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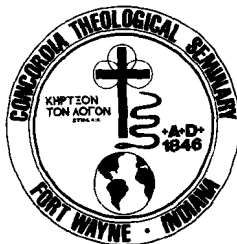
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# Private Confession and Absolution in the Lutheran Church: A Doctrinal, Historical, and Critical Study

P. H. D. Lang

The history of confession and absolution from the first to the sixteenth century A.D. necessarily lies outside the scope of the enterprise at hand. Those fifteen centuries have, of course, a bearing on what happened to confession and absolution in the Lutheran Church from the sixteenth century onward. This study makes its beginning, however, with Luther and the Reformation.

## I. The Retention of Private Confession and Absolution

That Luther wanted private confession retained as a separate sacramental rite of the church cannot be questioned. In his treatise *Of Confession* he says, "I will let no one take away private confession and would not exchange it for all the wealth of the world, for I know what strength and comfort it has given me."<sup>1</sup> In his eighth sermon against Carlstadt (1522), who had abolished private confession in Wittenberg during Luther's absence, Luther closed with the words, "I know the devil well. If you had known him as well as I, you would not have thrown private confession so quickly to the wind."<sup>2</sup> In his *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* Luther writes, "Of private confession, which is now observed, I am heartily in favor, even though it cannot be proved from the Scriptures; it is useful and necessary, nor would I have it abolished; nay, I rejoice that it exists in the church of Christ, for it is a cure without equal for distressed consciences."<sup>3</sup>

Here already we see a principle of Luther and Lutheranism which differs sharply from the principle of Carlstadt, Zwingli, Calvin, the Reformed, and sectarian Protestants. We retain the traditional teachings and practices of the catholic church except where these are in conflict with Holy Scriptures. The Reformed and sectarians discard everything in the catholic church and start a new church; only those things that are in the Bible are to be taught and practiced. The Lutheran principle is evangelical, catholic, objective, and scriptural, and it promotes the peace and unity of the church. The Reformed principle is legalistic, subjective, non-catholic, and divisive, and it leads to Pietism, Rationalism, and ultimately Communism.

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In 1533 Luther expressed himself as emphatically as possible in his *Sendschreiben an die zu Frankfurt am Main*. There he says, "Wir behalten diese Weise, dass ein Beichtkind erzähle etliche Sünden, die es am meisten drücken. . . . Wenn tausend und aber tausend Welt mein wären, so wolte ich alles lieber verlieren, denn ich der geringsten Stuecklein eines der Beichte aus der Kirche wolte kommen lassen. Ja, lieber solte mir sein der Papstthums Tyrannie vom Fasten, Feyren, Kleidern, Staedten, Platten, Kappen, und was ich koennte ohne Versherung des Glaubens tragen, denn das die Beichte von den Christen solte genommen werden."<sup>4</sup> Rather than have anything of confession lost to the church, Luther would prefer to endure the tyranny of the pope. Not only did Luther teach, preach, and practice private confession, but he also provided a liturgical form for it in his Small Catechism. It was his deep pedagogical insight that induced him to prepare this "Brief Form of Confession," for according to the title of the Fifth Chief Part of the Small Catechism, the unlearned should be taught to confess. Luther realized that teaching the principle of confession without providing a "Brief Form" would inevitably degenerate into ineffectual theorizing.

The attitude of Luther toward the retention of private confession was also the attitude of the other Lutheran reformers. We find this attitude most clearly and most authoritatively expressed in the confessions of the Lutheran Church, which state over and over again that private confession is not to be abolished in the Lutheran Church, but is to be retained and used with highest reverence. Thus, the Latin version of Article XI of the Augsburg Confession says of Lutherans: "Of confession they teach that Private Absolution ought to be retained in the churches, although in confession an enumeration of all sins is not necessary." The German version is even more forceful: "Von der Beichte wird also gelehrt, dass man in der Kirche privatim absolutionem erhalten und nicht fallen lassen soll." Correlative statements are found in Article XXV of the Augustana; Articles VI, XI, XIII, and XXVIII (14) of the Apology; Part V of the Small Catechism; Part V of the Large Catechism; Article VIII of Part III of the Smalcald Articles; and Article XI of the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord.

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## II. The Lutheran Doctrine of Private Confession

The Lutheran doctrine of private confession and absolution grew out of a critical opposition to the corrupt doctrine and practice of penance as it existed in the Church of Rome at the time of the Reformation. This doctrine of Rome, officially formulated in the Council of Florence in 1439, stated that the *poenitentia* consisted in *contritio*, *confessio*, and *satisfactio*. Actually, the opposition was not at first primarily to this doctrine, but to the shocking abuses in the practice of the Roman penitential system which developed in the Middle Ages. What these abuses were, anyone can learn by reading the article on the "False Repentance of the Papists" in the Smalcald Articles (Part III, Article III, 10-44).

