

Introduction

Let us pray: Grant, we implore you, almighty God, to your Church your Holy Spirit and the wisdom which comes down from above that your Word may not be bound but have free course and be preached to the joy and edification of Christ's holy people, so that in steadfast faith we may serve you and in the confession of your name abide to the end, through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

WARNING! If you're an absolution tea-totaler, you will puke in revulsion. If you're a gospel sipping moralist, you will most certainly gag and choke. If you're DYI theologian, you will be offended. If you're one of those congregations or pastors who is hell-bent on turning the church into a Menards or Lowes where salvation is a do-it-yourself job, I give you fair warning.

Why? Because I serve you a very strong drink today. I invite you to belly up to the bar and slam it down without blinking an eye. What's the drink? It is the 200 proof, 2,000 year- old death and resurrection gospel forgiveness of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Happy Hour's special today and always is holy absolution (straight up, neat and clean, neither shaken nor stirred). It is, "the voice of God and is pronounced following the command of God."¹ Dr. Luther popped the cork

¹The Augsburg Confession, Article XXV, *Book of Concord: Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Kolb-Wengert (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), Latin, 73:3-4.

of this 200 proof, 2,000 year-old gospel and he couldn't get enough. Neither can I. So I invite you, if you're a pastor, to be a gospel bartender that will generously pour out the undiluted forgiveness won for all by Christ's very good, Good Friday death. And if you're a baptized believer, drink it up. Guzzle it down. And please, no ice. No water. And for crying out loud, absolutely no Coke!

There are some mighty thirst folks out there in the church. They have been beaten by the law. Hammered by sin. They live in the fear of death. The syrupy saccharine of sentimentalism just doesn't cut it. The castor oil of moralism just makes them more ill. And when the pastor turns every sermon, every Bible story, every Bible class, every newsletter, every visit and every devotion into a make disciples of all nations or else, life in the church is so flat. No joy. Just burden and oppression.

So, it is time to serve up the strong drink of the gospel proclaimed in the absolution (St. John 20:19-23).² It is time to proclaim that sins are forgiven for Christ's sake with no strings attached. It is time to speak the 200 proof, 2,000 year-old absolution, "I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." After all, the absolution is, "the voice of the God . . . God's own voice resounding from heaven."³ And

²Being sent to proclaim forgiveness reveals the apostolic character of the church.

³*Book of Concord*, Latin, 73:3-4.

where there is forgiveness of sins there is life and salvation. This is the highest form of pastoral care that pastors can provide and which you can receive. More on this later.

Part One: Setting the Reformation Table & Dr. Luther's Discovery
(The Absolution As *Verbum Efficax*)

Now I want to back up a little and do a review of church history prior to the Reformation starting with scholasticism and then moving to a key part of Dr. Luther's Reformation rediscovery. Keep in mind that the scholastics inherited an ancient understanding of language that came mainly from the Stoics. This ancient Stoic way of thinking about language strongly influenced St. Augustine's hermeneutic of signification that even to this day is how most people think language operates. According to the Stoic way of thinking, language is a system of signs that point to a thing, a state of affairs, or express an emotion. The bottom line, however, is that the sign (*signum*), understood as a statement or as an expression, is not the thing [reality] itself (*res*).

This hermeneutic must be kept in mind as we observe the scholastics debate about the sacrament of penance. There were various schools of thought. First, they distinguished between what they called the external sacrament of penance (confession and satisfaction) and the internal

sacrament of penance (interior penance). Two Parisian scholars, Peter Abelard (1079-1142) and Peter Lombard “*Magister sententiarum*” (ca. 1100-1160/64) maintained that the essential part of the sacrament was interior penance. In other words, they were contritionists (satisfaction gives way to contrition as the most important element in the sacrament). Others followed their lead such as Alain of Lille (1128-1203), Peter of Poitiers (1130-1215) as well as Gratian (d. 1159) who stated: “the measure of sorrow must be considered rather than the time spent in doing penance [satisfaction].” The interior repentance (contrition) resulted from the grace of perfect sorrow that loved God. Confession of sin was necessary, but only relatively necessary, as long as you had time to get to your priest.

