



GODCONNECTS™

A COURSE IN CHRISTIANITY



LHM.ORG/GODCONNECTS

DISCUSSION GUIDE - SESSION 9

USING THE DISCUSSION GUIDE

This is an interactive study guide. We designed it to be flexible so it will fit both group and personal use. It includes links, which provide extra information on Internet sites where you can browse and dig as deep as you want.

A PDF discussion guide containing all 12 sessions, as well as single session guides, are available at www.lhm.org/godconnects.

To find the discussion guide on the DVD, load it into your computer (not your DVD player). You can right click the menu. Push "Open" instead of "Play" and you will pull up a list of files, which includes the discussion guide.



ABOUT US

God Connects is a ministry of Lutheran Hour Ministries (LHM). As a Christian outreach ministry, LHM supports churches worldwide, producing Christian radio and TV programming for broadcast, Internet and print communications, dramas, music, and outreach materials—all designed to reach unchurched people in the United States and more than 30 countries around the world. Lutheran Hour Ministries' flagship program, **The Lutheran Hour**, airs weekly on more than 1,400 stations and the American Forces Network. To learn more about this long-running Gospel program and LHM's other ministry resources, go to www.lhm.org.

CONTACT US

We would love to connect to you. Call us at **1-855-JOHN316 (1-855-564-6316)** E-mail to lhmresponse@lhm.org.

INTRODUCTION

GodConnects: In a difficult and confusing world, God is connecting to you!

God, are You there?

Everyone, at some point, asks this question. It can come at moments of sterile reflection or in times of deep despair. "God, if You are there, why don't You show Yourself to me?" In this confusing world where authenticity is so elusive, it seems like we cannot connect to God.

We could not connect to God, but the good news is that God connects with us. He has been doing this from the beginning in amazing ways. The most direct way God connected to us is when He became one of us in Jesus Christ. When Jesus was on this earth, He was the very revelation of God as He taught and healed and loved.

Then to restore our connection to God which had been shattered because of sin, on the cross, Jesus willingly paid the penalty for our sins—in His own death! This is the most authentic, startling and determined love the world could have ever imagined.

Now God connects to us by revealing Himself in the Bible. This God-given book has an amazing story. It tells of God's constant and compassionate work to restore our relationship with Him.

GodConnects wants to share that story with you. *GodConnects* is a course that tells this unique, unequalled story. Whether you do not believe in Christ as Savior or want to deepen your faith in Him, as you delve into *GodConnects* you will explore what the Bible says about this remarkably loving God, and how this love gives direction and meaning to your life today and forever.

On this website, you can explore these questions of faith. You will find videos and other up-to-date media that take advantage of today's technology.

So let's get started

CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION

Session 9: A Course on Christianity

Opening Prayer: Heavenly Father, I want to be confident of Your complete forgiveness for Jesus' sake. Teach me how You provide that certain peace through Confession and Absolution. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Imagine sitting face to face with someone and opening up about shameful things you have said and done. The very idea of declaring our sins out loud to another person is a terribly frightening thought, to say the least. The Bible doesn't require us to confess our sins to another person, but offers it as a comforting consolation, if you ever find your heart and soul weighed down with guilt, shame and doubts. When you confess your sins, the church—through the pastor or others—assures you from the Bible that Jesus paid the price for that sin, and speaks God's forgiveness to you.

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

- Discuss some sins and situations that could drive a person to seek the reassurance of private confession and absolution.

9.1. WHAT IS THE OFFICE OF THE KEYS?

The *Office of the Keys* (<http://cyclopedia.lcms.org/display.asp?t1=k&word=KEYS.OFFICEOFTHE>) is a unique power God has given to His church to forgive the sins of those who confess their sins and trust in Jesus as their Savior. Two parts make up the Office of the Keys: Confession (admitting our sins) and *Absolution* (<http://cyclopedia.lcms.org/display.asp?t1=A&word=ABSOLUTION>) (receiving forgiveness from God). We are drawn by God's Law to confess, and by His Gospel we are forgiven or absolved.

9.2. WHERE DOES THE PHRASE OFFICE OF THE KEYS COME FROM, ANYWAY?

The words are drawn from the imagery and directive Jesus shared with His 12 apostles.

