

**ON PRIVATE CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION**  
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There is a quiet reformation going on in many Lutheran congregations. It is nothing less than a return to the Reformation understanding of repentance, forgiveness, and the Holy Ministry. People are coming individually to their pastor to confess their sins and receive the forgiveness that Jesus died to win for them. Pastors are seeking fellow pastors to serve as father confessors. Catechumens, both young and old, are coming to their pastors for private confession before they are admitted to the Lord's Supper. Some congregations have scheduled hours specifically for private confession. The confessional chair, largely absent from American Lutheranism, is once again appearing in Lutheran chancels. What's going on here? We have many questions.

**Is private confession a Lutheran practice?**

It most certainly is. Our Augsburg Confession states that "private absolution should be retained and not allowed to fall into disuse." The Apology to the Augsburg Confession calls Holy Absolution the "voice of the Gospel," and states that "we must believe the voice of the one absolving no less than we would believe a voice coming from heaven." Dr. Luther himself included a short liturgy for private confession in the Small Catechism to teach people how to make confession. He also commended the practice highly from his own personal experience.

More than a "Lutheran" practice, private confession is a Christian practice. As Dr. Luther put it in the Large Catechism, "When I urge you to go to confession, I am simply urging you to be a Christian." Confession was known and practiced by the apostles (James 5:16, 1 John 1:9) and is established on the authority of Jesus Christ to forgive and retain sins which He entrusted to His Church and exercises publicly through the Office of the Holy Ministry (Matthew 16:18-19, 18:15-20, John 20:19-23).

**But isn't private confession a "Roman Catholic" practice?**

Well, yes and no. Roman Catholics also practice private confession, but not everything "Roman Catholic" is necessarily wrong. The Lutheran reformers did not set aside private confession, as the later radicals did. Instead, they reformed it so that Christ's free forgiveness was the center and focus. The Lutherans set aside such legalistic practices as forcing the faithful to come to confession at fixed times during the year, requiring that every sin be confessed in order to be forgiven, and prescribing certain religious works to offset the temporal punishments of sin. But the Lutheran reformers never would have imagined a Lutheran congregation without private confession. They said that it would be "wicked to remove private confession from the churches" and "those who despise private absolution understand neither the forgiveness of sins nor the power of the keys." In fact, only those who had been previously instructed, examined, and absolved by the pastor were admitted to the Lord's Supper.

## **What exactly is confession and absolution?**

Confession and absolution is the work of the Law and the Gospel. There are two works. The first work is ours. We confess, that is, we say back to God what He has said to us. We confess that the Law has had its way with us. We tell the truth about ourselves from what God has revealed to us in the Ten Commandments. The Law says that we are sinners. We say, "I, a poor, miserable sinner." That is the truth. That is our condition from conception. We say what we have done and what we have failed to do. We sin because we are sinners. Confession is similar to telling the physician the symptoms so that he can make a diagnosis and treat the disease. The disease is sin; our sins are the symptoms. The diagnosis is that we are utterly sinful. The condition is fatal. "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23).

The second work is God's work. He absolves, or forgives, our sins on account of Jesus' sacrificial suffering and death in our place. God tells the truth about us in Christ, and that is a greater truth than the truth of our sins. Confession and absolution is a happy exchange. "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). Christ on the cross was the adulterer, the fornicator, the drunkard, the liar, the cheat, the gossip in your place. He was made sin for us. And in our Baptism we are the sinless children of God.

The merit of Christ's saving death on Calvary comes to us and is applied to us in Holy Absolution, just as it was in our Baptism. Holy Absolution is the on-going work of Holy Baptism, drowning our old, sinful nature in Adam and raising our new, sinless nature in Christ. "The free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23).

God always works through means or instruments. In Holy Absolution His instrument is a man whom He has called and ordained to speak in His stead and by His command. The pastor is under orders to forgive sin. And we are to hear our pastor's voice forgiving us as the very voice of Jesus Himself. "He who hears you, hears me." (Luke 10:16).

Sin is dealt with decisively, not by our "trying harder," but by dying and rising in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Confession and Absolution. The Law and the Gospel. Such a Savior we have in Jesus that He has given this divine authority among us to dispense what He died to win for us! Faith can only say, "Amen." Gift received.

## **What sins do I confess?**

Before God, we confess everything we have done and everything that we are as utterly and totally sinful. God knows our sin much better than we do. But before the pastor, we confess only those things that are known to us and that particularly trouble us. We need not torture our memories. Remember that God's forgiveness is always whole and entire, while our confession will always be partial and incomplete. God's work of absolution is not based on our work of confession but on the finished work of Christ's sacrificial death on the cross.