Yet while the Lutheran doctrine developed in the heat of battle against the Roman doctrine and practice, it was not the creation of an opposite doctrine and practice. We must not imagine that Luther and the Lutheran reformers went about establishing a doctrine and practice of confession by arbitrarily creating something new and antithetical to Rome. Unfortunately, there are ignorant people who regard the whole Reformation of the sixteenth century as an attempt by Luther and his coworkers to create a new church. When it dawns on these people that the Lutheran Church retained much that is also found in the Roman Church, they take the attitude that these things must have been retained out of condescension and compromise and that they cannot be a part of the Lutheran Church today. Such a view is, of course, untrue to the facts. At the time of the Reformation the Christian church was in a state of corruption both in doctrine and practice, but the church was still there. It had existed for fifteen centuries. It was not the task of the Lutheran reformers to build a new church, but, on the one hand, to cleanse what had become corrupt and, on the other hand, to retain what had not been corrupted. Here is a point that we today must see clearly if we want to understand the Lutheran doctrine and practice of private confession.

As was said before, the Roman doctrine of penance consisted of *contritio*, *confessio*, and *satisfactio*. As to *satisfactio*, the Lutheran Church spoke only of the full satisfaction made by Christ and the resolve by the penitent to amend his life. And both of these she

related to faith. The satisfaction of Christ is apprehended by faith and the amendment of life is the fruit of faith. At the same time, faith is not a work of man but a gift of God. In regard to *contritio*, the Lutherans desired not only sorrow for sin but also faith in the forgiveness of sin for Christ's sake. And this desire had a direct bearing on *confessio*. For sorrow and faith bring a person to confession. But confession is not something that is done for its own sake; it is essentially a seeking for absolution. And absolution must be viewed from the standpoint of the doctrine of the means of grace. The result was that the Roman doctrine of penance gave way to the Lutheran doctrine of confession and absolution.

The Roman *poenitentia* was a work of man. The Lutheran doctrine placed confession, which is the work of man, over against absolution, which is the work of God. In his brief admonition to confession, Luther says, "Now mark well what I have said often, that confession consists of two parts. The first is our work and doing, that I lament my sins and desire comfort and renewal of my soul. The other is a work which God does, who absolves me from my sins through His word spoken by the mouth of man. This is the most important and precious part, as it also makes it lovely and comforting. Up till now the confession has all been our work without going any farther than recognizing a good confession, and the other most important part was not recognized nor preached, quite as if it all were a good work with which to pay God. And whenever the confession was not complete to the last detail, then absolution could not be effective nor sins be forgiven."<sup>5</sup> And in his *Warning to Certain People in Frankfurt am Main*, Luther wrote, "Therefore those who desire my counsel in this matter should understand me thus, that in confession are two parts: first, the enumeration of sins. . . . The other part of confession is the absolution which the priest speaks in God's place."<sup>6</sup>

It is for this reason that the confessional writings maintain that the chief thing in confession is the absolution and that private confession is to be retained on account of the absolution. Since the Lutheran Church regards the absolution as the chief thing in private confession, she also accepts it as a sacrament if one omits from the definition of the word "sacrament" the necessity (as has now become

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customary in Lutheranism) of a divinely ordained visible element. Confession is man's work. But the absolution is God's work. And in the absolution the essence of the Christian religion is present, namely, the dispensing of grace to man. It is a form of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Indeed, it was "ordained by Christ Himself in the Gospel" (Smalcald Articles, VIII, 1) and is practiced after the example of Christ Himself. Therefore we say in Article XI (60) of the Apology: "Certainly most men in our churches use the sacraments, absolution and the Lord's Supper, frequently . . ." In Article XIII (4) we say: "Therefore baptism, the Lord's Supper, and absolution, which is the sacrament of repentance, are truly sacraments."

The Lutheran doctrine of private confession differs from the Roman doctrine of penance and especially from the Reformed doctrine of "general confession" in that the Lutheran doctrine sets forth the right relationship that exists between the minister who speaks the absolution and God who bestows this absolution. According to the Lutheran doctrine, there are not two subjects who forgive sins, but only one subject, God. The servant of the word acts only in an instrumental capacity. The power of the absolution lies in the word of God Himself. When the minister pronounces absolution, it is effected by God who speaks in His word.

The Lutheran doctrine of confession distinguishes between general and specific confession as well as between public and private confession. General confession is a confession of sins in general without the mentioning of specific sins. Such a general confession may be made in public, as in the congregation, or in private, as in private confession when no specific sins are mentioned. It is this latter kind of general confession in private of which Luther speaks when, in answering the request, "Pray, propose to me a brief form of confession," he says, "But if you know of none at all (which, however, is scarcely possible), then mention none in particular, but receive the forgiveness upon the general confession which you make before God to the confessor" (Small Catechism, V, 21, 25). So general confession is the confession of sins without enumerating specific sins, and private confession, although it ordinarily involves the naming of individual sins, does not necessarily do so.

