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**Real women.**

**Real lives.**

**Real stories of God's faithfulness.**

# PEW SISTERS



**A Women's Small-Group Bible Study**

**\* Katie Schuermann \***

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For my favorite pew sister,  
CYNTHIA ROLEY

All of the women in this book are real, and their stories are true; however, names have been changed to protect individual privacy.



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FOREWORD

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Is it important to have devotion books and Bible studies written by women for women? Or is this a fruit of feminism that we would be fine without?

I enjoy many devotions written by men. Luther, Giertz, and Starck come to mind. All have provided the Church with wonderful books, none of which have made me feel misunderstood as a female. Why, then, the push for gender specific material?

The curses issued to Adam and Eve in the garden were not the same. They were as unique as the creatures themselves: “male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:27). As one’s identity and essence are understood according to one’s sex, so are one’s sufferings and crosses. Why should there not exist a line of women’s resources?

The problem is that many women’s resources fail to meet a mark of excellence. One who considers what women’s devotion to read is wise to proceed with discernment and frame her decision based on a few evaluative marks.

First, is the book anti-male? Does the author have an insensitive jerk of a man hiding in the shadows of her words? If so, this book should not be promoted in the Church. Even light jokes and bantering made at men’s expense often prove more harmful than humorous. Degrading males to promote females does not edify the Body of Christ.

Second, does the book reduce women to a pile of clichés? Ultimately: is it anti-female? Too many resources aimed

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at women are content to take up topics amounting to a shallow definition of womanhood. Women like chocolate! Women like shoes! Women like jewelry! Women like spas! These are all true of me and I feel no shame in admitting it. But while I like them, I do not define myself according to them. I would like my devotional resource to provide a level of gravity that reflects not just my interests but also my essence—who I am as a human being in general and a woman in particular.

Finally, is the book theologically sound and doctrinally rich? Or is it vacuous or heterodox? If women are liberated enough to roar, surely we are strong enough to insist on faithful interpretation and application of Scripture.

*Pew Sisters* meets all of these expectations. It is in no way disrespectful to men. It never suggests that women have to care for other women because pastors or husbands or fathers or brothers are failing in this sphere.

*Pew Sisters* recognizes a depth to femininity. Where other resources have disappointed me with superficialities and trivialities, this book addresses heart-wrenching realities of womanhood with compassion and seriousness. Postpartum depression, broken hearts, and cancer are a few of the topics taken up in this book. All are real issues of substance paired with real stories of God's faithfulness.

As for its theological integrity, the author rightly understands her role. She understands that she is a member of the priesthood of the baptized, and is therefore charged with the proper handling of God's Word. She shares Scripture in a way that is faithful and true. She also understands that she is not a called and ordained servant of the Word. She does not edge out the role of pastors in the care of women. She wisely solicits responses from two exceptional pastors in her study guide. She puts her readers on the receiving end of correct teaching and faithful Gospel proclamation.

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*Pew Sisters* is a women's Bible study resource that deserves a place of honor on my bookshelf and yours. Where other women's books have failed, Katie Schuermann's does not. In each session, she carries a woman in pain through a terrible trial. Her focus is on the cross of Christ, the source of genuine comfort. In telling the stories of twelve women, she bears their burdens, as all of us are called to do. She makes no distinction based on the type of trial that a woman endures. She imposes no demographical limitations. She knows that age, personality, and background are unimportant because Katie recognizes something about *true* sisterhood.

Sisterhood can be defined broadly by a pair of common chromosomes. In a circle of friends, it may have something to do with similar interests or outlook on life. In a family, a sister might be one who shares a set of childhood memories. But in the Church, true sisterhood—pew sisterhood—is this: loving one another for the sake of the eternal ties that are ours through Baptism and the Lord's Supper. This is why we rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn.

In my church, I teach the young women's high school Sunday School class. I may not shop at American Eagle or read the *Twilight* series, and a thirty-one-year-old woman may seem quite old to them, but we are sisters in Christ's name. I also attend a women's Bible study where the average age is sixty-five. I don't possess their level of wisdom, and a thirty-one-year-old woman may seem quite young to them, but we are sisters in Christ's name. All of us, regardless of background or age, are privileged and blessed to be listening ears and crying shoulders for one another. Katie's book encourages us to true Christian sisterhood, out of love for our neighbor and in gratitude for Christ's great love for us.