Peter Lombard (*Sentences* 1:18, 1-17) said that the purpose of the priestly absolution was to show the penitent (in a declarative / informative way) that he had already been reconciled by the grace of sorrow that had been motivated by his love of God. The priestly absolution was necessary to remit what there was of the punishment due to the penitent’s sin. But what kind of reconciliation was it? Vertical or horizontal?

Lombard held that the office of the keys reconciles the penitent with the church but not with God. The sacrament of penance gets you right with the church but he wasn’t so sure if it did the *coram Deo* job. So the penitent

needed to keep working hard. *Facere quod in se est!* The process of salvation or the pilgrimage to the beatific vision goes on. From lower to higher. Dirty to cleaner (sanative). Physical to spiritual. One can only hope to be saved *coram Deo*. Gabriel Biel (ca. 1420-1495) maintained as well that reconciliation takes place in the sinner's contrition. So again we ask: what of the priest's absolution? What's it for? Answer: It assured the penitent that his contrition was pure, (i.e. he was truly sorry) and that there was forgiveness. Contrition was the kicker. The absolution only described what the penitent already had in his contrition.

Another Parisian, Hugh of St. Victor (ca. 1096-1141) and the members of the Order of St. Victor (Victorines) disagreed with both Abelard and Lombard. Hugh contended that the sinner would be damned unless absolved by the priest. He based this on Christ's mandate that the apostles absolve sinners (*On the Sacraments*, 2:14,8). William of Auvergne (ca. 1180/90-1248/49) insisted as well that the key part of penance was the priest's absolution. Well, what of the sinner's contrition? What if the sinner's not contrite? William argued that the attrite⁴ penitent who comes to confession can become contrite through the priestly absolution and blessing. Duns Scotus (ca. 1265-ca. 1308) wrote that, "attrition is the disposition or

⁴Attrition is sorrow for sin because you fear God's punishment. It is not contrition proper.

congruous merit for blotting out mortal sin” (*Commentary on the Sentences*, 4:1, 2). Scotus also pushed the priestly absolution as being essential to the sacrament. “From the work worked” was the big language here.

St. Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1224/27-1274) adopted the philosophical terminology of Aristotle. With Aquinas the sacrament of penance consists of the penitent’s acts (the quasi matter) together with the priest’s absolution (form) (*Summa theologica*, 3:84, 3). The quasi matter or acts of the penitent included contrition, confession, and satisfaction. When the form (the absolution) comes to the matter you have a sacrament. Remember that Aquinas has to work within the framework of Lateran IV (1215) by which Pope Innocent III required confession before your priest at least once a year or else you would be excommunicated. Nonetheless, Aquinas is also a contritionist. For him contrition derives its power of obtaining forgiveness from the absolution bestowed, i.e. absolution is antecedently operative in the contrition.

From this all too brief historical flyby we can begin to understand Melancthon’s remarks: “Let any one of the opponents step forward and tell us when the forgiveness of sins takes place. Good God, how great is the darkness! They wonder whether the forgiveness of sins takes place in

attrition or contrition.”⁵ Dr. Luther was trained in this theological climate, especially the Augustinian (Stoic / Neo-platonic) understanding of language. Remember, Dr. Luther was an observant Augustinian friar!

At first, then, Dr. Luther understood the priestly absolution. “*Ego te absolvo!*” (“I absolve you”), only as a declarative word. In other words, in confession the priest searches for and examines the contrition. If he judges it to be real contrition he takes it to be the “sign” of the absolution that has already taken place in the penitent’s contrition. The priest’s job is to make sure the penitent knows and believes this to be the case through the absolution. Consequently, the absolution is only a declaration, a disclosure or a description of what already is.

Dr. Luther broke free of this with great difficulty as he studied and taught the Scriptures and as he practiced and observed the sacrament of penance that lead to the indulgence controversy and the posting of the *95 Theses* in 1517.