In reference to absolution, on the other hand, a clean distinction must be made between private and general absolution. By private absolution is meant the administration of forgiveness to an individual in private confession. It says, "Thy sins are forgiven thee." General absolution is the absolution offered and conveyed by the gospel. The enunciation of the gospel may be private or public. It may be done by ministers or, in private, laymen. It is efficacious whenever the gospel is accepted by faith. So private absolution is forgiveness conveyed specifically to an individual by the pastor. General absolution is the enunciation of the gospel in which forgiveness is offered to all.

When the Lutheran doctrine of confession and absolution makes these distinctions, questions are more readily answered. The first question is this: Can absolution be received only from a pastor? The Lutheran Church answers, of course, in the negative. General absolution is offered and conveyed by the gospel. And the enunciation of the gospel is the right and, indeed, the duty of every Christian. Therefore, neither the general enunciation of the gospel nor the general absolution can be restricted to the pastor.

There is, however, a difference between general absolution and private absolution. General absolution is not necessarily consciously sought or administered. The case is different with private absolution. It is necessarily consciously sought and administered. Consequently, he who seeks it will seek it from the appointed steward of the mysteries of God. It is not something that can be equated with the general enunciation of the gospel. Here we deal with the office of the keys as it applies specifically to the appointed servant of the word who has the office and responsibility of the care of souls. The situation here is the same as with the administration of baptism and Holy Communion. So, for example, the *Braunschweigische Kirchenordnung* of 1569 states, "Confession is to be maintained, so that private absolution be sought from the Lord Christ in the word through true confession and faith and from Christ through the medium of the servant of the word."<sup>7</sup> Martin Chemnitz and John Gerhard state similarly that absolution is to be sought from the pastor.

A second question is this: Is private confession and absolution

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necessary to the church? In answer to this question the Lutheran Church denies the Roman doctrine that it is necessary to confess every known sin in auricular confession in order to receive forgiveness. Such an enumeration of separate sins is not required by God. At the same time the Lutheran Church insists in its official confessions that there are subjective and objective reasons which require the retention of private confession by the church; it is not contrary to Scripture, but rather in harmony with its doctrines if it is practised on a voluntary basis.

First of all, there is a subjective or psychological necessity for private confession. Often one cannot find assurance without it. No one knew this fact better than Luther himself. In *Of Confession* he says, "Even if everyone can confess his sins unto God by himself alone and be reconciled to God in secret, . . . it is good that he take God at His word and promise [Matthew 16:19, 'I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.' John 20:23, 'Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained.']. One does well to overcome his stubbornness and failure to confess in compliance with God's word, so that he may come freely and boldly before God on the basis of His own truth and say, 'Now, dear God, I have confessed before Thee my sins to my confessor and in Thy name asked for grace. For Thou has promised that what is bound is bound and what is loosed is loosed and that the Father will grant what we desire in unity. Therefore, I cling to Thy promise and do not doubt Thy truth; as my confessor has loosed me in Thy name, so I am loosed as we have desired.' See, such a certainty no one can have who has confessed to God alone. . . . Therefore, I will let no one take away private confession and would not exchange it for all the wealth in the world, for I know what strength and comfort it has given me."<sup>8</sup>

Aside, however, from this subjective reason for private confession, there are also objective reasons. We read in Article XI (63) of the Apology: "It is of advantage to accustom inexperienced men to enumerate some things [which worry them], in order that they may be more readily taught." Likewise we read in Part III of the



Smalcald Articles (VIII, 1): "Confession or absolution ought by no means to be abolished in the church, especially on account of [tender and] timid consciences and on account of the untrained [and capricious] young people, in order that they may be examined, and instructed in the Christian doctrine." Primarily, however, the Lutheran Church sees the necessity of private confession in the very nature of the word of God and in the will of the Lord who gave us His own example. Again and again the confessions state that private confession is to be retained on account of the absolution. The absolution is the work of God, for it is the administration of His word.

Thus, there is no question about the need to maintain—and, indeed, encourage—private confession and absolution. The Lutheran Church does not say that it is necessary to salvation as if the forgiveness of sins could be obtained in no other way. For the forgiveness of sins is bestowed in baptism and in Holy Communion, as well as being offered and conveyed in a general way in the preaching of the gospel. The Lutheran Church does say, however, on the objective side, that the maintenance of private confession and absolution is required by the very nature of the gospel, which demands that it be concentrated on the individual penitent and summarized in the sentence: "Thy sins are forgiven thee." On the subjective side, too, the maintenance of private confession and absolution is necessary, not only on account of the particular sins which trouble individuals, but also because of the need which is common to all men alike, since all are sinners. Thus the Apology (VI, 4) states, "Neither do they understand what the remission of sins or the power of the keys is, if there are any who despise private absolution." The Lutheran Church forces private confession on none, but offers it to all. Such is the Lutheran doctrine of confession and absolution.