By Rose E. Adle

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

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Every woman sitting in the pew has a story to share of God's faithfulness in her life, and we women love nothing more than to revel in one another's experiences and celebrate the sisterhood of believers. *Pew Sisters* helps get that celebration started. Devotional in both tone and form, this twelve-session study goes and tells what God has done in the lives of real women in the Church today. From alcoholism to postpartum depression to cancer, women from all over the Church generously share their stories for the consolation and encouragement of their fellow sisters in Christ.

Each session begins with a Scripture reading followed by a narrative of an individual woman's real-life story. Eight study questions, designed for both personal and group study, help the reader apply the reading and narrative to her own life in Christ. "A Moment in the Pew," a segment designed specifically for this book, offers direct suggestions for how the reader can care for the needs of her fellow pew sisters. A meditative hymn stanza and collect complete each session.

This book was written by a woman for women, but it is not intended to supplant proper pastoral care. Your pastor is Christ's man there for you, and his job is to preach and teach God's Word to you in its truth and purity. Engage your pastor in a discussion about this book. Ask him the questions at the end of each session, and listen to his answers. That's what I did. I asked my own pastors, Rev.



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Brent McGuire and Rev. Michael Schuermann, every one of these questions and then compiled their answers in a study guide at the end of this book. What Gospel words of comfort they spoke to me, and what a privilege it is to share their words in this book for your benefit!

I hope your faith is strengthened, your soul comforted, and your joy multiplied in reading this book. I couldn't help but write it. There are so many of you out there whom I love and admire. Your stories must be shared, your tales must be told, and the songs of God's faithfulness to all of us in Christ Jesus must be sung. Who am I to keep these treasures to myself? *Soli Deo gloria.*

## SUGGESTIONS FOR SMALL-GROUP PARTICIPANTS

1. Begin small-group time with prayer.
2. Every participant should feel free to express her thoughts. Comments shared in the small group should remain confidential unless you have received permission to share them outside your group.
3. If your meeting time does not allow you to discuss all of the questions for the study session, the leader should choose the questions most meaningful to the group.
4. Close by sharing concerns and prayer requests, then praying together.

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## INTRODUCTION

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**N**y husband and I have moved eight times in our ten years of marriage. From graduate school in Missouri to career advancements in Illinois to seminary in Indiana to my husband's first call to serve a congregation in Texas, we have set ourselves down on a lot of different pews in a lot of different churches. No matter the location, I always find myself sitting next to the most amazing sisters in Christ.

There was Diana in Kansas City. A woman with the most beautiful smile, striking figure, and gentle demeanor, she never married. She was just one year shy of retiring as an executive with AT&T, and she hoped to move back to her family's pecan farm in Oklahoma to make and sell chocolate truffles in their storefront. I remember that she used to open her hymnal before each service and let the wise words of hope and comfort written there preach a rhyming sermon to her every Sunday. I wonder if Diana ever found the perfect truffle recipe.

Then, there was Margie in Illinois. A woman in her sixties with boundless energy, she could rollerblade and bike me into oblivion. I used to love sitting at her breakfast bar, eating apples with peanut butter, talking about life, family, and faith. She and her husband generously opened their home to us when we were house-less the month before we moved to seminary. I am pretty sure Margie can still bench press more than me today.

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In a country church in northern Indiana, I sat next to a tall, stately woman with broad shoulders and long eyelashes. She was never without company in church. Her children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren happily gathered around her before and after each service, but she made a point to sit next to me. I had no children, and my husband was busy serving up front as a field worker. I think she didn't want me to feel alone. Sadly, I can't remember that regal woman's name, but I will never forget her kindness.

In Texas, I sat next to Elvina. She was so slight of frame, a strong breeze could have lifted her off the ground; however, her spirit was strong and steady. She had trouble gathering enough air into her lungs to speak full sentences, but her bright eyes spoke volumes of the ninety years she had already lived on this earth. Almost single-handedly, she organized and built a deaf ministry in our church, and she persisted in climbing the sanctuary steps every Christmas and Easter to water the poinsettias and lilies. Never mind her walker. I won't soon forget the way my dear friend rested her tired head against my shoulder as I sang the Offertory to her just days before she died.

