best index of abuse, just as its disappearance is the best index of healing from abuse.

In the church God offers five main kinds of healing for the victims of sin. He invites them to unload their hurt on him; he cleanses them with the water of baptism; he offers them healing in Holy Communion; he requires sinners to settle matters with the victims of their wrong doing; he enables the victims of abuse to forgive those who have hurt them.

First, just as those who have sinned are told to confess their sins to God to receive pardon from him, so those who are victims of sin are urged to share their experience of abuse with him and receive healing from him. In 1 John 1:8-9 the apostle says:

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

The Greek term for 'unrighteousness' also means 'injustice.' God does not just forgive the unrighteous things we do; he also cleanses us from the unrighteous things that are done to us and from their toxic effect on us. It is right, then, for us to divulge to God the sins that have been committed against us as well as the sins that we have committed, for we all are stained by both. The blood of Jesus, which 'purifies us from all sin' (1:7), also cleanses us from the taint of abuse and the sense of defilement that besets the victim of sin.

We may, then, unburden our hearts to God by confessing our hurt and anger to him. In fact, Paul urges us to do just that in Ephesians 4:31 where he says: **Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamour and slander be put away from you, with all malice.** The passive tense of this admonition indicates that God is the only one who can remove the spiritual effects of abuse from us. That is what Christ does for us when we unload it on him. When we hand it over to him in prayer, he gets rid of it for us.

God provides help for us in doing this with some of the psalms of lament. Typically, they begin by complaining to God in general terms about the evil that has been experienced. In this complaint, which is often full of hurt and anger and outrage, the victims of sin tell God how they feel about an evil deed, the enemy who has done it, and his failure to fulfil his duty of care for them. From there they go on to ask God for vindication and restoration. As they do this they often express their desire for revenge and appeal to him for justice against their enemy. These psalms mostly end with the prospect of renewed thanksgiving and praise after the experience of deliverance and restoration.

Second, God the Father washes us clean and gives us new a birth through the Spirit-filled water of baptism (Tit 3:3-7); cf. 1 Cor 6:11; Eph 5:25-27; Heb 10:24). There he not only washes away the guilt of sin, but also washes away the corrosive stain of malice and resentment and hatred. He pours out his Holy Spirit on us, the Spirit who puts to death our old polluted self and gives us a new holy self by uniting us with Jesus. In baptism he frees us all from the old sinful way of life that is based on repaying evil with evil; he provides a new way of life that is based on the forgiveness of sins, a way of life in which the Holy Spirit detoxifies the hurt of sin and renews those who have done wrong and those who have been wronged. So baptism gives a new foundation for all those who are victims of sin. It helps them to renounce unrighteous anger and bitterness and resentment and malice and hatred and slander and vengeance as the works of the devil as they put our trust in him for their vindication and deliverance from the evil that has been done to them.

Third, Jesus heals those who are victims of sin by giving them his blood in Holy Communion. His blood cleanses them and gives them a good conscience (Heb 9:14; 1 John 1:7). That includes cleansing from the stain of abuse and injustice, the pollution of bitterness and resentment and hatred. In Matthew 26:28 Jesus tell us that his blood is 'poured out for many for the remission of sins.' The Greek word for remission includes the idea of 'release,' 'liberation from slavery and imprisonment.' That is how it is used in Luke 4:18 where Jesus speaks about bringing 'release' to both the captives and to the oppressed. Like the Year of Jubilee in the Old Testament, the amnesty that Jesus proclaims by preaching the gospel is far-reaching; it includes the forgiveness of sins and healing from abuse, liberation from bondage to sin, death and the devil, and the restoration of creation to its proper state of harmony with its Creator; it culminates in the resurrection of the body for eternal life with God in heaven. So in Holy Communion Jesus offers his blood for release from the stain of sin for the victim as well as release from the guilt of sin for the sinner. Through Holy Communion those who are victims of abuse receive healing from the wounds of Jesus (1 Pet 2:24).

Fourth, in Matthew 5:23-26 Jesus puts the onus of reconciliation on those who have angered their fellow disciples by sinning against them. Since they themselves have been forgiven, they have no need to justify themselves and defend their behaviour. He requires them to take the initiative in making up with those whom they know that they have hurt. They are to seek reconciliation with those whom they have wronged. This involves approaching them in a friendly way without acting defensively, hearing them out, apologising to them, and asking for forgiveness from them. They are to make an effort to win them back as friends and so restore their relationship with them. If they refuse to settle matters personally, face to face in a friendly way when the opportunity arises, they may face the full weight of God's judgment in his final court of law. By their refusal to seek reconciliation they may forfeit God's forgiveness of them. By putting the responsibility for reconciliation on the offender, Jesus gives those who have been offended a chance to escape the dead end of anger, with its fixation on injustice and its endless rehearsal of grievances.

Fifth, Christ encourages and empowers Christians who have been offended to forgive their fellow Christians who have offended them, just as they themselves have been forgiven (Matt 6:14-15; 18:21-35; Luke 17:4). He himself models how this can be done and sets an example for us in doing this (Luke 23:34; Eph 4:32-5:2; 1 Pet 2:21-23). But this cannot be enforced or done prematurely. It comes, if possible, at the end of the process outlined above, to complete the process of healing.

To prepare us for this, Jesus gives us his prayer, the Lord's Prayer, with its remarkable fifth petition (Luke 11:4). In it Jesus identifies himself with us and our sins as he asks God the Father to release us from sin. And we join with Jesus in asking the Father to forgive us, as we, there and then, forgive those who have wronged us. Since Christ gives us his own words we are able to do what does not come naturally and easily to us. We therefore no longer desire God to withhold his mercy from them and condemn them; instead we ask him to forgive both us and them as we ourselves forgive them before God. We, as it were, give up the 'right' to reject them, since God has not rejected them. We stop damning them in our own hearts and no longer demand that God should deal with them according to the strict letter of his law. With our forgiveness of them before God, the spiritual process of forgiveness is complete. Yet in another sense that process is not yet complete. It is enacted day by day as long as we live, for the old self that excuses its sins and damns others for their sins is with us until we die and are raised bodily with Christ.

God sent his Son to bring us forgiveness, so that we can live on earth without the threat of condemnation (John 3:16-18; 5:24; Rom 8:1). Since we are forgiven, we are free from the crippling fear of condemnation by him, free, too, from obsessive desire to condemn those who have hurt us. We are free from Satan's use of God's law to damn us in our hearts by recalling the evil things we have done, and to damn others in our hearts by recalling the evil things they have done to us. We are also free from the fear of rejection by others and their disparagement of us. Our conscience is free from the taint of guilt and fear of rejection as well as the stain of unrighteous anger and toxic hatred.

Since we have a clear conscience we are open to receive God's blessings and to pass them on to others. We are free to forgive just as we have been forgiven. We are free to accept them as we have been accepted. We are free to love others as God loves us. We are free to live boldly and act confidently without anxiety about the future and what may hold for us. We are free to live fearlessly no matter what happens to us. For if God is for us, if he accepts and loves us, no one can ever be against us and nothing can ever separate us from the love that he has lavished on us in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:31-39).

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