In their polemics against this doctrine the Reformed have tried to identify it with the Roman auricular confession. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Lutheran private confession does, to be sure, differ from the Reformed "general confession"; Lutheranism advocates a personal confession—on account of the absolution. The Reformed churches know no real means of grace and no priestly

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ministry. The Reformed minister is only a servant of the congregation and not the mouthpiece of Christ as well. Therefore, the Reformed also reject private confession. The Lutheran Church of the sixteenth century opposed this rejection as bitterly as it did the Roman system of penance. The *Calenberg Kirchenordnung* condemns "die Sacramentsschwaermer und etliche andere, welche die Absolution zum Teil verachten, zum Teil gar verwerfen."<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the Lutheran private confession differs from the Roman auricular confession in this, that it is not compulsory and does not require the enumeration of particular sins. Lutheranism rejects the Roman doctrine that only those sins are forgiven which have been confessed.

### III. The Lutheran Practice of Private Confession

Private confession and absolution were formerly integral to the Lutheran Church. All the old Lutheran *Kirchenordnungen* have chapters on the subject and go into detail describing the procedure. This procedure was, in fact, fairly uniform.

The minister, vested in cassock, surplice, and violet stole, sat in a confessional chair at the communion rail or the rood screen. Thus, confessions were made in the open church and yet in a place which afforded the necessary privacy to the individual making his confession. There is a notice of the dedication of such a confessional chair in Neuseidlitz (Erzgebirge) as late as 1719, two hundred years after the Reformation. It is worthy of note that in the Roman Church confessional booths were additions subsequent to the Council of Trent. They were introduced in northern Italy by Charles Baromeo, Archbishop of Milan (who died in 1584), and were prescribed by the First and Fourth Councils of Milan (1565 and 1576). Up to that time movable seats had been used and the confessions had been held in the open church in the choir (the entrance to the chancel) or at the choir screen.

Time was especially set aside for confession on Wednesdays and Fridays, the two station days, and on Saturdays after vespers. The individual making his confession would come up to the confessional chair and kneel, and then both the penitent and the minister would use a prescribed rite of confession and absolution. The formula

most generally used was Luther's "Brief Form of Confession" provided in the Small Catechism:

*The penitent says:* Dear confessor, I ask you please to hear my confession and to pronounce forgiveness in order to fulfill God's will.

I, a poor sinner, plead guilty before God of all sins. In particular I confess before you that . . . . I am sorry for all of this and I ask for grace. I want to do better.

[Let the penitent confess whatever else he has done against God's commandments and his own position.]

*Then the confessor shall say:* God be merciful to you and strengthen your faith. Amen.

*Furthermore:* Do you believe that my forgiveness is God's forgiveness?

Yes, dear confessor.

*Then let him say:* Let it be done for you as you believe. And I, by the command of our Lord Jesus Christ, forgive you your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Go in peace.

[A confessor will know additional passages with which to comfort and to strengthen the faith of those who have great burdens of conscience or are sorrowful and distressed.]<sup>10</sup>

Children and adults were taught this or another formula and learned to know it by heart. Many *Kirchenordnungen* direct that in weekday services the minister should teach the people the rite of private confession. Thus the *Verdensche Kirchenordnung* says, "Before or after the sermon, the words of the catechism in German plus a short form of confession should be read to the people, so that the common man may learn how to confess his sins."<sup>11</sup> The people were also taught that the Lutheran Church retained private confession because of the great benefit of absolution, which is the pardoning voice of God sounding from heaven. In the Lutheran Church no one was forced to confession, nor were penances

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imposed; for when our Lord upon the cross cried out, "It is finished," the complete payment for all sins had been made in full. Yet everyone was urged to make private confession in order that in the absolution he might receive the individual, personal, and unconditional forgiveness of his sins, especially such particular sins against God's commandments as might weigh upon his heart and burden his conscience. The church simultaneously taught, of course, Luther's own words in the catechism (Small Catechism, V, 24-25):

But if anyone does not find himself burdened with such or greater sins, he should not trouble himself or search for or invent other sins, and thereby make confession a torture, but mention one or two that he knows. Thus, [he may say]: "In particular I confess that I once cursed; again, I once used improper words; I have once neglected this or that [obligation]," etc.

Let this much suffice. But if you know of none at all (which, however, is scarcely possible), then mention none in particular, but receive the forgiveness upon the general confession which you make before God to the confessor.

The significance of the phrase "general confession" in this last sentence has already been demonstrated.