These beautiful women are my pew sisters, and, since we are all one in the Body of Christ, they are your pew sisters too. They are your family. They share the same faith as you, eat at the same table as you, and inherit the same paradise as you. Their joys are your joys, and their sorrows are your sorrows. So, please welcome them in the pages ahead. Don't be too concerned with their age or experience. Don't worry about their marital status, their education, or their waist size. Don't be bothered with whether or not they have anything in common with you, for the only thing that matters—the only thing you need to know—is that all of them have been baptized into the same Christ as you, and you are one in Him.

*Session One*

MARIANNE

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Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through Him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Romans 5:1–8

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We are as sick as our secrets.

Marianne grew up in a small town in Indiana. She was baptized at a Lutheran church in nearby Bloomington, but her parents were not all that interested in making the drive to church every Sunday. Marianne's grandmother, a faithful churchgoer, saw to it that her granddaughter got involved

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with the local Methodist congregation.

Marianne loved church. She liked the closeness of the relationships she formed there, the special attention she received from her beloved pastor's wife, and the feeling of being a part of something bigger than herself. She felt safe and secure at church, totally loved and accepted by God, and she never wanted to be apart from it.

Several years later, Marianne stood at the back of her treasured church and turned to speak to her father. "I don't want to go down the aisle," she confessed. Clark, her high school sweetheart, was waiting for her there. Marianne knew deep down inside that Clark was a spoiled child, but his good social standing suited her family and friends. Whatever her fears, it was easier for Marianne to go through with the wedding than to disappoint the people she loved.

Life was not so bad in the early years of their marriage. In fact, it was good. Clark and Marianne were blessed with the birth of two boys, and their little family moved to Bloomington where Clark got a job as a television director. Marianne could hardly contain her excitement to be back at the church where she had been baptized. She delighted in the majesty of the church's Gothic architecture, and she fell in love with the Scripture-rich liturgy of the service. Clark even came to church with her and the boys, and the two soon got involved in a couples' club. Their entire social life revolved completely around the church. This was the life for which Marianne had always dreamed.

Unfortunately, dreams have a way of ending with the dawning of a new day. Before long, Clark got a different job in Nashville, and he moved the family to Tennessee. Part of Clark's new position was wining and dining country western stars, so he began drinking. It was social drinking,

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at first, even sophisticated, just a part of the job. Within a few years, however, the drinking had become more personal than social. He moved the family to Georgia for yet another job change, and all kinds of things went wrong at once. The worst of it was when both of Clark's parents died, and his drinking got out of control.

"Alcoholics are all yellow lights. No reds," Marianne admitted years later to a close friend. "They keep accelerating when they should be braking."

Clark began spending large amounts of money on booze, and it soon became hard to pay the bills. Marianne feared the sight of the mailman and the sound of the telephone for all of the bad news they brought her. She knew they were living a lie, but she worked tirelessly to keep up a good front. She was terrified of anyone finding out the truth.

Church no longer felt like a blessed sanctuary from the world, for Clark brought his pungent secrets into the pews. Marianne would seethe as she sat next to him, hating him for smelling like alcohol, hating him for behaving poorly to their friends, and hating him for being a hypocrite to their boys. Clark insisted on continuing to serve as Kevin and Joe's scout leader even as he was drinking the family into debt. Marianne realized she could no longer trust the man she married, and she fumed in the jail cell of her duplicitous life.

One by one, Marianne lost control of everything she valued: her marriage, her family, her social life, her financial stability, even herself. She was sick from their secrets, and she became nasty and vindictive. One day, after a particularly bitter fight, Clark sought refuge on the backyard patio with a beer. As soon as Marianne heard the tab go up on the can, she went outside, picked up the beer, and poured

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its contents all over her husband. Clark wasted no time in his vengeance. He went inside the house, cleaned himself up, put on his nicest clothes, and walked out the door to meet up with another woman. He never came back.

Marianne was a wreck; her broken marriage run aground and her life's goals lost at sea. How did this happen? How did a small-town girl from Indiana become a single mother in Atlanta? How would she care for her boys? She had been a stay-at-home mom all of these years, so who would ever hire her? Marianne looked in the mirror and said to herself, "I hate you. I really do."

Marianne had to sell the house and move the boys into an apartment. She cried all of the time. One day, she came home to find that her boys had made her a coupon book, and each coupon read, "Good for one free cry." Marianne clung to her boys, feeling for the first time in what seemed like years the total love and acceptance she had cherished from her childhood days. It was a tiny flicker of hope in an otherwise bleak existence. She knew something needed to change, but she felt so helpless and alone. "Lord," she cried out, "if You want me to change, then You are going to have to do it. I just can't."

