

# A Broken and a Contrite Heart

By Siegbert W. Becker

Several years ago Professor Alfred Schmieding, member of our River Forest faculty, made an intensive study of the religious life and attitudes of a group of children, all of whom were under the care of Lutheran educational agencies of one kind or another. The children came from all types of homes. All the various levels of personality adjustment were represented. While this study has been widely circulated, yet it can be said that it has not received the attention from our pastors and teachers that it deserves. One of the most disturbing features in the whole investigation is the discovery that of the children tested almost half were not certain of the forgiveness of their sins. In this half of the group there was no preponderance of children with personality maladjustments.

The interpretation of this particular fact, established by the investigation, is by no means entirely clear. For an accurate evaluation of the evidence it would be necessary to examine the soul life of each individual child and investigate the causes responsible for the individual's attitude in this matter. It might even be said by some, and perhaps with some justification, that the disturbing aspect of this particular conclusion is that *only* one half of the children gave evidence of a living sense of the guilt which attaches to the violation of the Commandments of God. For while we realize that a guilt *complex* is undesirable, we hold unreservedly to the necessity of the sinner's conviction of his own guilt as a prerequisite to the acceptance of a Savior from that guilt and from the punishment which it entails. It has been rightly said that the business of a preacher of the Word is to afflict the comfortable and to comfort the afflicted.

Yet, we recognize that the first and foremost outcome of all religious teaching should be the assurance of the forgiveness of sins, the certainty of reconciliation with God. It is disturbing to find evidences indicating that we fail so often, and we ought constantly to examine our teaching to make sure that as far as it lies in us, we do not permit opinions and attitudes to develop which can lead only to uncertainty in this matter on the part of the children under our spiritual care. The purpose of this article is to point out a few of the pitfalls that threaten to rob us of the conviction of forgiveness. We shall limit ourselves to the dangers that arise from misconceptions as to the place of contrition, or sorrow over sin, in the life of the Christian.

In pastoral experience we often find that men hold to the belief that the forgiveness of sins is a result of our repentance. The whole process of forgiveness is viewed somewhat in this way, that God looks at our hearts and when he sees that they are filled with sorrow over sin, he is so pleased with these evidences of humility on our part that he is moved by our sorrow to pity and to forgive us.

While such an opinion in regard to the forgiveness of sins must lead to a strange view of God and, if consistently carried out, would destroy both his love and his justice, a more evident and more direct consequence is this, that it must result in a complete perversion and destruction of the doctrine by which the Church lives, namely, salvation by grace alone. For if God forgives us because of the sorrow that he sees in us, then we are saved by what we do. Then we could boast that we were saved because we sorrowed more than those whose souls are lost in hell.

This particular view of forgiveness can only lead to despair on the part of those who are deeply disturbed by their sinfulness. For as they look into their hearts, they see that the sorrow that they feel is not in proportion to the greatness of their sin. It is perhaps safe to say that many of the readers of this article have sometimes wondered whether they could truly answer that question in the Communion liturgy as it should be answered, "Do you heartily repent of your sins?" Men may know that they should weep over their sins. They should like to do this, and yet they cannot. They know that their sorrow is not what it ought to be, they know that the grief that they feel can never match their offense against the majesty and holiness of God. And because their sorrow is not what it should be, they know that their very sorrow is still sinful, or as someone has put it, "Even the tears that we shed over our sins need to be washed."

Still more destructive of the assurance of forgiveness is the demand for a particular type of sorrow. We sometimes hear it said that God will not forgive those of whom he sees that their sorrow flows out of fear of punishment. To be forgiven, it is said, a man must first experience sorrow out of love for God. Such a demand can only lead the troubled soul to torture itself still more, striving to determine whether its sorrow flows out of fear or out of love. Here the contrite heart sails indeed between the Charybdis of despair and the Scylla of self-righteousness, for as long as it cannot determine whether its sorrow flows from fear of punishment or if it flows from love, it cannot find a place to cast its anchor. And if it does discover that its sorrow flows from fear of punishment, it can only conclude that there is still no hope. And, on the other hand, if in self-deception it imagines that all its sorrow flows from love of God and then concludes that by this fact it has become worthy of the Savior's love and fit for his forgiving grace then its last state is worse than the first, for now it has learned to look for salvation not to Christ and grace alone, but it has begun to build upon the merits of its own doing.

What is still more tragic is this, that the demand for sorrow over sin flowing out of love for God as a necessary condition, which must be fulfilled, before the forgiveness of sins can be bestowed and the declaration of God's pardon can be announced sets up a situation impossible to meet. For until man sees God as gracious and forgiving through Christ, he remains an enemy of God, who hates the Lord with his whole being. He may not recognize this hatred for what it is, and it may take the very deceptive form in which in a subtle way God is made over into a Being whom man can love. But so long as a man sees God for what he is, a God of perfect holiness, who is satisfied with nothing less than sinless perfection, a God who stands over man with the unrelenting, inflexible demands of the Law and with the threat of punishment for the slightest infraction of the respect due to his majesty, and so long as this man does not see that in Christ all these demands are met for him, so long he can only flee from God and rage against him in his heart; so long he will wish that God did not exist or at least that he were not what he is. This is what the Apostle teaches when he says that the Law works wrath and that man is by nature an enemy of God.