In the Lutheran Church confession and absolution formed an independent and separate church office. The whole Lutheran attitude to confession naturally called for such an independent office. Private absolution was not merely the proclamation of God's word, but the administration of the word to the individual. Therefore, it was no mere preparation for Holy Communion. To be sure, no one received Holy Communion unless he had made his confession at some time, just as no one received Holy Communion who was not baptized. But this fact does not mean, as so many people think today, that a person had to go to confession every time that he went to Holy Communion, or that confession was a rite preparatory to Holy Communion. Such a practice had, indeed, arisen in the Roman Church in the Middle Ages. But in the Lutheran Church such a practice would have been impossible, since Lutherans reintroduced the celebration of Holy Communion as the chief service of every

Sunday and every feast day and urged every member to partake of it at every celebration. Confessions, therefore, were heard throughout the year, and people were, indeed, admonished to confess throughout the year and not just at Easter-time or when they desired to partake of the blessed sacrament. Since confession and absolution were regarded as an independent church office, it was administered in the church, not in the parsonage or a business room or a private home, except in case of necessity. Nearly all the *Kirchenordnungen* prescribe the use of the sanctuary.

In some places private confession and absolution represented the only specific rite of confession and absolution in use. One *Kirchenordnung*, for instance, says, "Es sollen auch die Pastoren jede Person insonderheit verhoeren und die Absolution sprechen, und nicht einen Haufen zugleich eine gemeine Absolution sprechen."<sup>12</sup> The *Calenberg Kirchenordnung* says, "Es sollen aber die Pastoren einen Jeden nach getahner Beichte aus dem Befehl und der Zusage Christi insonderheit absolvieren, und nicht zwei, drei, oder mehr zugleich."<sup>13</sup> From the very beginning, at the same time, some Lutheran churches did institute a type of public confession which had developed in the Middle Ages; it was called *Offene Schuld*. There was no intention, however, to have it take the place of private confession. It was originally incorporated into the service following the sermon. We find it mentioned in the Saxon Visitation Articles of 1533,<sup>14</sup> the *Kirchenordnung* of Prussia (1535),<sup>15</sup> and the *Braunschweiger Kirchenordnung* of 1531.<sup>16</sup> (The last of these gives a liturgical formula which is really only a confession and does not contain an absolution.)

Actually even the *Offene Schuld* caused debate. When Osiander and Brenz formulated the *Kirchenordnung* of Ansbach-Nuerenberg in 1533, they did away with the *Offene Schuld* which had become customary in the Nuerenberg service.<sup>17</sup> Some people did not approve and complained to the city council. Brenz then defended his action in a letter to the council.<sup>18</sup> There he argued that the *Offene Schuld* nullified the sermon, since the sermon in itself was a general absolution. It also devalued the rite of private confession, since it made private confession appear superfluous. Thus, it undermined the office of the keys, put the conscience of some

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people to sleep, and made other people uncertain. The keys of the kingdom of heaven was the application of the gospel of Christ. The gospel could be applied to a general assembly, and it could be applied to an individual. When it was preached to a general assembly, it worked forgiveness according to the nature of such preaching. Then, if an *Offene Schuld* followed the sermon, it resulted in the false idea that the preaching of the gospel was not really a general application of the office of the keys.

On the other hand, argued Brenz, an *Offene Schuld* was not the application of the gospel to an individual. Nowhere could one find in the Scriptures that a mixed group of people (in which, besides true Christians, there might be unbelievers, hypocrites, impenitents, adulterers, fornicators, usurers, traitors, drunkards, murderers, and those who did not desire absolution, much less were determined to amend their sinful lives) were to be absolved. The old church knew nothing of this sort. Private absolution was the application of the gospel to an individual. Therefore, in addition to the sermon, which was in its own nature a general absolution, it was necessary to have private confession for the individual absolution of the sinner, especially when he was troubled about his personal forgiveness. The fathers called holy absolution the sacrament of penance, and they did so for a good reason. The very nature of a sacrament demanded its administration, not to a group in general, but to individuals who desired it. It was improper to administer the sacrament of absolution to a whole group in which there were people who had given no evidence that they desired it or that they were penitent.

The city council debated the question, but could not agree. The matter was, therefore, referred to Luther. Luther answered in a letter which was also signed by Bugenhagen, Jonas, Melancthon, and Cruciger (dated October 8, 1533).<sup>19</sup> In it he and his colleagues agreed that the sermon was a general absolution, but concluded that an *Offene Schuld* could be used in order to remind the hearers that each of them should believe the gospel as the proclamation of the forgiveness of his own sins. Simultaneously, however, Luther and the others stressed the maintenance of private confession and absolution by all means.

#### IV. The Exodus of the Practice of Private Confession

To understand the exodus of private confession from the Lutheran Church, we must realize, first of all, that the doctrine and practice of the Reformed Church has had a tremendous influence on the Lutheran Church from the very beginning. Secondly, we must remember that between the sixteenth century and the second half of the seventeenth century came the Thirty Years War (1618-1648). The Lutheran Church was grievously disrupted. Many Lutheran churches were without a pastor, not only for a few years, but for decades. Church orders, church books, and church furnishings were destroyed. Schools were closed. Religious education stopped. Morality sank to a low level. Under these conditions one can understand that the administration of private confession and absolution, which depends on the functioning of the office of the ministry, suffered tremendously.