Marianne's pastor began to look in on her and the boys. He even helped them with money. Soon, Marianne was sharing her story with him, unveiling her secrets and confessing her bitter anger. In return, her pastor shared with her the complete love and acceptance of Christ. Could Jesus really love her when she felt so unlovable? Could Jesus really forgive her of her anger and hate when she still felt so angry?

Marianne pondered these divine mysteries as she attended meetings for Al-Anon, a support group for friends and families of problem drinkers. The other members talked of complete love and acceptance as well, not just for

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themselves but for those who had hurt them the most. “I learned today that I have to forgive the other people in my life,” one woman spoke with quiet authority. “I don’t have to like my husband, but I do have to love him and let my resentments go. It helps if I pray for him every day: ‘Lord, I forgive him. Help me to forgive him!’” Marianne was stunned by the idea. *Forgive Clark?* Was it possible to forgive the one who had rejected and abandoned her?

One evening, Marianne sat in her car, waiting in the church parking lot for Kevin and Joe to finish their scout meeting. She sat in the darkness, wrestling with the equation of forgiveness. She thought back to her pastor’s promise that Christ completely loved and accepted her, faults and all. The seed of the Word which her pastor had planted in her heart was blossoming into a tender flower of faith, and the simple truth of God’s mercy to her in Jesus rang out loud and clear in the car as if God was speaking directly to her: “I have loved you all along, My child, and you are okay.”

The shackles of Marianne’s secrets burst open and lay in a defeated pile at her feet. Oh, the sweet freedom! The blessed joy and peace which surpasses all understanding!

But, what about Clark? How would she forgive him?

That flower of faith grew a little taller, and Marianne smiled in her understanding. “Yes,” she whispered aloud to the One who is always listening, “I can forgive Clark because You have forgiven me of everything.”

And, she did.



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STUDY QUESTIONS

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1. What in your life makes you feel unlovable?

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2. Is God's love based on our worthiness?

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3. How does God show us His love?

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4. Does God ever withhold His love from us,  
His baptized children?

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5. How does forgiveness relate to love?

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6. Is forgiveness a feeling?

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7. Marianne felt unworthy of God's forgiveness, yet God still forgives her. How can we trust that God forgives us of our sins even though we are unworthy?

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8. How do we forgive those who have hurt us the most?

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A MOMENT IN THE PEW

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**F**orgiveness is not a feeling. It is a gift that is given to you regardless of how you feel. It is just as real and certain and valid whether you feel sad, happy, stressed, peaceful, guilty, or content. How do we know this to be true? God's Word tells us that forgiveness is His work for us in Christ Jesus. Forgiveness was earned for us once and for all when Jesus died on the cross to atone for our sins. It is an outpouring of God's love for us, and it is our faith, not our feelings, which grasps onto this forgiveness.

For this reason, we can forgive our sister in Christ even when we feel angry and forsaken. We can pray along with Marianne, "I forgive her. Help me to forgive her." Believe that God can forgive all sins, even yours, and forgive your pew sister for Christ's sake. When, in the inevitable moment that Satan reignites the fire of anger toward your sister in Christ, snuff it out with God's Word and ask God to help you trust in His objective promises, not in your subjective feelings. Then, tell Satan to go to hell.

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HYMN STANZAS FOR MEDITATION

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**Lord of All Nations, Grant Me Grace**

Forgive me, Lord, where I have erred  
By loveless act and thoughtless word.  
Make me to see the wrong I do  
Will grieve my wounded Lord anew.

Give me Thy courage, Lord, to speak  
Whenever strong oppress the weak.  
Should I myself the victim be,  
Help me forgive, rememb'ring Thee.  
(LSB 844:3, 4)

*Collect*

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Heavenly Father, we act horribly and abandon You in our thoughts, words, and deeds, yet You forgive us. Send us Your Holy Spirit that we might grasp Your mercy in repentance and faith and, being forgiven of all, help us to forgive those who sin against us, through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who died for all of our sin. Amen.

