

Rejoicing in Holy Absolution

I have a high regard for private confession, for here God's word and absolution are spoken privately and individually to each believer for the forgiveness of his sins, and as often as he desires it he may have recourse to it for this forgiveness, and also for comfort, counsel, and guidance. Thus it is a precious, useful thing for souls, as long as no one is driven to it with laws and commandments but sinners are left free to make use of it, each according to his own need.

(Dr. Martin Luther, 1528 *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper* AE 37:368)

The practice and use of private confession and absolution is one of the ways that justification by grace through faith will be kept pure and operative in the church. (Dr. Kenneth Korby)

Father of mercies and God of all consolation, before You all hearts are laid bare and no secrets are concealed. Open the lips of Your children that they may not hide their iniquity and so waste away in deceit, but in truth acknowledge their sin and receive Your word of absolution. Guide your pastors by Your Word and Spirit, that they may rightly discharge the holy office with faithfulness and mercy, wisdom and compassion. Guard the door of their lips that they never utter what is divulged in confession and, by the word of pardon that You have placed on their lips, grant that those whose bones have been crushed by the weight of Your wrath might be restored with the forgiveness purchased by the blood of Your Son. Protect them from the accusation of the evil one as he strives to rob them of Your peace. Save them from temptation and keep them in the company of Your holy Church to sing of Your saving righteousness forever; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

+ Jesu Juva +

Holy baptism has meaning for you not just on the day of your baptism but also for all of your life. The baptized Christian lives in and from baptism as the Lord repents, faiths and leads. Living in and from holy baptism is an ongoing dying of the old Adam and the rising of the new man spelled F-A-I-T-H. Daily the sinner dies in the death of Jesus. Daily the saint rises in the life of Jesus. Daily the washing, rebirthing and renewing work of baptism is effected through the Holy Spirit-filled Word of God. Baptism is the beginning of a dying and rising (Romans 6) that ends with your own death and your resurrection when Jesus appears in glory to judge the living and the dead.

This daily dying to sin and rising of the new man spelled F-A-I-T-H brings us what is sometimes called the "third sacrament" – holy absolution. And such a poor and neglected one it is! It shouldn't be so in a church that pledges her allegiance to the Lutheran Confessions which call absolution the "living voice" of the gospel, and says that "it would be wicked to remove personal absolution" from our churches. Tell a fellow Lutheran that your congregation offers hours for personal confession twice a month as its provided in the hymnal (LSB page 292) and I guarantee you that jaws will hit the floor, eyebrows will rise, teeth and fists will be clenched and the pastor will be under suspicion of false teaching. I was almost removed from the office of the holy ministry because I taught the fifth chief part of the Small Catechism and actually had times for people to receive the absolution if they desired it individually. In addition, I'll never forget that at one of my first circuit meetings, one of my peers arrogantly and snidely mocked: "Private confession? That Roman Catholic! We don't do that in the Lutheran Church!" Really? The church that does

not practice what the Lutheran Confessions (especially the Small and Large Catechisms) teach is hardly entitled to be called a “Lutheran” church. If it was wicked to remove personal absolution in the 16th century, it is still wicked to remove it or refuse to put it back into practice in the 21st century – unless something has changed about your sin and Christ’s Good Friday forgiveness.¹

It bears repeating. Confession of sin and receiving the absolution is the ongoing meaning and significance of baptism. It is living in and from baptism. It is a return to the water, a sprinkling with the Word of baptism that first brought us life and cleansing. So basic is confession to the Christian life, that the Large Catechism simply says: “When I urge you to go to confession, I am simply urging you to be a Christian.” Christians confess their sins and use Jesus properly by the regular reception of forgiveness. Unbelievers deny their sins and have no use of Jesus and His forgiveness.

Absolution without individual confession can become a cross-less or Christ-less Christianity. It is the attempt to have repentance without shame, contrition without guilt. It is the equivalent of an out of court settlement – just pay the money admit no wrongdoing. God, however, wants us at the bar of his justice. There is no back room bargaining with the Lord. There is only the law and the gospel -- your sin and the death of Jesus for your sin.