It is surprising how soon after the Thirty Years War the church orders were again reprinted and put into practice. But the problem of restoring the life of the church was so great that only an outward restoration was possible. This was especially true in regard to confession and absolution. Private confession and the confessional chair were restored, but only the outward forms could be reestablished. This is the time which is called the period of "dead orthodoxy." The church held on to orthodox doctrine and practice but, so far as individual faith and morality were concerned, much was lacking. This situation is not difficult to understand when one considers the conditions of that time.

Two other factors likewise contributed to the downfall of private confession. The first was the immediate association of private confession and absolution with Holy Communion. While the *Kirchenordnungen* expressly stated that people were to come to confession throughout the year, specific times were now prescribed for confession in connection with Holy Communion and feast days. This made private confession practically impossible, because a single pastor could not hear a hundred or more confessions in a short time. Secondly, confession was used for the purpose of church discipline. It was made punitive instead of reconciliatory. For example, a woman who bore an illegitimate child was forced to come before the

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congregation and beseech forgiveness before the minister would grant absolution. In this way a stigma was attached to the person who had confessed. The whole practice became legalistic. The main part of the office was no longer the absolution. Consequently, people became afraid of confession and stayed away.

From such conditions as these arose a pietistic aversion to private confession. The first blow came from the theological school at Rostock. Theophilus Grossgebauer published an article in 1661 entitled "Waechterstimme aus dem Verwuesteten Zion," in which he stated that private confession was unscriptural and unnecessary, because those who go to confession are either penitent or impenitent. If they are penitent, they already have forgiveness; and if they are impenitent, the absolution will do them no good anyhow.<sup>20</sup>

After Grossgebauer's death, Philip Jacob Spener became the leader of the movement known as Pietism.<sup>21</sup> He was a pastor in Frankfurt and later a professor of theology in the University of Halle. He inaugurated prayer meetings in private houses which devalued the liturgical services of the church, the sacraments, and the office of the ministry. His spirit was different from that of the sixteenth-century Lutheran reformers—also in regard to confession and absolution. They had said, "Das ganze Beichtwesen ist vornehmlich um der heiligen Absolution willen da." Spener said, "Das Hauptwerk des ganzen Beichtwesen geht vornehmlich dahin, dass die noetige Pruefung der Kommunikanten recht befoerdert werde, und der Beichtfater eine berueme Gelegenheit habe, mit seinen Beichtkindern notduerftig und vertraulich zu handeln."<sup>22</sup> He declared himself in favor of abolishing confession and absolution altogether and substituting something else which would suit his pietistic purposes.

That something else necessarily involved, of course, doing away with the confessional chair in the church. Spener proposed that everyone who desired to partake of Holy Communion on Sunday should come individually to the pastor's study during the week before to announce his intention. There in the pastor's study, he claimed, there would be opportunity for a heart-to-heart talk, something much better than private confession and absolution, according to Spener's pietistic ideas. By instituting communion



announcements in the pastor's study, Spener did, indeed, contribute mightily to the fall of such confession and absolution into disuse in the Lutheran Church.

Spener advocated many more practices tending to the same end. He urged pastors to hold a confessional service for all wishing to partake of Holy Communion, in which the pastor should give a confessional address, followed by the confession and absolution of all as a group. Only after these things had been done was the pastor to offer private confession and absolution to those in attendance. In this way Spener formally retained private confession and absolution (since it was an office of the church, which he could not legally abolish), but he added something which would effectively kill it. For since the addition was more convenient for the people and the pastors, the new soon displaced the old. Spener likewise attacked prescribed forms of private confession. He wanted everyone to pour out his heart in his own words. The result was that the once familiar forms of confession were lost. Since most people did not have the ability to confess in an individual way, they did not confess at all.

The influence of Spener resulted in the substitution of Reformed practice for the traditional practice of the Lutheran Church. An instructive instance is the case of Johann Casper Schade, who was pastor of St. Nicholas Church in Berlin and an ardent follower of Spener. He both spoke and wrote against private confession and absolution, sometimes using such harsh language as "Beichtstuhl, Satanstuhl, Hoellenpfehl."<sup>23</sup> In his congregation, consequently, he completely abolished private confession and absolution. Those who came for confession were given only a confessional sermon and absolution as a group. This action caused trouble in the church, and the matter was referred to the office of the elector of Brandenburg. At the time the elector was away and appointed a commission to handle the case. This commission would have restored the Lutheran practice of private confession and absolution, but in the meantime the elector returned. He himself was inclined toward the Reformed Church and in a subtle way had already begun to unionize the Lutheran and Reformed elements in Berlin. In consequence, Schade and those inclined to the Reformed Church felt free to publish an

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"Apostolischer Bericht und Unterricht von Beichte und Abendmahl," in which they treated confession and Holy Communion in the same way as such free-thinkers as Dippel did, when they rejected the office of the ministry, called confession and absolution "ein babylonisches Monstrum und Ungeheuer vom narrischen Menschenhirne ersonnen," and called Holy Communion a mere memorial feast.<sup>24</sup> This approach had the backing of the elector, and so the Lutherans had to be satisfied with communion announcements, public confession, and general absolution.

