



The Forgiveness of God and the Judgment of God¹

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THE BASIC QUESTION OF EVANGELICAL FAITH, HANDED DOWN TO US FROM THE reformation of Martin Luther, is this: How do I get a gracious God? But is this still our burning question? All the evidence suggests that other questions have taken the foreground, questions about Christian responsibility in the world or ethical decision making in political affairs. These appear to have pushed aside the question about a gracious God.

To be sure in this new age of nuclear power, Christian faith has a very special responsibility in the public political arena. When humanity stands at the threshold of self-destruction, Christians throughout the world must stand together and do whatever they can to preserve the human race from this horror....² But, can we Christians bring about world peace when there is no peace in our own house?

Peace is something that comes from the inside out. True peace among people is found only where people have found peace with God. The great disturbances in the coexistence of nations and within a given society point to a hidden source: a

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²A few sentences related particularly to the time of the writing have been omitted here.

Baptized Christians must take seriously their petition to be forgiven as they forgive. If God finds in us no sign at all of forgiving love, if our lives are made dark by self-righteous anger and obstinate lovelessness, then we have thrown away the forgiveness that God has provided for us in Christ; then we are lost.

disturbance at the innermost heart of human existence. A disturbance in the relation of the human to God will also produce a disturbance in the relation of humans to one another. For example, when unforgiven guilt casts its shadow over one person in a marriage, either the man or the woman, the relationship between the two of them also stands in that shadow, which often kills the relationship and leads to dissension. The common life of social groups and world powers works the same way. When the wrath of God stands over humanity, the wisest and strongest attempts to uphold order, peace, and justice will be in vain. If the Lord God had found only ten righteous in Sodom, he would have spared the city for their sake. Today, too, in every city and every country, everything depends upon God's finding a small group of people who, in his judgment, are righteous because they have peace with God. Thus, it is not merely our own eternal destiny that depends now upon whether or not we have a gracious God but the fate of the world itself. People who have no peace with God can bring no peace to the world. The old, so-called pietistic question, "Do you have peace with God?" is, in truth, today's most relevant question. If this question is no longer the main question within the evangelical church, the one which illuminates all others and upon which all others depend, then the church will have lost its reformation and biblical roots. When that happens, all the church's efforts at social ethics, public influence, and public power will not be able to prevent the church from falling prey to the secular powers and to a process of dissolution and decay.

I. JUDGMENT AND FORGIVENESS

The forgiveness of sins in the time of God's judgment is the church's reason for existence and stands at the very heart of our evangelical faith. The forgiveness of sins within the judgment of God is the final reality of the gospel of Jesus Christ but also the final reality of our temporal earthly life.

"The forgiveness of God and the judgment of God" is an unusual formulation. Is it not finally wrong? Should not the theme and title of this essay be stated the other way around: "The judgment of God and the forgiveness of God"? Once I have apprehended the forgiveness of God is not then God's judgment submerged forever in God's forgiveness? My concern is to show that this is not the case. Has not the question about receiving God's forgiveness paled into insignificance precisely because, in our evangelical certainty of the forgiveness of God, we have come to think that we are no longer subject to the judgment of God? This puts us in danger of viewing the forgiveness of God as something simply to be taken for granted. God's grace to us is then no longer the wonder of wonders but a foregone conclusion. "God has to be gracious to me; he has no other choice! I have his forgiveness in my pocket once and for all, like an insurance card." We would be blind to think and to try to live like this.

Are we really sure what we mean when we say the word "God"? God is not an object like other objects, about whom we can make one assertion or another. No

one has ever seen God. God dwells in a light that no one can approach. Thus, no one can truly say, truly declare, who and what God really is. That is why God has become pale and indistinct for many Christians: a thought, an edifying thought, an elevating or comforting thought, perhaps now and then a warning thought—but often only a thought, and often a rather pale one at that, behind which there is no longer any actual reality. Thus, the first thing about which we have to be clear is this: God is no pale thought; God is more real than anything we can see or grasp or comprehend. God is, quite simply, the Lord, the Lord of all worlds, all powers, all forces, all realities. God is also your Lord and my Lord. God is the one from whom and through whom and in whom everything is that is. God is the one who holds me and you completely in his hand. We are what we are through God. We have what we have from God. And more: our ought, too, comes only from God. Over us stands the will of God, and it wants something quite definite of us. The will of God wants our will for God's will—and entirely so, not just piecemeal! God wants us to want what God wants of us; God wants us to do what God wants done by us.