(Jesus said) "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." (Matthew 16:19)

9.3. WHAT IS A CONFESSION, EXACTLY?

In a broad sense, a confession is a truthful statement publically made by an individual, or group of individuals. A confession of sin is admitting to God what you have done wrong according to His Law—the Ten Commandments. A confession of faith, such as the Apostles', Nicene, or Athanasian Creeds, is a public witness made by Christians to the faith they believe and teach.

Here we speak of confession in the sense of admitting our sins to God and trusting His promise of forgiveness. This confession can be made publicly or privately.

DIGGING DEEPER

- "*Confession and Absolution*" (<http://lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=1087>) is a pamphlet that provides more details on the subject.

9.4. WHY DO WE NEED TO REPENT OF OUR SINS?

God calls us to confess and, ultimately, it is God whom we have offended with our sins.

(Jesus said) "Therefore whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops." (Luke 12:3)

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23)

9.5. WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF WE DON'T REPENT?

Guilt has a way of exerting a powerful pressure on us. If we hide our sins or unwisely attempt to justify them in God's eyes, a destructive stress grows on the mind and even the body. We long to "come clean" as it were. God truly offers complete forgiveness to all who believe that Jesus carried all their sins to the cross.

For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. I acknowledged my sin to You, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and You forgave the iniquity of my sin. (Psalm 32:3-5)

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

- "Is Repentance Just Saying You're Sorry?" (audio, <http://media.lhm.org/lutheranhour/mp3s/QA7416PD.mp3>)
- List some sins that people really enjoy committing.
- What should you do if you know you should feel sorrow over a sin you are committing, but you still really like doing it?

DIGGING DEEPER

- Edgar Allen Poe offers a unique portrayal of what guilt can do to a person in his infamous short story, "The Tell-Tale Heart." (<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/poe/telltale.html>)

9.6. WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE CONFESSION?

In public confession, all the members of a congregation publicly confess their sins together. These sins are summed up in general and confessed to God. Then the pastor announces God's forgiveness or absolution—since Jesus paid the full price for all sins in His suffering and death on the cross.

Sometimes a specific sin weighs heavily on your conscience. When this is the case, private confession gives you the chance to confess that specific sin and be assured that God forgives that very sin for Jesus' sake.

Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out. (Acts 3:19)

Perhaps you are wondering, can I go to heaven if I never go to private confession? Since God offers complete and free forgiveness by grace through faith you do not have to go to private confession. Think of it as a special gift of God for times when you may struggle with a guilty conscience.

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

- Discuss the different ways God has provided to reassure us He has forgiven all our sins for Jesus' sake.
- How certain does God want you to be about your salvation in Jesus Christ?

9.7. WHEN A CONGREGATION CONFESSES ITS SINS DURING A CHURCH SERVICE, DOES THAT MEAN THEY ARE ALL FORGIVEN?

On the cross Jesus won forgiveness for every sin of each person who has ever lived or will ever live. In the church service God indeed offers that complete and free forgiveness to each person there. Those who trust in Jesus are completely forgiven. If people are merely pretending, denying in their hearts, or "going through the motions," then no, God is not fooled, and their sin remains.

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. If we say we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His Word is not in us. (1 John 1:8-10)

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

- Why is it so easy to fall into the rut of just going through the motions when attending church?

DIGGING DEEPER

- “Confession without Contrition” (audio, <http://media.lhm.org/lutheranhour/mp3s/QA7851PD.mp3>) is a conversation on the practical implications of this teaching.

9.8. TO WHOM SHOULD WE CONFESS OUR SINS PRIVATELY?

Any fellow Christian can offer you God's forgiveness. A pastor may be preferable because he knows the expectations of God's Law and passages of Scripture to reassure you God has forgiven your sin no matter how grievous. Also, he has publicly taken an oath before God to never repeat sins confessed to him.

Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. (James 5:16)

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

- What do you think are some reasons Christians may be reluctant to go to their pastor for private confession?

9.9. I AM NOT SURE I LIKE THE IDEA OF ANOTHER PERSON FORGIVING“ME OF MY SINS. ISN'T GOD THE ONLY ONE WHO CAN FORGIVE SINS?

