

“Lord God, you have appointed me as a pastor in your Church, but you see how unsuited I am to meet so great and difficult a task. If I had lacked your help, I would have ruined everything long ago. Therefore, I call upon you: I wish to devote my mouth and my heart to you; I shall teach the people. I myself will learn and ponder diligently upon your Word. Use me as your instrument -- but do not forsake me, for if ever I should be on my own, I would easily wreck it all.”

2 CORINTHIANS 2

¹⁰ If you forgive anyone anything, I do too. To be sure, if I have forgiven anything, I have forgiven it in the presence of Christ for your sake.



Pork tenderloin and biscuits and gravy—that is what one wedding guest wanted to eat in Indy. He heard these foods were characteristic of this state. Many things are peculiar to this or that place in the world. Being poor is not the same everywhere. Climate change is not the same everywhere. What is fair is not the same to everyone everywhere. Food does not grow the same everywhere, nor are food preferences the same everywhere.

Yet the words of Jesus, “Your sins are forgiven,” mean the same thing everywhere. If your sins are forgiven in Carmel, Indiana, then they are forgiven in Carmel, California. If your sins are forgiven in the U.S., they are forgiven in China and Russia. If your sins are forgiven in Djibouti, they are forgiven in Timbuktu. If your sins are forgiven on earth, they are forgiven in heaven. Spiritually speaking in Christ, forgiven sins are forgiven everywhere.

WHY MINISTERS OF THE GOSPEL CAN AND DO PRONOUNCE ABSOLUTION

1. From where ministers obtain the authority to pronounce absolution

There was a man who had sinned very publicly in 1 Corinthians, and that man repented by the time Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians. Paul’s advice was they ought to forgive and comfort him, “*so that he would not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.*”

In this text St. Paul is clearly speaking of absolution, for so he says, *“If you forgive anyone anything, I do too. To be sure, if I have forgiven anything, I have forgiven it in the presence of Christ for your sake.”* These words describe the formal announcing of forgiveness to certain persons in behalf of the congregation and in the person of Christ. That is absolution as practiced in our church. It is essentially the same thing we practice. We express forgiveness and give the offender comfort and heaven.

This practice of absolution is a great stumbling block. Some would agree wholeheartedly that we can forgive others emotionally and offer psychological forgiveness. But can preachers really forgive sins to high heaven? How can men who are themselves sinners bring to others the forgiveness of sins?

Where does the authority to forgive sins originate? Here the unanimous answer of all Christians is from God alone. God alone can forgive sins by His own power and authority. I can forgive a wrong which another has done me, but inasmuch as it violates God’s law, the forgiveness must come from God. To forgive sins is God’s prerogative. This is in fact something very self-evident and no one will dispute it.

But as evident as that is, He who has the authority to forgive sins also has the authority to delegate to others. Jesus Christ, who has the power to forgive sins, also has the power to commission others to distribute His forgiveness among men on earth.

- *“If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven,”* John 20:23.
- *“I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them,”* Matt. 18:18-20.

But if Jesus Christ is the originator of forgiveness, the one commissioning the others to distribute forgiveness, then the authority rests in Him.

- *“The blood of Jesus Christ ... cleanses us from all sin. 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 us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness,”* 1 John 1:7-9.

So Paul can say with the Corinthians, “*If you forgive anyone, I do too,*” because the forgiveness is distributed not on Paul’s authority or on the authority of the Christians in Corinth, but on the authority of Jesus Christ.

2. In what the validity of absolution rests

If Christian forgiveness is true everywhere, in public absolution or just in your private relationships, then the temptation may be to clam up about it and not say it out loud.

Why is that?

Do we doubt the forgiveness we have to say? Is it us looking to who we are? But forgiveness is not valid because of who you are. The validity of absolution is therefore not dependent on the person of the preacher, nor on the worthiness of his person. When our governor pardons a criminal, it makes no material difference whether he chooses a judge or a janitor as the messenger to convey the pardon. The validity of the pardon is in the message, not the person of the messenger. Whether the chaplain of the U.S. House of Representatives, or the missionary roughing it in a third-world country, he pronounces absolution is all the same.

Neither does the pardon depend on the personal piety of the minister. Whether our governor sends a pardon by a good man or by a bad man alters nothing in the pardon. Certainly the evil life of a preacher would do great harm in the church, and an evil lifestyle will influence how people hear his words. And a hard sentence will fall on those who themselves do not believe and practice what they preach to those who hear them. Nevertheless the greater piety of the forgiving sinner cannot make absolution more valid. And his hypocrisy or impiety cannot render it invalid, if the words of Gospel Scripture come from him. If the validity of absolution depended on the piety of the pastor, no one could ever be certain of it, because no one can see into the heart of their pastor. In Matthew 23 the Lord says, “*The experts in the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So practice and observe whatever they tell you. But do not do as they do, because they do not practice what they preach.*” The words remain the same whether spoken by upright or hypocritical lips.

Likewise the validity of the absolution does not depend on the faith of those to whom it is pronounced. The words remain true, though they are despised and rejected. When a hypocrite receives baptism, it is a true baptism and he is really

baptized. The only reason why he does not have the grace of God is because he refuses it. When absolution is pronounced to an unbeliever, she is really absolved. The forgiveness of sin is really and truly extended to her, yet she doesn't benefit from it because she refuses it. Such a person is like a prisoner whose cell door is flung open and to whom the name and by the authority of the governor it is announced that he is a free man, but who nevertheless remains in his cell. In absolution, the forgiveness is there for the hypocrite just as truly as the believer. The words bring and give the forgiveness of sins, whether men believe or ignore, and for this very reason those who do not receive the words load their souls with guilt.

The words of forgiveness belong to Jesus. And the words of Jesus can never be false, neither can they be empty. They always bring and do what they say.

So just as people encourage each other to "eat local," let the Christian be encouraged to "forgive local." Forgive those around you who apologize for sinning against you. Never assume they know they are forgiven.

I have seen the power of "forgiving local" from time to time at the death of a believer. Of course, the bereaved knew his wife was in heaven. But it seemed like no one in the home had said that yet, expressing it out loud. I saw a shift in posture when starting to explain to the bereaved I'm not there to cause more tears, but instead to dry tears. Then to explain death and the point of human relationships and what brings a person to heaven—it's the peace of forgiveness that I've seen on people's faces. For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.

"Forgive local." Make words of forgiveness as common as pork tenderloin sandwiches and biscuits and gravy in Indy. The word now is, "*He that believes and is baptized will be saved.*" Any and everyone accepting the Word of pardon in sincerity of heart and simplicity of faith has the forgiveness of sin and is an heir to all the riches of Christ.

Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.