The gift of holy absolution consists of two parts. The first part is that we confess our sins. To confess means to “say the same words.” To say back what you have heard in the way a child repeats what he hears. You may feel badly about yourself. You may have low self-esteem, feel guilty or depressed and isolated. The law says to you: “You are a sinner.” That’s what is wrong with you. It’s not what you do. It’s who you are. So you confess: “I am a sinner.” That is the only truth that a sinner can say. “I am a sinner.” Remember Isaiah? As he stood before the holy Lord he spoke the truth: “Woe to me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips,” (Is 6:5). Remember Peter? Standing before the Lord after the large catch of fish he too told the truth: “Depart from

¹The Apology of the Augsburg Confession: “For we also 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. Therefore it would be unconscionable to remove private absolution from the church. Moreover, those who despise private absolution know neither the forgiveness of sins nor the power of the keys,” (Ap XII 99-101; KW, 204). Dr. Kenneth F. Korby once recounted a conversation with a LCMS district official who arrogantly proclaimed: “I make confession to no one!” To which Dr. Korby replied: “And so do your people!” One wonders if this district official’s “no one” included God himself. I hope not. Otherwise one wonders if he ever prayed the fifth petition of the Lord’s Prayer, the evening prayer from the Small Catechism, or if he participated in the preparatory rites from the hymnal. Most likely the official’s “no one” meant Korby whose high pastoral care as a doctor of the church included not only teaching Articles XI and XXV of the Augsburg Confession and its Apology as well as the fifth chief part of the Small Catechism but also its evangelical practice. Instead of being repulsed by the smoke of a hand rolled cigarette from Dr. Korby’s lips (a mortal “sin” these days – of which all must confess to Concordia Health Plans and then promise never to do it again), the official almost certainly smelled the aroma of “Romanizing tendencies” called private confession and absolution.

me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord,” (Lk 5:8). Sinner means rebel, enemy of God, idolater, one who wants to overthrow God from his throne, one who fears, loves and trusts himself instead of God. That is the truth about ourselves. We must speak that truth before God.

The opposite of confession is denial. “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us,” (1 Jn 1:8). When we deny our present sinfulness, we are kidding ourselves, and the truth is not at work in us. We become quite angry when someone says to us, “You are sinning” or when someone calls us a “sinner.” Right? Of course! But it’s the truth. That’s what we are. “If we say we have not sinned, we make (God) a liar; and his word is not in us,” (1 Jn 1:10). The past counts too. The past and the present testify against us. We HAVE sin and we HAVE SINNED.

Confession puts the past and the present into concrete words. We may confess generally, such as we do in church every Sunday: “We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone.” We also confess specifically, those things that we know and trouble us the most. The Lutheran Reformation is not interested in the mathematics of “how many” sins to confess. Who can know all his errors? “Forgive my hidden faults”, prays the psalmist (Psalm 19:12). There is no end to the lists one could make. By the same token, the Reformers were not satisfied with a generic confession, the kind that you, me, and everyone could all say together. “I, a poor miserable sinner.” True enough, but what makes you say that?

General confession without specific confession runs the risk of simply bad-mouthing ourselves. That isn’t telling the truth, but covering over the truth with a lesser truth. Specific confession run amuck can become a perverse sort of pride, a personal pity party in which we brag about our weakness and run our dirty laundry out on the line for the whole neighborhood to see. Speaking the truth of our sin means neither kicking the corpse of our body of death, nor putting it on display.

Confession is directed in three ways – to God, to the neighbor, and to the pastor. A Christian always confesses to God, and can always confess to God directly, as we do in the Lord’s Prayer, the Evening Prayer in the Small Catechism and in our own personal prayers. Psalm 32:5 is a classic example: “I acknowledged my sin to you ... I will confess my transgressions to the LORD, and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.” That is your privilege as a holy and royal baptized priest and child of God. However, sometimes we are tempted to use this privilege as a dodge and an excuse. “I can confess directly to God; therefore, I don’t need to confess before another.” That isn’t humility, but pride. The very words and deeds we are ashamed to admit before a fellow sinner, we were not ashamed to say and do in full view of the Lord of heaven and earth.

Though we may confess to God directly, He always deals with us through the external Word, the Word outside of ourselves – through baptism, through the Lord’s Supper, through the preached Word. The person who boasts confidently, “I can confess my sins to God directly, and therefore don’t need the church,” misses the basic point. It’s not our confession, but God’s forgiveness that matters. And God always deals with us through the incarnation of Jesus, through earthy, creaturely means such as water, bread, wine, words, in this case sound waves that emanate from mouths and go into ear holes.