The will of God is not unknown to us. God wills that we allow him alone to be our God. God wills that we fear God alone, that we love him with all our heart, that we trust him alone in life and in death. God wants our whole life to mirror our love, fear, and trust of God. God wants the way we interact with other people to bear witness to the fact that our will is totally bound up with God's will. If we truly respect and fear God, then respect and regard for others will permeate us through and through. If we love God, something of God's love for us will shine forth in our love of neighbor and even our love of enemies. If we trust in God alone, then we will be free of the fear of others, free to stand up for justice and righteousness, for truth and integrity—and to do this calmly, confidently, and decisively in any situation, no matter what it costs.

If we want to know what God wants of us, we need only look at the Ten Commandments. The will of God is not like a dialectical pendulum swinging between yes and no but always a clear and definite command or a clear and definite prohibition. The will of God is over us and around us; we are caught up in it whether we admit it or not. The will of God surrounds us like a sphere, and there is no way to break out of it. We can kick against the sphere of God's will, but we cannot break through it, replacing God's will with a sphere of our own making and our own taste. God's will is the ruling power and the norm for judgment that surrounds us for all eternity.

The second thing that must be clear is this: we live in every instant in the judgment of God. God sees us. God looks into the foundation of our being. God sees through everything—including us. God sees through us completely. Our most secret reality is laid bare and open to God. But God not only sees us, God measures us, critiques us, takes a position about us and about what we are and do. Just as God's will is omnipresent, so God's judgment about us is omnipresent and all-inclusive. Big things and small, public and private, external acts and invisible

thoughts, the aspirations, wants, and desires of my heart, my conscious self and the deeply hidden elements of my unconscious and subconscious self—everything stands in the bright judgment of God; everything is measured according to God's will.

Living in every instant in the judgment of God makes our life what it is. Living in the judgment of God is the creative power that makes us what we actually are. We do not make ourselves what we are; God's judgment about us makes us what we truly are, for the judgment of God works very differently from human judgment. What other people think and say about me will, in many cases, be quite wrong. In my heart of hearts I am free in regard to a judgment made about me by another person. Such judgment may destroy my civil existence but it cannot destroy my self. But God's judgment is different. *I am* what God thinks about me. God's judgment carries with it the immediate power of execution. God's decree creates what it says. If God's word about me says, "He is proud; he is vain; he is selfish," then I really am proud, vain, and selfish, even though I may be seen by others and even by myself as humble, modest, and selfless. If God decrees, "He is my beloved child," then that is what I really am, even when so much seems to speak against it.

Many things are, of course, very important to us in this life—success or failure in our work, social security or economic distress, war or peace, a happy family or a burdened one, friendship or loneliness, health or illness, certainty about what is true or the uncertainty of doubt. But infinitely more important than all these important things is what God thinks about me. That is the final and decisive reality for my whole life. God's judgment about you and me creates the basic foundation of our existence. I live as I live in the judgment of God. I am what I am through the judgment of God. Any weight that I might place on the scales of my life produces only a superficial and temporary swing. But what God's judgment brings into my life shifts the balance for all time and eternity. That is why the question of what God thinks of me is the most important of all questions.

The third thing that must be clear to us concerns the content of God's judgment about us. I only know what God thinks of me from God's word. God's opinion of me comes from a completely different dimension than human opinions. God sees my life in a totally different context than I do. God sees me not only as an individual person but also as one implanted in the context of all humanity, all human affairs. God sees how I am from the outset caught up in a human enterprise that leads away from God into alienation. God's judgment sees me, in fact, in relation to the very beginning of this human movement against God. He sees how everything that I am and have is tied up with the fall into sin, the primeval fall at the foundation of human history. Therefore, in my own nature I cannot please God. A fundamentally skewed direction is at work in our lives, even before we come to self-awareness. When a person comes to faith in the gospel, then he or she gains new insight into their past. They see their own past in conjunction with the past

history of the whole human race. In retrospect they see how all of us, measured in the judgment of God, are totally lost (Rom 5:12-21). God's judgment sees us enmeshed in that hostile-to-God human context that stems from the fall and that stands against the will of God.

