

We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins

You can think of the Nicene Creed which we say each communion and which we have been looking at over the last few months like the coronation crown, the crown of St Edward. A symbol of great authority made up of precious priceless gems, or in the case of the creed of precious, priceless, truths, where the beauty of each is enhanced by being set in relation to each other.

A priceless treasure

And in the second last sentence of the Creed - "We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins" – we have one of these priceless treasures

The truth that there is forgiveness of sins

And the truth that this forgiveness is found only by believing in the living God confessed in the Creed, the One God, Father, Son and Spirit

Is your soul stirred by the thought that there is forgiveness of sins? Does the possibility of forgiveness excite you?

It should for the forgiveness the creed is speaking of is full and final forgiveness, forgiveness by God, the forgiveness that will mean there is nothing to condemn on the last day.

It does excite me, fills me with thankfulness.

Once you are convicted of your sin – that you have done wrong, not just that you feel guilty or ashamed, but that objectively you have done wrong, wrong which deserves punishment – forgiveness is something you long for.

And once you are convicted that your sin has wronged the living God, who sees the thoughts of our hearts, whose judgement is always just, who is almighty and will call all that we have done to account to give your sin what it deserves, the forgiveness of God is something you long for.

I am convicted of both. I can look at things I have done before and after becoming a Christian and know I did wrong, and have seen the harm and hurt done in the lives of others, people made in God's image who deserve respect and love, by what I have done – the carelessness, the selfish thoughtlessness about others interests, the unkind words, and worse. Convicted, not just that I have done wrong things, but I have done wrong things because I wanted to, because my heart was wrong, because I was determined to ignore God, or knowing what God had commanded was determined to do instead what I wanted to do.

I am convicted of sin.

And I am convicted of judgement. It is not just a word, but a felt reality, the fearful certainty that there is no escaping a reckoning with the just God, my Creator who has the right to judge and condemn me.

For me, perhaps for many of you, the knowledge that there is forgiveness of sins by God is exciting, has been life changing

But for some of you – if you are generous you might be thinking

Good for you, but its not something I'm really excited about.

Talk of Forgiveness? ho hum, just another piece of religious jargon

And if you are not generous you might be thinking

Here he goes again – sin and judgment, my two least favourite topics, and he is oversharing about his own tortured soul. There's a case for psychoanalysis here.

If that is you, if you are in the not excited by the possibility of forgiveness camp, can I ask you just to think with me for a while about why someone might not share my excitement about forgiveness, not be excited about forgiveness even as they confess in the Creed the existence of forgiveness.

You see, it is a shame to have great treasure – and ignore it; to put the Monet in the attic and not in the best room.

It's a shame to have great wealth, and live like a pauper, to be struggling with a car that is always breaking down, or living always anxious about your bills, when you have access to millions.

It would be a shame to know there is forgiveness from God, and not be able to rejoice in it.

Let me suggest four reasons people may not be excited about forgiveness

Firstly, Sin is not an issue

That may be because you believe there is No God, or at least not a God who judges, or it may be because you think you are basically a good person – sin is not an issue for you, although it is for others.

Let's take each one in turn

Now if you believe there is no God or not a God who judges, sin plainly won't be an issue for you – for sin is defined in relation to God. It is ignoring God, trying to keep Him out of your life. It is doing the things God says you shouldn't, defining right and wrong for yourself. It is living life with the good things God has given you and never giving thanks to God. It is always making sure you are number 1, not God, in all you do and say

And if there is no God then you don't need to be concerned about his judgement, let alone be excited about His forgiveness

You may still admit you do wrong things, let yourself down by not living up to your standards – and are probably convinced others do wrong things to you

And may still have to grapple with what to do when others wrong you, or how to heal relationships when you wrong them

But God's judgement and forgiveness from God don't come into the picture

And that is sad – because it is not true. God's judgment is part of the picture of everyone's life, in the present and at the end.

And the living God's judgement is a certainty. Jesus' resurrection guarantees it

Acts 17: ³⁰ "Therefore, having overlooked the times of ignorance, God now commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has set a day when he is going to judge the world in righteousness by the man he has appointed. He has provided proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead."

And its Sad, because the universe is poorer, uglier, and without hope where God is not an active judge.

Where God is not judge – if Putin dies in his bed, that's it. He escapes judgment

Hitler, by taking his own life, has escaped accountability for the atrocities he authored, defiant, master of his own fate until the end.

You might want to invoke karma – but how do you know? And where is personal accountability, let alone hope where karma operates as an impersonal, relentless, force that knows no mercy.

And if God is not judge, upholding His standards which are standards for all His creatures, right and wrong become arbitrary, reduced to personal preferences, or just expressions of human power.

