



Confession & Forgiveness

Professing

FAITH

as

AMBASSADORS

of

Reconciliation

Ted Kober

*To Sonja and David,
who have forgiven me so often*



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Introduction

Pastor Schmitt led his church in a way that surprised everyone in the room. Our peacemaking team had just completed delivering our final oral report to the leadership of this conflicted church, and we invited anyone to respond to the presentation. We were uncertain how people might react, including the pastor.

Pastor Schmitt rose first to speak. Trembling, he slowly unfolded a piece of yellow legal paper he had pulled out of his pocket. He introduced his statement by acknowledging that he was personally responsible for contributing to many of the conflicts in their church. He read his prepared admission, clearly confessing his sins without excuse.

The room fell silent as Pastor Schmitt identified specific examples of his public sins. He admitted his own denial of his contributions to many of the disputes. He described running away from dealing with others by keeping an extremely busy work schedule. He confessed his defensive attitude toward people who brought complaints, and he acknowledged that he specifically made confronting him difficult and uncomfortable. Pastor

Schmitt avoided using words such as *but* or *maybe*, which can be used to excuse one's actions instead of confessing them. He promised to amend his sinful life, asking one of his most ardent opponents to help hold him accountable to his good intentions. He expressed his desire to personally be reconciled to those who were angry with him. Finally, he asked for forgiveness from his lay leaders and fellow church workers.

His fellow leaders sat stunned. When he finished reading, he started to return to his chair. I gently stopped him, indicating that we were not yet done. I invited the rest of the group to respond to their pastor's confession with the Good News of the Gospel, using the familiar words of the Declaration of Grace from their Sunday morning worship service (*Lutheran Worship*, p. 159). Normally, these words of absolution—as indicated in the liturgy—are pronounced by a “called and ordained servant of the Word.”) Tears filled Pastor Schmitt's eyes as he heard members of his flock proclaim God's forgiveness for him.

I then invited individual responses to Pastor Schmitt. One by one, key leaders spoke personal forgiveness to their pastor. Then Bob, one of the pastor's most outspoken critics, began to speak. Bob personally expressed his forgiveness and then began to stumble over words of his own confession for mistreating Pastor. But Pastor Schmitt did not wait for Bob to struggle over his words. This pastor reached out to his former enemy, motioning for him to stand, and they hugged each other with tears, sharing words of personal forgiveness.

Pastor Schmitt's unusual act of leadership prompted several others to publicly acknowledge their sins against one another. After each confession, the assembly responded with absolution, and individuals also publicly pronounced personal forgiveness. Following these public confessions, we provided these Christian brothers and sisters the opportunity to privately seek out those in the room with whom they had unresolved issues. Many reconciled their relationships with mutual confession and forgiveness. All over the church one could hear crying and laughing among people who months before had stopped talking to one another.

Confession and forgiveness among God's people were never intended to be reserved for an isolated reconciliation event for those engulfed in intense conflict. For the Christian, confession and forgiveness are a way of life, something we do in our normal, everyday lives. Children of God who regularly confess sins and forgive others demonstrate strong faith in Christ and model Christian leadership for the church. Such leaders are ambassadors of reconciliation.

In this book I desire to help equip you in your vocation as an ambassador of reconciliation. God uses various people to lead others—pastors, teachers, elders, church officers, parents—and many others who may not be “officially appointed” but serve as examples for others. I could have written about the entire spectrum of reconciliation and conflict resolution, but I chose to focus on the key

elements of confession and forgiveness. Although we acknowledge that this subject is rather basic to our faith, for most of us confession and forgiveness are rarely easy or routinely practiced in life's daily struggles. Nonetheless, when applied consistently in the life of a Christian leader, this one fundamental of the sanctified life makes a profound difference in influencing believers and non-believers.

I approach this from the perspective of our charge to be ambassadors of reconciliation. We will review the primary cause of conflict and its relationship to the ministry of reconciliation. We'll explore what makes biblical peacemaking distinctly Christian and unique from all other conflict resolution models. Our study will reinforce the relationship between confessing our sins and professing our faith and the necessity for daily contrition. Included will be reflection on our witness to believers and unbelievers as we respond to conflict, especially noting the influence that leaders have in modeling confession or self-righteous attitudes. A related topic will deal with the approachability of church leaders.

Our human nature frequently doubts the power of God's work in the challenges of everyday living, and we sometimes are unable to comprehend the many ways in which the Gospel can be applied in our personal lives. Thus, I illustrate many of the concepts drawn from Scripture with examples of actual events ranging from biblical times to contemporary settings. True-life stories can

inspire us and help us appreciate what God does for us and intends for us to do. I have changed names and other details to protect confidences, so please do not assume you know the people or particulars of a specific case. (When I make presentations, occasionally someone suggests that they knew the original parties from my illustrations, but it turns out otherwise. Because we all suffer from the same human nature, true-life situations repeat themselves in various places with different people.) The accounts of my interactions with my family and pastors are true, and I appreciate my family and pastors for allowing me to share these private experiences with you.

In the appendix I have provided some resources to help you apply the ideas presented. I also encourage you to check out the references and other resources for more information.

I pray that this book will be a blessing to you, your family, and the people God brings around you as you live out your vocation as Christ's ambassador.

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer” (Psalm 19:14 ESV).

Called to Be Ambassadors

Every Christian is called by God to serve as an ambassador of reconciliation. Sinners who begin to grasp the seriousness of their plight treasure the Good News that God reconciled us to Himself while we were yet sinners (Romans 5:8). Who is better qualified to tell others about this great find than those who need it most? So, God chose us, forgiven sinners, to serve as His representatives in delivering this lifesaving message. St. Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth:

So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And He has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be

reconciled to God. God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:16–21)

Notice that the message of reconciliation is salutary not only for unbelievers but also for believers. Yes, God's people need to be continually forgiven, strengthened, and encouraged by hearing that eternally sweet news that we are His chosen ones, brought near to Him through the blood of His own Son. It is this Gospel message that moves us to respond to God's love in kind. As St. Paul proclaims in verses 14–15, our Savior's love is our motivation:

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for Him who died for them and was raised again. (2 Corinthians 5:14–15)

Leaders in Christ's church enjoy the privilege and bear a responsibility to equip other saints as ambassadors of reconciliation. They disciple God's children through preaching and teaching, by mediating disputes among believers and encouraging them to be reconciled to one another, and by managing the congregation's organizational affairs in a way that is consistent with God's ministry of reconciliation. But perhaps the most important way that leaders disciple ambassadors is by example.

Set an Example

St. Paul urged the young church leader Timothy: “Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity” (1 Timothy 4:12).

As a father and husband, I continue to be amazed how my son and wife are much more likely to imitate my actual behavior (good, bad, and indifferent) over time than all the pompous speeches and corrections that I can deliver with my tongue. People learn in many ways, but our example is our most effective sermon.

Since this book is designed to help prepare you as a Christian leader, my focus is to encourage you to be a “Timothy.” Set an example that the believers in your church and family can follow. Be an ambassador of the message of reconciliation.

I fully expect that you will fail in your attempts to be a good model, just as I do. Why? You and I fail because we are not only saints, we are also sinners. No matter how much we want to please and honor our Lord by keeping His commands, we miss the mark every day. But because of God’s great grace and mercy, we are forgiven every day, and we can give tremendous witness to our faith by trusting in that forgiveness and confessing our sins. Actually, it is from our reactions to our own failures that other sinners learn most.

Thus, this book features stories about leaders who fal-