Dr. Luther’s Reformation rediscovery of the gospel hangs on what he learned from the Scriptures regarding language. It is the shift from declarative to performative. The absolution, which is nothing else than the gospel, Dr. Luther discovers is an effective Word (*verbum efficax*). The

⁵*Book of Concord, Apology XII, 188:6.*

verbal sign (*signum*) is itself the thing or reality (*res / ding*). This is a huge shift where the Word does what it says and says what it does.⁶ This begins to take shape very clearly from 1518-1520.⁷

⁶“*Signum philosophicum est nota absentis rei, signum theologicum est nota praesentis rei*” in 1540 WA BR 4:666, No. 5106. See also the hermeneutical shift with regard to the Scriptural language “the righteousness of God” in Dr. Luther’s work as he himself states: “I had indeed been captivated with an extraordinary ardor for understanding Paul in the Epistle to the Romans. But up till then it was not the cold blood about the heart, but a single word in Chapter 1, ‘In it the righteousness of God is revealed,’ that had stood in my way. For I hated that word ‘righteousness of God,’ which, according to the use and custom of all the teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically regarding the formal or active righteousness, as they called it, with which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner. Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God, and said, ‘As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!’ Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted. At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, ‘In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, *He who through faith is righteous shall live.*’ There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’ Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. Thereupon I ran through the Scriptures from memory. I also found in other terms an analogy, as, the work of God, that is, what God does in us, the power of God, with which he makes us strong, the wisdom of God, with which he makes us wise, the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God. And I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word ‘righteousness of God.’ Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise.” Martin Luther, “Preface to Latin Writings” (1545), in *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955-1986), 34:336-337.

⁷1518 “Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses,” AE 31:98-107, 191-196. “Therefore it is neither the sacrament nor the priest, but faith in the word of Christ spoken through the priest and his office which justifies you . . . Take care, therefore, that you do not in any manner trust in your own contrition but completely and alone in the word of your

With regard to absolution the *Ego te absolvo* does not merely describe what has already taken place in the penitent's contrition. Instead, the absolution does and gives exactly what it says! The absolution brings about a new state of affairs because it creates a new relationship between the penitent and God. "I forgive you all your sins in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" is Christ's Word of promise that is active and effective creating and sustaining faith. Christ's external Word of promise gives the certainty upon which faith can live. And here the pastor provides the highest form of pastoral care to troubled consciences.

Note how Dr. Luther applies this biblical hermeneutic of a *verbum efficax* for the sake of providing high pastoral care to troubled consciences. His comments on Isaac's blessing in Genesis 27 reveal the hermeneutic:

In Holy Scripture . . . there are real blessings. They are more than just wishes. They state facts and are effective. They actually bestow and bring what the words say [*non imprecativae tantum, sed indicativae et constitutivae, quae hoc ipsum, quod sonat re ipse largiunt et adferunt* – more than mere wishes; they are indicatives and performatives; they actually bestow and bring about what the words say]. We also have blessings of this kind in the New Testament through Christ's priesthood, which is our blessing when I say: 'Receive the absolution of your sins.' If I said: 'Would that your sins were forgiven you; would that you were pious and in God's grace!' or 'I wish you grace, mercy, the eternal kingdom, and deliverance from your sins,' this could be called a blessing of love. But the blessing of a promise, of faith, and of a gift that is at hand is this: 'I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; that is, I reconcile your soul to God, remove

kindest and most faithful Savior, Jesus Christ! Your heart may deceive you, but he will not deceive you," (194-195).

from you God's wrath and displeasure, put you in His grace, and give you the inheritance of eternal life and the kingdom of heaven.' All these things have the power to grant you forgiveness immediately and truly if you believe, for they are not our works; they are God's works through our ministry. Accordingly, they are not blessings that express wishes; they are blessings that have the power to bestow. When I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, it is just as if I were saying: 'I am snatching you from the hands of the devil and bringing you to God, and I am doing this truly and in fact.'⁸