All we are left with to bring order to our world are human attempts at justice – but who decides what justice is. Many think they know, but often are assuming the legacy of the Christian faith they are seeking to deny.

Take fairness – why do you think all people are equal and are to be treated equally. Other cultures and other times have not made that assumption. It is the legacy of thinking all are made in God's image, not the fruit of the Darwinian struggle for survival.

And human justice is frail, finite, and flawed – just like us.

It is intoxicating to reject God and believe you are accountable only to yourself, but you are poorer and the world is poorer

Why don't you reconsider your rejection of God – and if you want someone to test your ideas with, come and talk, to me, or one of the other pastors or Christian friends you know.

God will judge each of us justly, give to each of us what our deeds deserve.

But you might know that and still not be excited about forgiveness because you are sure you are a good person, and what you deserve is good from God.

Now I think it is possible to consider yourself a good person – when you compare yourself to selected others, or when you are measuring yourself by your own rules, and are willing to accept your own excuses

I was tired when I snapped at her and said those nasty things – but that is not the real me

Sure I helped myself to the work supplies, but I needed them and they didn't, and nobody's perfect

Making it sound with that last phrase as if God's standards are unreasonable

You might be trying hard to be good, even proud about how hard you try and be good, but the measure is God's standards, not yours

God who sees not just what we do but the envy, the pride, the jealousy, the anger, the bitterness of our hearts

And He says

Romans 3: ¹⁰as it is written:

There is no one righteous, not even one.

¹¹ There is no one who understands;

there is no one who seeks God.

¹² All have turned away;

all alike have become worthless.

There is no one who does what is good,

not even one.

You may not think you really need forgiveness, but God does, and He knows you better than you know yourself

But as well as thinking sin is not an issue for you there are other reason you might not be excited about forgiveness

You might, secondly, Think forgiveness is easy

If that is the case it may be because you have only suffered small wrongs, never been hurt deeply, or mistaken forgiveness for ignoring those who have wronged you

Forgiveness is costly, and the more personal the injury, the costlier it is.

It is costly to forego vindication, costly not to exact from another what you are entitled to.

WE know that with monetary debts, but it is greater with personal ones, where you have suffered betrayal, had your reputation slandered, been treated with contempt

To forgo your right to have the wrong punished, and so to have your place in your own eyes and the eyes of others restored, is costly

A cost that may be enduring.

Or thirdly, your only experience of forgiveness might be a diminished one, the compulsory forgiveness authorities try and impose

Like when a parent intervenes in their children's squabble and says to one "Say sorry", and to the other "She's said sorry. Now forgive her." The words are there, the fighting has stopped, but the anger and hurt, the resentment, bubbles on.

That is not the forgiveness the prodigal received.

Luke 15: ¹⁸ I'll get up, go to my father, and say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. ¹⁹ I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired workers." ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father. But while the son was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. He ran, threw his arms around his neck, and kissed him. ²¹ The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² "But the father told his servants, 'Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.

He returns to confess, gets half his words out [Luke 15:18-19, 21] "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son" – but before he can finish he is restored as son by the Father v.22 who has already run to him and embraced him. This forgiveness is enthusiastically offered, life restoring, joy overflowing

That is forgiveness to be excited about.

Or fourthly you might not be excited about forgiveness even though you say you are forgiven, because you have taken it for granted, growing up in the church you have considered it your birthright. You haven't paused too long to think about your sin, often been protected from the consequences of your own selfishness and wilfulness by loving parents – so not faced your own heart. And when you have thought about it you have just assumed forgiveness would always be there.

There are reasons why you might not be as excited about the possibility of forgiveness by the living God, but none of them good

Sin is serious and worthy of condemnation by God

And real Forgiveness of our sin is costly

is no-one's right, always a gift

is life restoring, rich

Forgiveness, to be forgiven by God, is wonderful.

Romans 4: ⁷ Blessed are those whose lawless acts are forgiven and whose sins are covered.

⁸ Blessed is the person the Lord will never charge with sin.

And it Opens the door to so much

To Peace with God

To sure Hope

Here, wonderfully, the Creed says there is forgiveness of sins, and it associates it with baptism

"We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins."

Baptism and forgiveness

Baptism has been associated with forgiveness from the beginning.

Peter says to the crowd

*Acts 2:*³⁸ Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹For the promise is for you and for your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call."

Ananias says to Paul

*Acts 22:*¹⁶ And now, why are you delaying? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name.'

In fact baptism has been associated with forgiveness from John the Baptist Lk. 3:3

*Luke 3:*³ He went into all the vicinity of the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,

Being baptised was from the beginning of the Christian Church part of the believing response to the gospel preached by John and the apostles

But just as John the Baptist's preaching looked forward to what Jesus would do, John's baptism for forgiveness was preparatory and provisional, awaiting its fulfilment in the work of Jesus.

