

The Forgiveness of Sins

All pardon for sins ultimately comes from Christ's finished work on Calvary, but how is this pardon received by individuals? Did Christ leave us any means within the Church to take away sin? The Bible says he gave us two means.

Baptism was given to take away the sin inherited from Adam (original sin) and any sins we personally committed before baptism. For sins committed after baptism, a different sacrament is needed. It has been called penance, confession, and reconciliation, each word emphasizing one of its aspects. During his life, Christ forgave sins, as in the case of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1–11) and the woman who anointed his feet (Luke 7:48). He exercised this power in his human capacity as the Messiah or Son of man, telling us, “the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins” (Matt. 9:6), which is why the Gospel writer himself explains that God “had given such authority to men” (Matt. 9:8).

Since he would not always be with the Church visibly, Christ gave this power to other men so the Church, which is the continuation of his presence throughout time (Matt. 28:20), would be able to offer forgiveness to future generations. He gave his power to the apostles, and it was a power that could be passed on to their successors and agents, since the apostles wouldn't always be on earth either, but people would still be sinning.

God had sent Jesus to forgive sins, but after his resurrection Jesus told the apostles, “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained’” (John 20:21–23).

The Commission

Christ told the apostles to follow his example: “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you” (John 20:21). Just as the apostles were to carry Christ's message to the whole world, so they were to carry his forgiveness: “Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 18:18).

This power was understood as coming from God: “All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18).

Some say that any power given to the apostles died with them. Not so. Some powers must have, such as the ability to write Scripture. But the powers necessary to maintain the Church as a living, spiritual society had to be passed down from generation to generation. Christ ordered the apostles to, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” It would take much time. And he promised them assistance: “Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Matt. 28:19–20).

If the disciples believed that Christ instituted the power to sacramentally forgive sins in his stead, we would expect the apostles' successors—the bishops—and Christians of later years to act as though such power was legitimately and habitually exercised. If, on the other hand, the sacramental forgiveness of sins was what Fundamentalists term it, an

“invention,” and if it was something foisted upon the young Church by ecclesiastical or political leaders, we’d expect to find records of protest. In fact, in early Christian writings we find no sign of protests concerning sacramental forgiveness of sins. Quite the contrary. We find confessing to a priest was accepted as part of the original deposit of faith handed down from the apostles.

Lots of Gumption

Lorraine Boettner, in his book *Roman Catholicism*, claims “auricular confession to a priest instead of to God” was instituted in 1215 at the Fourth Lateran Council. Yet there is much early Christian writing—a good portion of it one thousand or more years before that council—that refers to the practice of confession as something already long-established.

Actually, the Fourth Lateran Council did discuss confession. To combat the lax morals of the time, the council regulated the already-existing duty to confess one’s sins by saying that Catholics should confess any mortal sins at least once a year. To issue an official decree about how frequently a sacrament must be celebrated is hardly the same as “inventing” that sacrament.

The earliest Christian writings, such as the first-century *Didache*, are indefinite on the procedure for confession to be used in the forgiveness of sins, but a verbal confession is listed as part of the Church’s requirement by the time of Irenaeus (A.D. 180). He wrote that the disciples of the Gnostic heretic Marcus “have deluded many women. . . . Some of these women make a public confession, but others are ashamed to do this, and in silence, as if withdrawing themselves from the hope of the life of God, they either apostatize entirely or hesitate between the two courses” (*Against Heresies* 1:22).

The sacrament of penance is clearly in use, for Irenaeus speaks of making an outward confession (versus remaining silent) upon which the hope of eternal life hangs, but it is not yet clear from Irenaeus just how, or to whom, confession is to be made. Is it privately, to the priest, or before the whole congregation, with the priest presiding? The one thing we can say for sure is that the sacrament is understood by Irenaeus as having originated in the infant Church.

Later writers, such as Origen (241), Cyprian (251), and Aphraates (337), are clear in saying confession is to be made to a priest. (In their writings the whole process of penance is termed *exomologesis*, which means confession—the confession was seen as the main part of the sacrament.) Cyprian writes that the forgiveness of sins can take place only “through the priests.” Ambrose says “this right is given to priests only.” Pope Leo I says absolution can be obtained only through the prayers of the priests. (See the *Catholic Answers* tract *Confession* for full quotes from the early Church Fathers on the sacrament of penance.)