Commenting on God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 22, Dr. Luther writes: "The blessing in actuality is truly divine; for when God blesses, the result is the thing itself or that which is said, in accordance with those well-known statements: 'For He commanded, and they were created' (Ps. 148:5) and 'God said: Let there be light; and there was light' (Genesis 1:3). He is One who blesses with effect and does all things through what He says, because His Word is the thing itself, and His blessing is an abundant blessing, physically as well as spiritually."⁹ Dr. Luther's comments on Genesis 48 serve as a theological legacy and testament to faith's certainty that the Word is an *verbum efficax*: "I have been baptized. I have been absolved. In this faith I die. No matter what trials and cares confront me from now on, I will certainly not be shaken; for He who said: 'He who believes and is baptized will be saved' (Mark 16:16) and 'Whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven' (Matt. 16:19) and 'This is My

⁸AE 5:140-141 = WA 43:525, 3-5, 10f.

⁹AE 4:154-155 = WA 43:247, 22-26.

body. This is My blood, which is shed for you for the remission of sins' (cf. Matt. 26:26, 28) – He cannot deceive or lie. This is certainly true.”¹⁰ Then in his 1535 *Lectures on Galatians* Dr. Luther states: “And this is the reason why our theology is certain: it snatches us away from ourselves and places us outside ourselves [*extra nos*], so that we do not depend on our own strength, conscience, experience, person, or works but depend on that which is outside ourselves, that is, on the promise and truth of God, which cannot deceive.”¹¹

No wonder that the answer to the question “What is Confession?” puts the emphasis on the absolution: “that we receive the absolution, that is, forgiveness, from the confessor as from God himself and by no means doubt but firmly believe that our sins are thereby forgiven before God in heaven.”¹²

The Large Catechism too points troubled hearts to the absolution because in it one hears “God’s Word” by which “God looses and absolves from sin.”¹³

Part Two: Where There Is Forgiveness of Sins There Is Life and Salvation

The crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ mandates that, “repentance and forgiveness of sins” be preached in his name (Luke 24:47). Law.

¹⁰AE 8:193-194 = WA 44:720, 28-36.

¹¹AE 26:387 = WA 40¹:589, 25-28.

¹²*Book of Concord*, Small Catechism, 360:16.

¹³*Ibid.*, Large Catechism, 478:14.

Gospel. Contrition. Faith. Confession. Absolution. “As the Father has sent me so I send you.” Then the Holy Spirit filled words together with the Lord’s breath: “If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven” (John 20:22-23; cf. Matthew 16:19; 18:18).

King David, the forgiven sinner (*simul iustus et peccator*) lived in this matrix of repentance and forgiveness, law and gospel, contrition and faith, confession and absolution (2 Kings 11-12). From this *passiva vita*¹⁴ by which he suffers God’s killing and raising him through the law and gospel, comes Psalm 51. Dr. Luther’s commentary on this psalm provides us with the fundamental presuppositions of theology that come from the Holy Scriptures: “The proper subject of theology is man guilty of sin and condemned, and God the Justifier and Savior of man the sinner [*Nam Theologiae proprium subiectum est homo peccati reus ac perditus et Deus iustificans ac salvator hominis peccatoris*].”¹⁵ For us and for our salvation there is the Lord Jesus Christ. He does a Bethlehem, a Good Friday, an Easter Sunday, a “Lo I am with you always” hidden behind the cloud Ascension Day, and a pouring out of the Holy Spirit in these last days Pentecost -- to achieve salvation for us and for all and now to bestow the benefits of his sacrificial death in his Word and sacraments. Jesus is indeed

¹⁴*Psalmenvorlesungen* 1519/21 (Ps. 1-22), WA 5:166, 11.

¹⁵AE 12:311 = WA 40²:328,17-18.

Immanuel, God with us. He is the Immanuel who is, “with us in the muck and work of our lives so much that his skin smokes.”¹⁶ “You will give him the name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). How does one deal with an absolute hidden god? Through the absolution!

Consequently, the central biblical message is the forgiveness of sins!¹⁷

Proclaiming and delivering the goods from Good Friday’s road kill from which we vultures may eat and live by faith alone is the proper hermeneutic (*beneficium* / Gospel). Otherwise you do not understand the Scriptures. Dr.