The apostle's gospel, looking back to Jesus' death for sin and resurrection, declaring that Jesus is now Lord, brought the forgiveness of the judge on the last day [Acts 10:42-43].

As Peter says

*Acts 10:*⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be the judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³All the prophets testify about him that through his name everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins."

The forgiveness Jesus promises in the gospel to those who believe is full and final forgiveness to all who believe. It is forgiveness that assures believers of being spared judgement [Jn. 5:24], a share in God's eternal Kingdom, of the new heaven and earth.

Baptism is part of the believing response to the gospel. Confessing Jesus is Lord believers do what Jesus commands [Matt. 28:18-20], they receive baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Spirit, summarised in Acts as baptism in Jesus' name, on His authority as Son of the Father who exercises the judgment of God and who gives the Spirit.

This baptism is a sign given to them by Christ of what HE does for those who believe in Him – He washes them clean of the defilement of their sin – that is, He forgives them, takes their sin out of the picture so that it is no longer a consideration in their relationship with God His Father. And in forgiving them He includes them in His people, His church, by joining them by faith to Himself in His death and rising. Buried with Him they are raised to new life by the power of His Spirit [Romans 6:1-4]

*Romans 6:*³ Or are you unaware that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?
⁴ Therefore we were buried with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too may walk in newness of life.

And as a sign given by the Lord Jesus which each believer must experience for her or himself, the Lord Jesus also seals His promises to us in baptism. That is, just as the seal on a letter assured the recipient of the letter that the content of the letter is genuinely from the author, so baptism, given by Jesus, His gift, assures those who are baptised that the promises He has spoken are for them, that trusting Him they are genuinely forgiven, included in His people.

Baptism was non-controversial in the early church

And from beginning it was confessed to be one

*Eph 4:*⁴ *There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope at your calling—*⁵ *one Lord, one faith, one baptism,*⁶ *one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.*

So why did the authors of the creed include this phrase? What was going on that made them want to affirm only one baptism for forgiveness of sins.

Our issues with baptism – debates about how much faith or how much water - were not their issues

Already by this time baptising both adults and babies

But they did have an issue – and it was Arianism

You may remember that we talked about it when we looked at the first phrase of the creed about Jesus

“We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten not made,
of one Being with the Father.

Through him all things were made.”

Arianism, even though it could use the language of Jesus being the Son of God, taught, like today’s Jehovah’s Witnesses, that Jesus was not fully God, but a highly exalted creature, even if the first creature through whom all the rest of creation was made.

But He did not exist eternally with God – there was when He was not

And this part of the Creed was written to exclude Arianism is inadequate to Jesus’ reality, as inconsistent with the gospel

And the issue facing the writers of the Creed, those early bishops, was: “If you were baptised believing in the Arian Jesus, this exalted creature, were you forgiven, were you included in God’s church?”

It was an issue of who had the authority to forgive sins fully and finally, to give this wonderful gift of God’s forgiveness.

Who has the authority?

By including this phrase “We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.”

They were saying baptism cannot be separated from what we believe and the Lord we confess. If there is one faith and one Lord, there is only one baptism.

So it is not a statement about the form of baptism

Nor the formula used in baptism, for the Arians had inherited the use of Matthew 28 like the rest of the fourth century church

This is a statement about the faith with which you must undergo baptism if you are to receive what baptism is a sign of – forgiveness and union with Christ.

The one baptism for the forgiveness of sins only existed where it was in the name of the One God - Father, Son and Spirit, and one Lord confessed in the Creed, the eternal Son who is of one being with the Father

And this was not splitting hairs.

They knew the Jesus of the Arians could not save

Who can forgive sins but God alone the Pharisees had said when Jesus forgave the sins of the paralytic

Mark 2:7 "Why does he speak like this? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

And they were right. Only God can give the full and final forgiveness of sin against God. No creature can.

Only the Lord Jesus as confessed in the Creed – the only Son of the Father, God from God, true God from true God, one with the Father and the Spirit in the work of salvation – could forgive fully and finally, give the forgiveness that means we will never be excluded from God's love.

And only the Lord Jesus – true God and true man – could save.

Only He, truly human, truly sinless, truly Son of God, could die the death that made forgiveness certain for it made forgiveness just, God bearing in Himself the cost of our forgiveness, the cost of upholding His righteousness even as He forgives.

Only He can speak the Word that spares from judgement, for only He exercise the judgment of God

And only He, who has life in Himself and can give life, can be the second Adam, unite us to Himself in a new humanity that could live in the presence of the Father forever.