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STUDY GUIDE

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**W**hen it comes to the application of God's Word, I am really good at asking questions, but I am not so good at coming up with answers; or, to be more exact, I do not trust myself to properly interpret Scripture in its truth and purity. I have never studied Greek or Hebrew, and I have no formal training in exegetical studies. While I have skills in analyzing literature in the English language, I do not fool myself into believing that a single, published, English translation of the Bible perfectly communicates the grammar and syntax of antiquity's languages. For this reason, I go to my pastors with my questions about the Bible. They have studied God's Word in its original languages, and, most important, they have been called by God to preach and teach it to me in its truth and purity. Now, that's a brand I can trust.

In this study guide, you will find answers for each of the study questions in this book. I asked my own pastors, Rev. Brent McGuire and Rev. Michael Schuermann, these questions, and the answers provided below are transcripts of what they told me. I hope you will find their responses helpful, and, as you chew on these truths and ponder the mysteries of God, I hope you will go ask your own pastor any further questions you have. May God bless your study of His Word, and may He continue to send us faithful pastors to teach us about His love to us in Jesus.

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SESSION ONE: MARIANNE

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1. Answers will vary.
2. **Pastor McGuire:** No, God's love is not based on our worthiness. God's love is based on the worthiness of Christ who, in turn, makes us worthy. God Himself tells us in His Word that He loves us for Christ's sake. In John 3:16, God is the actor, and we are the recipients. Our worthiness is based on what He's done in giving His Son up into death on the cross.  
**Pastor Schuermann:** God's love is not based on our worthiness but on His very nature. John writes, "God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent His only Son into the world, so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:8–10). He loves us as His creation through Jesus, regardless of any worthiness in us.
3. **Pastor McGuire:** We see God's love most clearly displayed on the cross. There He is, shedding His blood while we were yet sinners and then ascending to be at the right hand of God to intercede for us continually. God doesn't stop there. His love is also there for us in Baptism, in the preached Word, and in the Supper.  
**Pastor Schuermann:** God chiefly shows us His love by giving us His Son to die on the cross and save us from our sins, but He also shows us His love by providing for us and giving us our daily bread.

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4. **Pastor McGuire:** God never withholds His love from us. He says in His Word that nothing can separate us from the love of Jesus. No one is able to pluck us out of His hand. God does give us the terrible capacity to reject Him, which means we can turn our back on His love which is already there.

**Pastor Schuermann:** God never withholds His love from us. We have innumerable promises in Scripture of God's care for His people, and He promises never to leave us nor forsake us.

5. **Pastor McGuire:** Forgiveness is a concrete manifestation of love. In John 3:16, we see that God's love for us is manifested in Him sacrificing His Son to forgive us of our sins.

**Pastor Schuermann:** Peter writes in 1 Peter 4:8 that "love covers a multitude of sins." In this, we see that the greatest illustration of love is God forgiving us our sins in Christ.

6. **Pastor McGuire:** No, forgiveness is more than a feeling. It is concrete. It is a relationship we have that is based on an event, namely, the cross and the resurrection. Forgiveness is the status between us when we are reconciled to each other, whether we feel that way or not.

**Pastor Schuermann:** In forgiving someone, our attitude toward that person may change, but Christian forgiveness is not motivated by what we feel. It is motivated by what we know, namely, that God has forgiven us. Being forgiven by God, we, then, can forgive others regardless of our feelings.

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7. **Pastor McGuire:** We can trust that God forgives us, because God Himself says so in His Word. God even knows that in our weakness we need His assurance, so He comes to us again and again in His Word and in His Supper to shore up our assurance that we are forgiven by Him.

**Pastor Schuermann:** When it comes to forgiveness, it doesn't matter how we feel about ourselves. The only thing that matters is what God promises to us in His Word, and He promises that our sins are forgiven. Consequently, by forgiving us our sins, God makes us worthy to be receivers of His gifts.

8. **Pastor McGuire:** In order to forgive those who have hurt us the most, we have to start with Christ. No other foundation can be laid. If we go back to what Christ has done for us and realize our lack of worthiness in deserving the lengths to which He went to forgive us, that makes it possible for us to do the same. The fruit that naturally flows out of what God has done for us is our forgiving one another. Since we are reconciled to God through Jesus, we can be reconciled one unto another.

**Pastor Schuermann:** It isn't always an easy thing to forgive others. The best thing to do is to recognize that we can't forgive others in and of ourselves. We need God's help to do this. For this reason, we should come to the Lord constantly in prayer, asking Him to give us His Spirit that we might be able to forgive others.