Pietism sought freedom from private confession and absolution. The leaders of the church followed the trend, partly out of sympathy, partly out of fear, and partly out of desire for peace and political gain. At the beginning of the eighteenth century the denunciation of private confession and absolution by Lutheran sectarians was loud and vehement. Rosenback called private confession "eine verfluchte Abgoetterei und Gaukelei."<sup>25</sup> Tuchtfield called it "Satzungen unter welchen der Menschen Seele gefangen gehalten werden."<sup>26</sup> What the Pietists started was carried to its logical conclusion by the Rationalists. To them absolution, involving the speaking of divine words, made no sense at all, because they rejected the inspiration of Scripture and the power of the word of God. For them forgiveness of sins was obtained through the resolution to live a better life.

Toward the end of the eighteenth century one church after another abolished private confession and absolution. An example is the edict issued in Mecklenburg on 27 November 1790. Things became worse when catechisms, hymnbooks, and agendas were rationalized. The Wuerttemberg *Liturgie* of 1809 no longer gave the people an opportunity to learn the prescribed form of confession.<sup>27</sup> (Sadly enough, the Synodical Catechism of 1943 similarly deleted the form of private confession provided by Luther in the Fifth Part of the Small Catechism.)

## V. The Implications of the Loss of Private Confession and Absolution

These doctrinal and historical observations now raise this question: Is the present practice of the Lutheran Church as to confession and absolution satisfactory or unsatisfactory? The Lutheran Confessions

say again and again that private confession and absolution are not to be abolished in our churches or allowed to fall into disuse. How, then, can confessional Lutherans be satisfied with the present usage of our churches—which is, in fact, the disuse of private confession and absolution? If, then, we are dissatisfied with the present situation, what shall we do about it? In the first place, we must restudy what God has revealed to us about the means of grace and what our confessions state on the basis of Holy Scripture about private confession and absolution. Secondly, we must do something about restoring the Lutheran practice of private confession and absolution.

There are many things we can do. Chaplain Delvin E. Ressel, in an article which appeared in the *Lutheran Chaplain* in 1949, makes the following suggestions:

Having properly taught Part V of the Small Catechism, and remembering what the other confessions teach and enjoin on the same subject, the Lutheran pastor or chaplain will make such practical arrangements as to enable his spiritual children to derive maximum benefits from holy absolution. First, he will announce a regular time and place for the hearing of confessions. Then he will see that the ecclesiastical appointments are proper and inviting for private confession. Unless he makes these provisions, his teaching of confession will remain barren theorizing and the important confessional principle of the renewal of the baptismal covenant will lie fallow. Blessed Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther, in his *Pastorale*, directs that confessions be heard in the clergy seat next to the communicants' rail or the rood screen, thus being in the open church and yet affording the necessary privacy to the penitent. Blessed Wilhelm Loehe has the following on the practical arrangement of the confessional: "In the nave, either against a pillar on the south side or at a corner of the wall usually separating the chair from the nave, about opposite the place where the pulpit can be placed, is the confessional [chair], a necessary appointment, if private confession is practiced. Since private confession is the heaviest work of a pastor and also

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the most tiring physically, the pastor must be able to sit. The confessional, moreover, must be so placed as to be seen by all, yet not so as to permit anyone to hear the voice of the penitent." . . . The object of all these arrangements, in accordance with confessional teaching and practice, is to make confession, not a torture, but a welcome opportunity to receive divine grace for one's self and one's own particular need. Of course, the most thorough instruction and the most adequate and inviting facilities will avail little if the pastor or chaplain neglects to cultivate the spirit of a true evangelical father confessor.<sup>28</sup>

One might add that the pastor should be properly vested in surplice and violet stole in order to symbolize that he is administering the means of grace and is the mouthpiece of God in this official act of the church. Furthermore, there should be a printed form of the confession at the place where the penitent kneels to say his confession. This form should be used with all reverence and sincerity. It should be taught to the catechumens and all members. In fact, the catechumens should be required to learn it by heart, so that they may confess without the help of a printed form when they come for confession and absolution.

Such externals are important if private confession and absolution are to be restored to the Lutheran Church. But they will present no difficulty when the more important problems have been solved. Among these is the problem of re-educating clergy and laity. The Fifth Chief Part of Luther's Catechism must be emphasized, including, of course, Luther's "Short Form of Confession." Then there is the problem of overcoming the prejudice which has been built up against private confession and absolution. Traditions which go back hundreds of years, no matter how bad, cannot be corrected overnight. If, however, the position of the Lutheran Church is correctly stated in its confessions, then to restore private confession and absolution will always remain the goal of all true Lutherans.