The bishops who wrote the creed were not like modern liberals – content to leave things fuzzy, to include as many as possible no matter what they believed. It was not enough that people could use the same form and formula.

To be included in the church of God they had to believe the gospel, what God had revealed of Himself in saving through the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

There is, they said, only one baptism for the forgiveness of sins, only one faith, one confession of God where baptism is a sign and seal of the forgiveness offered in the gospel to all who believe for there is only one Lord, the glorious Jesus Christ we confess in the creed.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten not made,
of one Being with the Father.

Through him all things were made.

For us men and for our salvation
he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.

On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

Only this Lord Jesus has authority to forgive the sins of all who repent and believe that HE died for our sins, was buried, and rose again

Only this Lord Jesus saves

So when you say “We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins” you are confessing the Lord Jesus, the incarnate Son, forgives the sins of all those who repent and believe His gospel and show that by receiving on His authority baptism as the sign and assurance of their forgiveness,

And that is a confession that should excite and thrill you every time you say it

There is forgiveness, full and final, that we can know now by believing the gospel of Jesus.

I hope you know the joy of that full and final forgiveness yourself

If you don't, and want to – because you know you have sinned and fear to get what your sins deserve on the last day

Turn away from trusting yourself and living to please yourself. Believe the Lord Jesus, that HE has died for your sins, and lives now with all authority, authority to forgive and judge.

Call out to the living Lord Jesus for the forgiveness He gives

It is as simple as saying “Lord Jesus, I am sorry I have lived ignoring you and doing what is wrong. Please forgive me and make me one of your people.”

And come and talk

And even if the knowledge that Jesus can give full and final forgiveness does not fill you with joy now, as it should

I hope you will remember it if God in His mercy brings you to know both the reality of your sin – that you have done wrong that deserves His condemnation and will never be excused – and feel, are convinced of, the reality of His judgement from which you can never escape before it is too late

For on that day the forgiveness of the Lord Jesus, who alone has the authority to give now the judgement and forgiveness of the last day, is your only hope,

But if this confession does fill you with joy, the joy of being forgiven, then know

you are also saying something about Jesus' church, the church you can only come to belong to by faith in Jesus and obediently receiving baptism, the sign He gives of your being included by faith in His people.

The community of the baptised

The church as the community of the baptised is the community of forgiven sinners, and the only people who belong are people who know they are forgiven sinners, know their unworthiness in themselves of being in Jesus' church

And that means firstly we recognise that in Jesus' church all are equal in status,

Galatians 3:26 for through faith you are all sons of God in Christ Jesus.

27 For those of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ. 28 There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; since you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Each one of us has only one thing to boast of, to be proud of – and that is our Saviour who has given us the privilege of being God 's children.

So there is no place for divisions over race, gender, wealth, beauty, age that pit us against each other, divisions the world seeks to foster

No place for competing with each other for recognition and importance

What matters for our treatment of each other, for our acceptance of each other, is our new identity in Christ

Being God's daughters and sons determines how we value and treat each other, whatever our background

And so we will

Ephesians 4: Therefore I, the prisoner in the Lord, urge you to walk worthy of the calling you have received, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

Phil 2: ³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves. ⁴ Everyone should look not to his own interests, but rather to the interests of others.

Romans 15: ⁷ Therefore welcome one another, just as Christ also welcomed you, to the glory of God.

And secondly the church as the community of the baptised is and must be the Community of the forgiving, because it is the community of the forgiven

We can be no other for the Jesus who gives the forgiveness of God teaches we must forgive

Matthew 6: ¹⁴ "For if you forgive others their offenses, your heavenly Father will forgive you as well. ¹⁵ But if you don't forgive others, your Father will not forgive your offenses.

Knowing the joy ourselves of being forgiven our hearts must incline always to forgive

And we must not be this in words only, liking forgiveness as an idea but never practicing it

Each of us individually has to be committed to practicing

Luke 17: ³ Be on your guard. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. ⁴ And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and comes back to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him."

The pastors can't do this for you.

We may be able to clarify whether what has offended you is a sin or not, help you with words to raise the issue

We may be able to encourage you to trust the Lord Jesus to do something he commands which is difficult, by reminding you of His love for you in His death, of His care for you, of the power of His Spirit at work in you

But we can't do it for you.

Because you love and trust the Lord Jesus who loved you enough to die for you to bring you forgiveness, you need to do it.

We will say these words, one baptism for the forgiveness of sins and remember that we are only in Jesus' church because we have been forgiven, together next Sunday before we come to the Lord's table.

So let them stir you up now to seek reconciliation with those whom you have wronged or to forgive those who have wronged you

It is a wonderful, joyous thing to know the full and final forgiveness of God through believing the gospel of His Son

And to be now by our Saviour's grace the community of the forgiven and forgiving.