We can love God, the true God, only when we have learned to see his love in Christ. We love him because he first loved us. The source of all true love of God is faith in his free grace and trust in his forgiving love. It is clear, therefore, that to demand love for God from men as a condition that must be fulfilled before God can love and forgive is to demand from man what he can never give. And if we cannot demand such antecedent love from men, we ought also never to say that his sorrow must flow out of love before he can be forgiven. Such an approach turns the whole doctrine of forgiveness upside down and certainly vitiates the doctrine of salvation by grace alone.

Contrition, sorrow over sin, is not necessary to earn God's forgiveness and in some way to atone for the wrong that we have done. It could never do this.

Could my tears forever flow,  
All for sin could not atone;  
Thou must save, and Thou alone.

God does not forgive us *because* we are sorry. He forgives us only because he loves us and because Jesus lived, and died, and rose again for us. Sorrow over sin is not necessary to make God merciful. God is merciful from all eternity through Christ.

This is not to say that contrition is of no value or importance. It is necessary that man should see himself as a lost sinner before he will be ready for the message of forgiveness and salvation which is proclaimed in the Gospel. They that be whole have no need of a physician, but they that are sick. The Pharisee has no use for a Savior from sin, for he knows of no sin from which he needs to be saved. He is a good man, a righteous man in the eyes of the world, and this is enough for him. It was to men like this that Jesus said, "I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." "Christ Jesus came into the world

to save *sinners*” has no personal application except for those who know that they are numbered among these sinners whom he came to save.

Furthermore, men must realize the enormity and culpability of sin if the message of pardon and grace is to find reception. So long as a man realizes his own imperfections, but ascribes the same imperfections to God by imagining that the Lord goes back on his word, “The soul that sinneth, it shall die,” so long he will not know his need of forgiveness. In other words, so long as a man does not see before him the avenging fury of God's justice, so long as he does not realize that he is subject to eternal damnation because of his sin, so long he will not understand how desperately he is in need of the salvation which Christ offers him in the Gospel.

But it is in this hour of despair that God catches up with the fleeing soul. It is in the hour that I see myself as lost, it is then that I find meaning in the promise that it is the lost whom the Son of God came into this world to save. It is to produce this condition in man in which he is driven to look away from himself for help and salvation that the Law must be preached in all its fierce severity. The soul that has never felt the terror of death will not thirst for the water of life. Here lies the value of contrition, not that it makes us better and more worthy of love in the sight of God, but that it makes us understand that we are evil, that we have need of grace, that we must be saved by what might be called, in modern terms, an act of charity on God's part, that we have need of a Savior from sin and death and hell. When our contrition has taught us that, it has done all that it can do. It is only the afflicted that can be comforted. The comfortable still need to be afflicted.

It is because men do not understand this that they say that an evangelical teacher should not be severe and harsh in teaching the Law. The Law which is not severe and demanding and denunciatory is not the Law, at least it is not the Law of God. Except where applying the Law as a guide for good works to the regenerate,

there is little value in a teaching of the Law which leaves the sinner unconvicted of his sin and unafraid of punishment. But we must always keep in mind that this is not an end in itself, that this must be the outcome of the teaching of the Law in order that we may have the privilege of laying the broken hearts of men at Jesus' feet for healing. To such hearts the free message of completed forgiveness comes indeed as light in darkness and as the dew of morning in a dry and thirsty land. It is such a heart that will truly learn to sing of the mercy of the Lord and to praise forever the loving-kindness which prompted him to pay our debts with his own blood.

It will be evident therefore that we must, in seeking to bring men to the assurance of forgiveness, always strive to make it clear that man's sorrow is not the atoning sacrifice by which he gains a merciful God. This may be very clear to us, and yet the language that we use may not be understood by those who do not have the background of training that we have. When we say in our teaching, as is sometimes done, "God will forgive us *if* we are sorry," we are using language that can be understood correctly, but certainly should be explained for it gives the impression at first glance that sorrow is a condition on which God is willing to forgive us. It is here that the natural opinion of man that he must be saved by what he does makes one of its last desperate stands to try to salvage something which will be to man's credit out of the wreckage of his own righteousness.

Another very common way of speaking of contrition might well be discouraged, although, again, it can certainly be correctly understood. that proceeds from love to God. We often hear it said that "sorrow out of fear of punishment is not enough." We might well ask, "Enough for what?" We know that sorrow out of fear is not enough to gain forgiveness from God. But neither is any kind of sorrow and we ought not to imply in the context of such an expression that sorrow out of love is enough to turn an angry God into a forgiving Father.

And when we say that there is no credit in sorrow that proceeds out of the fear of hell, we recognize that this is true, but again we ought not to imply that there is credit in sorrow that proceeds from love to God.

Certainly there is no credit in a sorrow that comes only from the fear of punishment. But we are not looking for credit. We are saved by grace, so that all the credit, all the glory, may belong to God alone.

"Sorrow out of fear is not enough," is true in this sense only that it is not enough to make that sorrow truly godly, Christian sorrow. But it surely is enough to convince the sinner that he is in need of help and of salvation. When that Law with its threats has done this for him, then it has served him well, then it has accomplished its foremost purpose in his life, and the only thing that can help him further in that hour is the glorious Gospel of the grace of God.