Like Baptism, Absolution is anchored in Jesus' saving work on the cross. Jesus paid the full price for all sins when He suffered and died, meaning God offers forgiveness to every man, woman and child. So it is not the person who is forgiving you of your sins. He or she is merely a vessel, a vehicle, delivering the forgiveness-filled Word of God to you. It is actually God who is forgiving you in that moment. One of the ways God shares His Word is through the office of the pastoral ministry, delivering grace and mercy to His people. This is as valid, in heaven also, as if Christ, our dear Lord, stood before us and spoke those words of forgiveness with His own lips.

And when He (Jesus) had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld.” (John 20:22-23)

9.10. HOW CAN I TRUST MY PASTOR NOT TO REVEAL THE SPECIFIC SINS I CONFESS TO HIM PRIVATELY?

Pastors take a public oath when they take office not to reveal or repeat specific sins confessed to them privately. This is based on a promise God made in the book of Isaiah:

I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake, and I will not remember your sins. (Isaiah 43:25)

When God forgives our sins He removes them completely and remembers them no more. The pastor promises never to reveal or even repeat your privately confessed sin because God will never reveal or repeat it, and He has completely blotted it out of His memory.

Martin Luther spoke a lot about having a “Father Confessor,” someone to regularly and genuinely listen to your confessed sin and personally provide you with the comfort of forgiveness of God's Word. Quite simply, any pastor who would reveal a privately confessed sin is not fit for the office of pastor or overseer.

The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? (1 Timothy 3:1-5)

DIGGING DEEPER

- “How Private is Private Confession?” (audio, <http://media.lhm.org/lutheranhour/mp3s/QA7626PD.mp3>) discusses various issues on this topic, especially a pastor’s promise never to reveal a confession.

9.11. CAN I FORGIVE PEOPLE WHO CONFESS THEIR SINS TO ME TOO?

Yes, you can! It’s not uncommon for people to wrestle, struggle, and even find themselves tormented by their own personal dark, innermost sins. Any Christian that understands the power of Confession and Absolution can serve as an instrument of God’s Word, and assure a struggling individual of God’s wonderful forgiveness.

Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets, but he who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a thing covered.
(Proverbs 11:13)

9.12. WHAT WAS THAT PART ABOUT WITHHOLDING FORGIVENESS? IF FORGIVENESS FROM GOD IS SUCH A WONDERFUL THING, THEN WHY ARE SOME PEOPLE NOT TO BE FORGIVEN?

The Office of the Keys works both ways. While God gives His church the key to unlock the door to salvation, it also has the power to lock the door to salvation. This is not a quick, abusive process that happens flippantly or emotionally. It is a slow, gradual process, which must be done in love and genuine concern for the salvation of the unrepentant sinner.

(Jesus said) “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” (Matthew 18:15-17)

9.13. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF EXCOMMUNICATION AND CHURCH DISCIPLINE?

While the terms conjure thoughts or images of painful exclusion, the intention and purpose is actually the complete opposite! God is deeply concerned about His straying child. He knows if this person continues in unrepented sin he or she will exclude him or herself from God’s forgiveness and peace, from fellowship with God in heaven itself. The purpose of church discipline and excommunication is to show how serious God is about sin, and to bring the sinner to recognize and repent of his or her sins now, so God can forgive and restore him or her.

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ. (Ephesians 4:15)

God openly declares, “*The wages of sin is death*” (see Romans 6:23). Who among us wants to have that hanging over his or her head? We can either hold onto our sin and be eternally doomed, or ask God to take it away by His Word of grace and forgiveness, as He did for David:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your steadfast love; according to Your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against You, You only, have I sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You may be justified in Your words and blameless in Your judgment. (Psalm 51:1-4)

You can think of church discipline and excommunication as God’s version of “tough love.” It won’t help an unrepentant sinner recognize his sin and turn from his error if the church pretends God is fine with the sinful behavior and the sinner’s refusal to repent.

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

- What are some of the ways well-meaning parents actually reinforce their teenage child’s destructive behaviors?
- What are some of the tough steps parents may need to take to wake up their child before it’s too late?

Closing Prayer: Holy Lord Jesus, You gave the church the gift of Absolution. Thank You for that gift of complete and free forgiveness through my pastor and others. Amen.