Confession Implied

Note that the power Christ gave the apostles was twofold: to forgive sins or to hold them bound, which means to retain them unforgiven. Several things follow from this. First, the apostles could not know which sins to forgive and which not to forgive unless they were first told the sins by the sinner. This implies confession. Second, their authority

was not merely to proclaim that God had already forgiven sins or that he would forgive sins if there were proper repentance.

Such interpretations don't account for the distinction between forgiving and retaining—nor do they account for the importance given to the utterance in John 20:21–23. If God has already forgiven all of a man's sins, or will forgive them all (past and future) upon a single act of repentance, then it makes little sense to tell the apostles they have been given the power to “retain” sins, since forgiveness would be all-or-nothing and nothing could be “retained.”

Furthermore, if at conversion we were forgiven all sins, past, present, and future, it would make no sense for Christ to require us to pray, “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors,” which he explained is required because “if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt. 6:12–15).

If forgiveness really can be partial—not a once-for-all thing—how is one to tell which sins have been forgiven, which not, in the absence of a priestly decision? No, the biblical passages make sense only if the apostles and their successors were given a real authority.

Still, some people are not convinced. One is Paul Juris, a former priest, now a Fundamentalist, who has written a pamphlet on this subject. The pamphlet is widely distributed by organizations opposed to Catholicism. The cover describes the work as “a study of John 20:23, a much misunderstood and misused portion of Scripture pertaining to the forgiveness of sins.” Juris mentions “two main schools of thought,” the Catholic and the Fundamentalist positions.

He correctly notes that “among Christians, it is generally agreed that regular confession of one's sins is obviously necessary to remain in good relationship with God. So the issue is not whether we should or should not confess our sins. Rather, the real issue is, How does God say that our sins are forgiven or retained?”

Verse Slinging

This apparently reasonable approach masks what really happens next. Juris engages in verse slinging, listing as many verses as he can find that refer to God forgiving sins, in hopes that the sheer mass of verses will settle the question. But none of the verses he lists specifically interprets John 20:23, and none contradicts the Catholic interpretation.

For instance, he cites verses like these: “Let it be known to you therefore, brethren, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him every one that believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:38–39); “And he said to them, ‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned’” (Mark 16:15–16).

Juris says that verses like these demonstrate that “all that was left for the disciples to do was to ‘go’ and ‘proclaim’ this wonderful good news (the gospel) to all men. As they proclaimed this good news of the gospel, those who believed the gospel, their sins would

be forgiven. Those who rejected (did not believe) the gospel, their sins would be retained.”

Juris does nothing more than show that the Bible says God will forgive sins and that it is through Jesus that our sins are forgiven—things no one doubts. He does not remotely prove that John 20:23 is equivalent to a command to “go” and to “preach.” Instead, Jesus is telling the apostles that they have been empowered to do something. He does not say, “When God forgives men’s sins, they are forgiven.” He uses the second person plural: “you.” And he talks about the apostles forgiving, not preaching. When he refers to retaining sins, he uses the same form: “When you hold them bound, they are held bound.”

The Advantages

Is the Catholic who confesses his sins to a priest any better off than the non-Catholic who confesses directly to God? Yes. First, he seeks forgiveness the way Christ intended. Second, by confessing to a priest, the Catholic learns a lesson in humility, which is avoided when one confesses only through private prayer. Third, the Catholic receives sacramental graces the non-Catholic doesn’t get; through the sacrament of penance sins are forgiven and graces are obtained. Fourth, the Catholic is assured that his sins are forgiven; he does not have to rely on a subjective “feeling.” Lastly, the Catholic can also obtain sound advice on avoiding sin in the future.

Just before Christ left this world, he gave the apostles special authority to make God’s forgiveness present to all people, and the whole Christian world accepted this, until just a few centuries ago. If there is an “invention” here, it is not the sacrament of penance, but the notion that the sacramental forgiveness of sins is not to be found in the Bible or in early Christian history.