### Endnotes

The Rev. P. H. D. Lang, who died in 1981, was one of the foremost liturgical scholars in the history of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. In 1960 he provided Dr. Donald Deffner with written permission to arrange the publication of this article. The editors wish to thank the Rev. Peter Cage for the research on which the following footnotes are based. Any reader who can supply additional information on the citations which remain unspecified below is welcome to send such data to the assistant editor of the *CTQ* [D. McC. L. J.].

1. Lang is here translating Luther's *Von der Beicht, ob die der Papst macht habe zu gebieten*, WA 8:178, 28-30. Lang uses this same reference again at the end of a larger quotation at note 8.
2. Lang is here translating WA 10 III:64, *Ein Kurtzer begriff des Sermons D. M. L. geprediget am Sontag Reminiscere, von der heimlichen beicht* (March 22, 1522), WA 6:58-64. The translation in the American Edition reads, "I know him [the devil] well, and he knows me well, too. If you had known him, you would not have rejected confession in this way." LW 51:100.
3. Lang is here translating *De Captivate Babylonica Ecclesiae* (1520), WA 6:546; LW 36:86.
4. It is not clear which edition of the original (German) text the author is citing here, but the *Sendschreiben an die zu Frankfurt am Main* (1533) is found in WA 30 III:554-571. The *Concordia Journal*, 16:4 (October 1990) provides an English translation of the letter by Jon D. Vieker, pp. 334-351. The ellipsis represents several paragraphs of Luther's letter. The specifically cited sections correspond to WA 30 III:566, 29-30, and 569, 6-11. The corresponding sections in Vieker's translation are pages 342 and 345.
5. Another English translation of Luther's "brief admonition on confession" (to which the author refers) is found in Theodore Tappert's edition of the *Book of Concord*, as an appendix to the Large Catechism's section on the Lord's Supper. It is entitled "A Brief Exhortation to Confession," LC, V, 15-16. The *Concordia Triglotta* does not contain this section.

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6. Lang's translation again corresponds to sections of WA 30 III:554-571. Before the ellipsis the reference is to WA 30 III:566, 9-10, and, after the ellipsis, is to WA 30 III:569, 14-15. In Vieker's English translation (see note 4) the corresponding sections are paragraph 23 on page 342, and paragraph 30 on page 345.
  7. The *Braunschweigische Kirchenordnung of 1569* is found in *Die Evangelischen Kirchenordnungen des XVI Jahrhunderts*, VI:I (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1955), p. 120, compiled by Emil Sehling.
  8. Lang is here translating WA 8:178, 8-30.
  9. This specific reference in the *Calenberg Kirchenordnung* could not be identified.
  10. The editor is here employing, in place of Lang's rendition, portions of the same section in the new synodical translation, *Luther's Small Catechism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), pp. 25-26.
  11. The church order to which reference is made here could not be found.
  12. The church order to which reference is made here could not be found.
  13. The church order to which reference is made here could not be found.
  14. The *Saxon Visitation Articles of 1533* are found in *Die Evangelischen Kirchenordnungen des XVI Jahrhunderts*, I, compiled under the direction of Aemilius Ludwig Richter (Leipzig: Ernst Julius Günther, 1871), p. 229.
  15. The church order to which reference is made here could not be found.
  16. The church order to which reference is made here could not be found.
  17. The *Kirchenordnung of Ansbach-Nuerenberg* by Osiander and Brenz (1533) is apparently the same as the *Brandenburg-Nuerenberg Kirchenordnung* (1533) by the same men. Both Richter and Sehling include it in their compilations. As indicat-

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ed, no *Offene Schuld* appears after the sermon in the aforesaid order of service (Richter, p. 206; Sehling, XI, p. 195).

18. This letter could not be identified.
19. *Luther, Bugenhagen, Jonas, Melanchthon und Cruciger an den Rat zu Nürnberg* (October 8, 1533), *WA Briefe* 6:527-530.
20. Confirmation of this statement and other details which follow appears in Heinrich Schmid, *Die Geschichte des Pietismus* (Nordlingen: C. H. Beck'schen Buchhandlung, 1863), p. 269.
21. See Schmid's section on "Der Beichtstreit," pp. 259-274, on Spener's role in the history of confession.
22. Schmid, p. 269.
23. This specific description of the practice of confession is again reported by Schmid, p. 262.
24. Reference is again made to the work of Schade and others by Schmid, p. 267.
25. The source of this quotation could not be determined.
26. The source of this quotation could not be determined.
27. The edict and liturgy to which reference is made here could not be found.
28. The reference could not be identified more specifically.