This divine judgment is no illusion, no theory; it is bloody reality—in the crucified Jesus. Were there even one person on earth who did not fall under this judgment, then God's Son would not have had to die for us. Jesus Christ died a bloody death on the cross because all who have been born and all who will be born have clashed with the will of God, have been found “guilty” by the judgment of God. Thus, Scripture says that we are all by nature children of God's wrath (Eph 2:3). All of us, without exception, enter at birth the context of a humanity that stands under God's wrath. We have to find a way out of that! Everything in life is affected by standing under God's wrath, from the basic elements of our sex life to the heights of human culture, our arts and sciences. Unredeemed life, life in the depths bound by dark powers, life torn and split in its foundations, life that is not life but rather disintegration, decay, death, and decomposition—all of that is the consequence of God's wrathful judgment on a rebellious humanity.

No person can free himself or herself from this distress. The powers of darkness that hold us from birth are much too strong for human power to overcome. We cannot by our own efforts evade the judgment of God that binds us in our sin, no matter how hard we try. Only one thing can save us, only one person: Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Lord. He is God's forgiveness for us—in person, in the flesh. So everything depends upon our being taken by God's hand out of the realm of the dark God-defying powers and set into the realm of grace, the realm of his dear Son. The outstretched hand of God that takes us out of the prison of our sin and sets us into the forgiveness of God made flesh in Jesus Christ is the living voice of the good news, proclaimed to us from the Scriptures, and the sacrament of holy baptism.

According to the Scriptures, the hand of God has reached out to all who are baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and who have, in faith, received the good news of the gospel. God has retrieved them out of his wrath, snatched them away from the powers of darkness, and, for the sake of Jesus Christ, unconditionally forgiven all their sin. The Apostle Paul summarized this basic fact of our life in Christ: “May you be made strong...joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col 1:11-14).

II. FORGIVENESS AND JUDGMENT

Doesn't that say *everything* there is to say about what we need for life and death? When I receive God's incarnate forgiveness in the person of the crucified and resurrected Lord, is not *everything* then right and good? Can any question re-

main? Is not the judgment of God overcome once and for all eternity in this forgiveness of God? Is it permissible now to speak of God's judgment and God's forgiveness in a different order than we have done up until this point? Dare we turn the order around, from "God's judgment and God's forgiveness" to "God's forgiveness and God's judgment"?

In the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt 18:21-35) a king settles accounts with an official who was deeply indebted to him. This indebtedness portrays the human situation before God that all of us share from birth, the primal guilt that is common to us all. "His lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made." There we hear God's sentence that binds us in our sin and gives us over to the divine wrath. But—thank God!—the story doesn't end there. The debtor throws himself to his knees before his lord and pleads for reprieve. "And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt." This is the great turnabout of which Luther sang in stanza four of his hymn "Dear Christians, One and All":³

But God had seen my wretched state
Before the world's foundation,
And, mindful of his mercies great,
He planned for my salvation.

This is God's forgiveness in the cross of our Lord. And this is as far as we have come in our present discussion. We could happily stop here, if the story only stopped here. But the story continues—and continues tragically!

The slave, turned loosed and freed from his debt, now goes after a fellow slave who owes him a few dollars and has this man, who likewise pleads for reprieve, thrown into prison "until he would pay the debt." When the king hears of this, he summons the official to him once more and confronts him with what he has done, reminding him that he had mercy on him when he could not pay his immense debt. "Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" And then comes a new sentence of judgment on this man. "And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt." Here is where the parable breaks off, with nothing more to follow. There is no repetition of the scene in which the slave is forgiven and released. Now he lies definitively under the wrath of his lord in debtors' prison, without hope. That is hell. He has used up God's forgiveness; it is no longer there for him.

We see in this parable a central feature of New Testament proclamation, made crystal clear in the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." The Lord's Prayer is the prayer of the Christian congregation, those who have received the comprehensive, unconditional forgiveness of God that has become flesh in Jesus Christ. But Christians know that they need God's forgiveness new each day, for daily they fall short of God's will for them,

³Found, for example, as hymn 299 in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978).