## **But can't I simply confess my sins before God alone?**

Indeed you must, for Jesus teaches His disciples to pray daily for forgiveness in the Our Father, and St. John says, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." But the real question is: How is the forgiveness of sins applied to you when you pray to God by yourself? A sinner who is alone and isolated in his or her sin often will not "feel forgiven" and may not be consoled by reading or remembering a passage from the Holy Scriptures. Self-medication with the Word of God can be as dangerous as writing yourself a prescription. St. Paul wrote that "faith comes by hearing," and so it is for the creating and strengthening of our faith that God has provided for Christ's forgiveness to be spoken into our ears by the mouth of another.

## **Must I go to my pastor?**

That's a Law question. You get to go to your pastor. He is Christ's gift to you (Ephesians 4:11). Nowhere is your pastor more a pastor for you than in private confession and absolution. You must learn to treasure this gift, and then you will rightly treasure your pastor. He is Christ's ear and mouth for you. He is bound by a solemn vow in his ordination never to disclose to anyone what he has heard in confession. Your sins are as far from his lips as the east is from the west. Many people complain that they never see their pastor. If you feel this way, then by all means take the initiative and come to private confession!

## **What if I'm too ashamed to confess to my pastor?**

Blessed Pr. Wilhelm Loehe, a confessional Lutheran pastor of the 19th century, wrote well: "Yes, be still more ashamed; for you were not ashamed to sin, and yet you are ashamed to confess it for your welfare. Deeds you performed without being shy, deeds which brought you nearer to destruction; but words you flee, although they bring you nearer to your salvation. Be ashamed - but confess!"

## **What is the benefit of individual confession and absolution?**

Just as a good shepherd tends his flock both as a group and each sheep individually, so a good pastor applies the blood-bought gifts of Christ to his congregation as a whole and to each member individually. In fact, individual absolution is the best way to administer this gift. Here the pastor can apply accurately the healing balm of Jesus' blood to those troublesome and annoying spots that may not have been reached by the sermon or the general absolution.

Confession humbles us and keeps us as beggars at the receiving end of Christ's gifts. We learn to speak like the broken-hearted publican instead of the self-righteous Pharisee. The false pride of our old Adam is crucified. We can leave behind our "Sunday best" and stop hiding behind our silly fig leaves. Many a troubled Christian has been greatly helped by disclosing the awful secret of his or her sin to a pastor only to hear Christ's sweet word of forgiveness. Individual confession and absolution is also a very potent weapon in the struggle against habitual sins such as drunkenness, sexual immorality, laziness, greed, gluttony, etc.

The most important benefit is that we are given to hear a clear, external, objective, official word from God that applies the saving merit of Jesus' death to us personally and individually.

### **How then is individual confession and absolution practiced in a Lutheran parish?**

Private confession is both a private and a public act. It is private in that it is a confidential conversation between a pastor and a penitent. It is public in that it goes on in the open church before the church's public ministry. Our agenda book rightly suggests that private confession take place where people regularly receive the Lord's Supper. A confessional chair is placed at right angles to the kneeling rail. Alternatively, a chair and a kneeling bench might be set up in some part of the nave. The pastor will vest in alb, or cassock and surplice, and stole, since this is a proper work of his Office. A short liturgy of confession should be used and eventually memorized (see Lutheran Worship, p. 310 or Luther's Small Catechism with Explanations, pp. 218-219). People may wait either in the back of the nave or in the narthex.

It is helpful to have regular, published hours for private confession. If no one is present for confession, the pastor can use these hours profitably for prayer. Of course, an evangelical pastor will always be ready to hear confession and speak absolution at any time it is needed. Devotional literature should be made available to help people prepare for confession. Particularly helpful are the "penitential psalms" (Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143) and the Small Catechism.

*When ministers lay on their hands Absolved by Christ the sinner stands; He who by grace the Word believes The purchase of His blood receives. (Lutheran Worship, Hymn #235)*

#### **Suggested Reading:**

P.H.D. Lang, "Private Confession and Absolution in the Lutheran Church: A Doctrinal, Historical, and Critical Study." Concordia Theological Quarterly (October, 1992) 56(4):241-262.

Eric D. Stumpf. "Private Confession: A Call for Restoration in Pastoral Care." Concordia Journal (July, 1993) 19(3):218-233.

Fred. L. Precht. "Confession and Absolution: Sin and Forgiveness" in Lutheran Worship: History and Practice. Concordia Publishing House (1993). pp. 322-386

Wilhelm Loehe. "The Sacrament of Repentance." Translated by Delvin E. Ressel. Una Sancta 10(2):1-11 and 10(3):10-23.