Luther writes:

So you see that the gospel is really not a book of laws and commandments which requires deeds of us, but a book of divine promises in which God promises, offers, and gives all his possession and benefits in Christ When you open the book containing the gospels and read or hear how Christ comes here and there, or how someone is brought to him, you should therein perceive the sermon or the gospel through which he is coming to you, or you are being brought to him. For the preaching of the gospel is nothing else than Christ coming to us, or we being brought to him.¹⁸

“SVNDE VERGIBT!” is the emphasis. Dr. Luther puts his index finger on

a specific Scripture verse from the Bible. Which one? On Romans 3:25!

God is the one who “FORGIVES SIN.” Of all the verses in the Bible, Dr.

¹⁶WA 4:608,32-609,1.

¹⁷WA 40²:385,9-10, (*in hoc psalmo et est principalis locus nostrae Theologiae, sine quo impossibile est, Sacram scripturam intelligere*).

¹⁸1521 “Brief Instruction On What To Look For and Expect In The Gospels,” AE 35:120-121 = WA10¹/1:13.

Luther distinguishes only this one phrase with all caps. In a marginal gloss, he calls this clause “the main part” and the “central place of this epistle and of the entire Bible.”¹⁹ Indeed.

What kind of God do you have? He is the Lord Jesus Christ who has died and risen for you. He now has instituted the forgiveness of sins in his church. He has established a reign or kingdom on the earth that is called: The Forgiveness of Sin.²⁰

This is precisely why Melanchthon writes: “Justification takes place through the Word, just as St. Paul notes [Rom. 1:16]: the gospel ‘is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.’ Likewise [Rom. 10:17], ‘Faith comes from what his heard.’”²¹ And again he writes: “To obtain the forgiveness of sins is to be justified according to [Ps. 32:1]: ‘Blessed are those whose transgression is forgiven.’”²² Consequently the theme: where there is forgiveness of sins there is life and salvation.

The gospel or the forgiveness of sins (*beneficium*) comes in various ways

¹⁹ See Martin Schloemann, “Die Zwei Wörter. Luthers Notabene zur Mitte der Schrift,” in *Luther* 65 (1994) : 110-123.

²⁰“Den Christus hat vergebung der sunden in seiner kirchen gestiftet und ein solch reich angerichtet, das so heisset vergebung der sunde,” Reihenpredigten über Johannes 3-4 sowie Matthäus 18-24 1537/40; Predigten 1539, WA 47:310, 32-33.

²¹Apology, Article IV, *Book of Concord*, 131:67.

²²Ibid., 133:76 [*Consequi remissionem peccatorum est iustificari iuxta illud: Beati, quorum remissae sunt iniquitates / Vergabung der Sunde erlangen und haben, dasselbige heisst für Gott gerecht und fromm werden, wie der 31. Psalm sagt: ‘Wohl dem, dem die Ubertretung vergeben ist’*].

for sinners. It comes through the spoken Word (preaching), baptism, the Lord's Supper, absolution, and the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren. Through these means the Holy Spirit works faith (justifying faith) in those who hear the gospel. Pastoral care is most concerned with faith, faith that clings only to Jesus and his giving. Shepherding in the Lord's church is all about preaching the gospel and faithful administration of the sacraments for the sake of justifying faith. "The highest worship in the Gospel is the desire to receive forgiveness of sins, grace, and righteousness."²³ Faith receives. Faith is given to. It is the *passiva vita*.

For this reason Dr. Luther, the reformers, and the churches of the Augsburg Confession kept private confession and absolution. "Concerning confession it is taught that private absolution should be retained and not abolished."²⁴

So what is confession? That's the question raised in the Small Catechism. It is just like the other two questions, namely, "What is Baptism?" and "What is the Sacrament of the Altar?" The answer given to "What is Confession?" gives the breakdown of what happens. The first part of confession is that we confess our sins. The second part is that we receive

²³Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article IV, *The Book of Concord*, edited by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 155:310.