daily they incur new guilt. So they need forgiveness daily, and thus we pray in every worship service, “Forgive us our debts.” But the Lord’s Prayer teaches us that the forgiveness we now invoke is no longer given by God without condition. The petition continues, “...as we forgive our debtors.” The Greek text makes the meaning even clearer: “Release us from our debts, as we *have* released our debtors.” This formulation makes clear that we cannot receive from God the forgiveness of our daily sins if we have not already forgiven our neighbors. Were we to treat others the way the unforgiving slave in the parable does, there would be for us no more divine forgiveness. Like the slave, we have received God’s great, comprehensive, unconditional pardon, given to us in Jesus Christ. All of us were already pronounced guilty, sentenced to death, put on death row, and ready for the executioner when we received God’s pardon: “You may live for the sake of Jesus.” Every breath we breathe is a gift because of God’s forgiveness in Jesus. God’s incarnate forgiveness in Jesus is the foundation of our existence, that which determines everything else. And that forgiveness must now have its effect in everything we think and say and do. Especially our relation to our fellow humans must be permeated by the fact that we live only in the forgiveness of God. Because we have been forgiven, we forgive all who are in debt to us. Since God’s sentence of wrath has been taken from us in the cross of Jesus, we can no longer meet the brother or the sister in irreconcilable wrath. Since God in Jesus Christ has rejected the basic principle of tit for tat in his dealings with us, we must also fully reject this principle in our dealings with others. Our relation to others is meant to reflect the love with which God loved us “while we were [yet] enemies” (Rom 5:10). If we call our neighbor self-righteously into account, if we let the sun go down on our anger even for only one day, making no room in our heart each day for a renewed readiness to forgive, we are not living from the incarnate forgiveness of God. We would be demonstrating that we are not permeated in the flesh by the great miracle of divine forgiveness accomplished in the cross of Christ. Those who are unable to forgive others, who cannot let go of their anger over an injustice done to them, make known that they have not really received the great, comprehensive, unconditional forgiveness of God. Only those have truly received the incarnate forgiveness of God whose hearts are thereby transformed and recast by God’s forgiving love. Only those have truly received God’s forgiveness in Christ who have—if I may put it this way—received it in the flesh, who have received it so that it permeates and saturates their whole way of life as the power that makes all things new.

We Christians come forth from the incarnate, all-forgiving grace of God in Christ just as certainly as we come forth from our baptism. We live from this forgiveness day by day until we die. Indeed! But we Christians also remain until we die under God’s will and under God’s judgment. Even though something has become fundamentally different in our person and in our lives through God’s acquittal; even though we are created anew by having received the incarnate forgiveness of God, enabled by the power of being forgiven to live in a love that forgives others;

nevertheless, much of the old still clings to us, not yet recast by our reception of the forgiving love of God. God's judgment daily finds guilt in us. Although we are now permitted to live under God's acquittal, God's judgment puts us every day back into the category of sinners. No Christian receives the forgiveness of sins because of his or her worthiness. We all receive forgiveness new each day from the mercy of God for the sake of Christ. But—and this is the new thing that applies solely to Christians who already live from the forgiveness of sins that we have received—God does not give us the new forgiveness that we need every day if we have not actually lived out of the forgiveness that we have already received. God looks into our lives to find whether he cannot find some reflection of the love that he showed to us when he took us as his children for Jesus' sake. If he finds in us no sign at all of forgiving love, if in his eyes our lives are made dark by self-righteous anger and obstinate lovelessness, then we have thrown away the forgiveness that he has provided for us in Christ; then we have fallen out of the acquittal that was ours in Christ; then we are back under the killing judgment of God without the forgiveness of God; then we are lost. If, however, God sees the signs of his love shining in our lives, if he sees that we can forgive our neighbors because we are penetrated by the power of his forgiveness, then his mercy comes to us new every morning. We continue, as before, to live solely from the mercy of God. But for those who have received God's mercy in Christ, a subsequent lack of mercy in their relation to others locks out the mercy of God. As Christians we need God's forgiveness every day. But now we can receive divine forgiveness only when we have forgiven those who have sinned against us, only when our lives show practical signs that we have truly received in the flesh God's acquittal upon which our lives as Christians are based; these signs are a readiness to forgive, conciliation, mercy, love of the brothers and sisters, love of neighbor—in other word, the acts of love that come from God.

We must distinguish, in other words, between the forgiveness of God given to the one who has never before received God's forgiveness and the forgiveness of God received by baptized Christians, those who already proceed from the reception of the incarnate forgiveness of God in Christ. The divine forgiveness given to the one who has never before received God's forgiveness comes with no requirement whatsoever on the human side; it is absolutely unconditional. The divine forgiveness implored again and again in the Lord's Prayer by us Christians, who have already received God's pardon in Christ, does, according to God's will, have a precondition on our side: that we have forgiven our debtors. The forgiveness that we implore in the Lord's Prayer remains equally unmerited forgiveness and thus remains grace through and through. Our love is not that which effects God's forgiveness. God's forgiveness for believers and the baptized is effected solely through God's act in the cross of Jesus. But for Christians, proceeding from God's pronouncement of acquittal, the situation is different; there is no forgiveness available if these "Christians" deny the power of divine forgiveness in their relation to others and harden their hearts in self-righteous lovelessness.