²⁴Augsburg Confession, Article XI, *Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert, German, 44:1.

the absolution, the forgiveness, from the pastor as from God himself. We are not to doubt this Word. Instead, we are to firmly believe that by the absolution our sins are forgiven before God in heaven. Then we are instructed about what sins we confess. Before God: all of them, even the ones about which you don't have a clue. Before pastor: just the ones you know and feel in your heart. All right. But which are these? Well, examine your place in life according to the Ten Commandments. Are you a father or mother? Are you a husband or wife? A son or daughter? How obedient have you been? Been lazy have you? Whom have you hurt with your words? Why didn't you eat all your supper? What did you lose at work and never report? Why did you accept a paycheck for 40 hours when you only worked 37 hours? And then there's Dr. Luther's liturgical example of how confession may go with your pastor.

The point of the fifth chief part is this: you don't just talk about confession and absolution -- you are to do/receive it. Thus the title: "How Christians Should Be Taught to Confess." Confess before God, before the neighbor, or when you have the need before the pastor. You have all the right doctrine concerning this topic. But the doctrine of justification by grace through faith will be kept pure and operative in the church as the Lord Jesus Christ speaks to sinners in the absolution. In that speaking the sinner

is justified only by faith in that Word. The absolution does and gives what it says (*verbum efficax*). The sinner through the absolution is forgiven graciously for Christ's sake. He/she now has a clear conscience *coram Deo* (Hebrews 9:14; 10:23). To be absolved is to be justified! "We believe, teach, and confess that according to the usage of Holy Scripture the word 'to justify' in this article means 'to absolve,' that is, 'to pronounce free from sin.'"²⁵ He/she now has a new relationship with God, his neighbors, and the creation. Forgiven for Christ's sake the man/woman are free to live the creaturely lives God has given him/her to be and to do the daily tasks he's given him/her to do in his/her various vocations.

So when the Small Catechism asks the question, "What Is Confession?" we are at the apex of pastoral care: faith. Faith that hears and trusts the *viva vox Christi* (living voice of Christ) in the absolution.²⁶ "In private absolution there occurs the application of the universal promise of grace to anyone at all separately, so that whoever has been absolved can and should claim with certainty that Christ surely has forgiven him his sins because He has announced it to him with His own voice through the minister's absolution,

²⁵Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article III, *Book of Concord*, 495:7.

²⁶"*Nam absolucio nihil aliud est quam praedicacio euangelii, sacramentum baptismi et altaris, do ist nichts anders den absolucio,*" April 11, 1531 "Predigt am Osterdienstag," WA 34¹:308,19.

no differently from how He did in the case of the paralytic: ‘My son, be of good cheer. Your sins are forgiven you,’ Matt. 9.’²⁷ In the word of absolution you hear Christ. He simply uses the mouth of the pastor to speak his Word to you.²⁸ In the absolution Jesus is saying: “I absolve you of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. That is I reconcile your soul with God and take away from you the wrath and indignation of God and set you in his grace. I give to you the inheritance of eternal life and the kingdom of heaven.”²⁹

Melanchthon contended that Dr. Luther’s reformational discovery was his evangelical teaching and restoration of confession and absolution.³⁰ This is absolutely correct. Confession and absolution is anchored in the life of holy baptism (daily repentance = contrition and faith / death and resurrection) that flows into the Lord’s Supper. That is the way Dr. Luther

²⁷David Chrytraeus, *A Summary of the Christian Faith*, 137.

²⁸“Nor is it the pastor who absolves you, but the mouth and hand of the minister is the mouth and hand of God,” “Lectures on Genesis,” AE, 5:249. “But whenever I minister, that is, baptize or absolve, I must be certain that my work is not mine, but God’s, who works through me. Baptism is a work of God; for it is not mine, although I lend my hands and my mouth as instruments. Thus when I absolve you or call you to the ministry and lay my hands on you, you should not doubt that, as Peter says, it is God’s strength,” AE 5:250. “And do not doubt that this voice of the brother in the Sacrament or in absolution is divinely spoken by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit Himself, so that you completely depend on what you hear, not on what you do or think . . . After hearing comes confidence, so that we say: ‘I am baptized. I have taken the body given for me on the cross. I have heard the voice of God from the minister or brother, by which the forgiveness of sins has been announced to me.’ This confidence conquers death and all other evils” AE 12:370-371.

²⁹AE 5:141 = WA 43:525, 16.

³⁰“Defense of Doctor Luther Against the Parisian Opinion,” WA 8:311.

understood the order based on the Scriptures. We see this in the arrangement of the Small Catechism. “What is Confession?” is sandwiched between “What Is Baptism?” and “What is the Sacrament of the Altar?”

And this is nothing else than the life of justification by grace through faith alone for Christ’s sake (*beneficium*). Witness too the order of the articles in the Augsburg Confession. Article II: Original Sin. Article III: The Son of God. Article IV: Justification. Article V: The Preaching Office that preaches the Gospel and faithfully administers the sacraments. Article VI: works don’t save but they flow from faith. Articles VII-VIII: the church. Article IX: Baptism. Article X: The Lord’s Supper. Articles XI-XII: Confession and Repentance. “The teaching on repentance and the teaching on justification, are very closely related.”³¹

Justification by grace through faith alone is not just a mantra, cliché, theory, or slogan. It is a fact. Through the absolution the sinner’s relationship to God is changed. The sinner’s relationship to others and creation itself is changed. And where there is forgiveness of sins there IS life and salvation. You are free to live a life not for yourself but for others. You are free to enjoy the creation as creation. And in your various vocations there will be crosses the Lord imposes on you so that you lose hold of

³¹Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XII, *Book of Concord*, 197:59.

yourself and you lose your grip (the old Adam is put to death). Then Jesus takes hold of you again in the absolution and he raises you once again for living in your vocations and for your salvation.

Now maybe you understand why Dr. Luther speaks this way about justification and why pastors extol holy absolution: “This doctrine can never be discussed or taught enough. If it is lost and perishes, the whole knowledge of truth, life, and salvation is lost and perishes at the same time. But if it flourishes, everything good flourishes – religion, true worship, the glory of God, and the right knowledge of all things and of all social conditions.”³²

Holy Absolution is the spoken gospel.³³ It is the true voice of the gospel.³⁴ According to Luke 10:16 you are to believe “the one absolving no less than we would believe a voice from heaven.”³⁵ Our churches retain “confession especially on account of absolution, which is the Word of God that the power of the keys proclaims to individuals by divine authority.”³⁶ “When we are baptized, when we eat the body of the Lord, and when we are

³²AE 26:3. See also Table Talk, AE 54:#430.

³³*Book of Concord*, Tappert, 148:271.

³⁴Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XII, *Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert, 193:39. The German: “*ist das Evangelium selbst.*”

³⁵*Ibid.*, 193:40. The German: *denn wenn wir Gottes Klare Stimme von Himmel hörten, und die Absolution, das selige, tröstliche Wort.*”

³⁶*Ibid.*, 204:99.

absolved, God truly forgives us on account of Christ. And God moves our hearts through the word and the rite at the same time so that they believe and receive faith just as Paul says, ‘So faith comes from what is heard.’”³⁷

Wilhelm Löhe is right. “All other methods of individual care of souls have proved unsatisfactory and often impracticable substitutes for private confession . . . The reintroduction will not be so difficult as one might think. There are examples to prove that it may be successful. Of course, we must be ready and willing to take some trouble to get accustomed to something new. The more we become accustomed to it, the more its blessing will be apparent.”³⁸

Happy serving up the 200 proof, 2,000 year-old Gospel in the speaking of the holy absolution. Happy hearing it from your pastor. May you all drink deeply using Jesus against your sin and for your life, and salvation.

The words which absolution give
Are His who died that we might live;
The minister whom Christ has sent
Is but His humble instrument.

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.

(“‘As Surely as I Live,’ God Said,” #614:5-6 *Lutheran Service Book*)

³⁷Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XIII, 219:4-5.

³⁸*Three Books About the Church*, 174-175.

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