III. THE LAST JUDGMENT

One final thing must still be said. At last will come the hour in which we can no longer ask for God's forgiveness, the hour "when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation" (John 5:28-29). What is the place of divine forgiveness in the hour of final judgment? We know that the door to eternal life is not opened by our good works but only by the forgiveness of God. But will this divine forgiveness be available to us in the final judgment? The New Testament declares repeatedly that in the last judgment God will judge us by our works. "For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil" (2 Cor 5:10). Thus speaks the Apostle Paul, the same one who so forcefully inculcates justification by faith alone. Is there not a contradiction here: justification by faith alone and judgment according to works?

There would be much to say about this fact that in the last judgment we are judged according to our works and nevertheless come into the kingdom of God solely through God's forgiveness; here, we will mention only one thing that pertains directly to our theme. In the final judgment our entire life in the body, just as we have lived it, with all our thoughts, words, and deeds, will be disclosed before the throne of God as though it were at the focal point of a lens; everything, down to the core, will be made crystal clear and transparent. Woe to us if there is found in our lives no stirring of that love that God's comprehensive forgiveness has meant to awaken in us—and does in fact awaken in us when we truly receive this forgiveness and allow ourselves to be permeated by it.

In the final judgment, hard-hearted refusal of reconciliation, bitter resentment, tenaciously held anger drive divine forgiveness away from us. If someone brings such anger, such resentment, such refusal through death into eternity, how then will that person find divine forgiveness before the judgment seat of Christ? Such a person has never actually allowed God's forgiveness into his or her bodily life! How, then, can God's forgiveness be present for them now in the judgment? When our works are disclosed before the throne of God at the final judgment, they demonstrate whether or not we have truly received the comprehensive, saving forgiveness of God in our temporal lives, received it in the sense that we have also forgiven others, even our enemies. Without this evidence we will not find God's forgiveness in the last judgment, for we will have already driven it away from us.

What does all this mean for our inner spiritual life? Let me summarize in five points:

1. The question of whether, in the final judgment, God will enfold you in his forgiveness remains the most important question of your whole life, up to the hour of your death.
2. Seek continually, in word and sacrament, the one comprehensive forgive-

ness of God, which has come to earth in the flesh in Jesus Christ and which is there for all. This alone opens the door to eternal life.

3. Wrap yourself entirely in this divine forgiveness. Let it into your life, into your everyday affairs, into the innermost foundation of your heart. Let yourself be recast by the unending and forgiving love of God. Let your entire life be saturated by this forgiving love of God.

4. Forgive your brother or sister. Forgive also your enemy. For you, too, have been forgiven when you yourself were still an enemy of God. Let the knots of your hard-heartedness be untied by God's forgiveness. Let go of all anger and all bitter resentment. Be reconciled with your adversary while you are still together. Tomorrow it could be too late!

5. Receiving forgiveness and practicing love belong inseparably together. Love is the fruit of our having received divine forgiveness. A life in which such fruit does not grow is lost, for God's forgiveness is not really in that life. Therefore, no one who has fully divested himself or herself of the works of love will enter eternal life. But whoever abides in love abides in God's forgiveness, and God's love abides in them—in them and with them even in the hour of death and in the hour of final judgment. 

PETER BRUNNER (1900-1981), a Lutheran theologian, was professor of systematic theology in Heidelberg from 1947 until his retirement in 1968. An active participant in the Confessing Church as pastor and teacher during the Hitler era, Brunner lost his professorial chair at Gießen and was for a short time imprisoned in the concentration camp at Dachau. In the post-war years, Brunner was passionately concerned to teach the evangelical faith in its clarity and, at the same time, to promote the unity of the Christian church. As Werner Führer notes in his brief biography, Brunner's theological work focused on the unity of faith and works and of academic theology and the church's proclamation (see W. Führer, "Peter Brunner," Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon, vol. 14, ed. Traugott Bautz [Herzberg: Traugott Bautz, 1998] 834-837).