A Christian also confesses to the neighbor, especially when he or she has sinned against the neighbor. Whenever we hurt and harm another, we need to confess it to that person, and forgive one another as God has forgiven us. We need to let Jesus get between us, or else our sins will push us apart. That is the double absolution for which we pray in the Our Father – that our Father in heaven would forgive us as we forgive others. Our problem is that we are out of practice. Our tongues are tied in knots. The language of confession sounds foreign to our ears because we don't use it. Instead we harbor grudges and resentments. We nurse quarrels for years. We isolate and alienate each other. And this ought not be, especially in the Christian congregation which God instituted to be a place filled with forgiveness. The Christian has the call and command of Christ to go to the brother or sister who has sinned, to be like Nathan to David, rebuke the sin and restore the sinner. "Therefore, confess your sins to one another," (James 5:16). "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother," (Mt 18:15). Peter's question went like this: "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" And the Lord's audacious answer is: "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven," (Mt. 18:21-22). "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you," (Eph 4:32).

Even the soft social science secular psychologists have begun to catch on, at least in a small way. They now speak of "forgiveness therapy" – husbands and wives intentionally and specifically forgiving one another. Parents and children confessing their sins against each other and absolving one another. Of all places, the church ought to be a laboratory where the conversation of confession is practiced and applied among the baptized children of God. But then again, "Who does that kind of thing anymore?"

Christians also confess to their pastor. There are several good reasons for doing this.

First, he is commanded by the Lord Jesus to forgive repentant sinners (Mt 16:19; 18:18; Jn 20:23) and he is ordained to hear confession. That's what we put him there for. It is one of the tasks laid on a pastor at his ordination.

Second, he is equipped by practice and training to help others sharpen and deepen their confession and to square them to the Word of God.

Third, he is bound by solemn vow to secrecy, something that a close friend is not. For a pastor to break the seal of confession is grounds for dismissal.

Fourth, the pastor is a public, corporate person. He holds an office. The pastor does not speak for himself but for Christ (Lk 10:16; 2 Cor 5:20) and for the whole church (2 Cor 2:10). The pastor is a minister, a servant of the Word, and a steward of God's mysteries revealed in Christ. He is not there as a superior, but as a servant. He serves not "from above" but "from below." He is there not to condemn but to forgive. He is under holy orders to forgive (Mt 16; 18; Jn 20). A friend may forgive you simply to keep you as a friend. A family member may forgive you for no other reason than to keep peace in the family. Friends and family we have galore. Pastors, we have precious few. A pastor forgives by the divine order of the crucified, risen, and reigning Son of God, "in his

stead and by his command.” He represents the person of Jesus, not his own person. Even if the pastor doesn’t like you, or even if you don’t like him, his forgiveness is Christ’s forgiveness, sure and certain, addressed to you. And that’s really all that matters.

That brings us to the second part, and more important part of confession, which is the absolution. “If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness,” (1 Jn 1:9). Absolution is spoken forgiveness, release, and freedom. God releases the sinner from his sin; He puts your sin as “far as the east is from the west.” He buries it in the Good Friday death of Jesus. He cleanses you with His holy, precious blood. He surrounds you with His innocent suffering and death.

God is faithful. He is trustworthy. He has promised to forgive. We can approach him with confidence. He will not treat you as your sins deserve. “I forgive you,” God says to you. Who would dare to contradict Him? To say, “No, it can’t be,” is to deny the cross of Christ. It’s the equivalent of saying, “Jesus did not die for me.”

God is also just. His justice demands a judgment, a verdict. God is just and he justifies the sinner in Christ. He made Jesus into our sin (2 Cor 5:21) and curse (Gal 3:13). He judged Jesus guilty and put on him what we all deserve. He condemned Jesus in our place. In Jesus, that is, baptized into his death and believing on his name, God judges/declares/reckons us innocent and righteous. God justifies the sinner in his Son.

“I absolve you. I forgive you.” This is no cheap, idle word. No “smile, be happy, God loves you,” saccharine sentimentality. This is a costly Word from God to you. It cost the Son of God his life. He sweat and suffered and bled and died so that this word might be spoken. It is a Word anchored in the past, nailed to the bloody cross of Golgotha. It is a Word that reaches into our present -- into the here and now of our lives. It reaches into our ears and minds and hearts. It is a divine Word that says, “Christ Jesus died for you.” It is a word authorized and approved by the crucified and risen Son of God himself, freshly risen from the dead with the wounds to prove it, who breathed His Spirit and words into his disciples and said, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld,” (Jn 20:23).

People are quite often offended by the absolution. “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” The unbelieving Pharisees asked that of Jesus. “How dare this Jesus speak as though he were God!” People should be offended. The absolution is as offensive as the incarnation of the Son of God. It is as offensive as the God who wears diapers and sleeps in a manger, or the God who hangs naked, bleeding and stone cold dead on a cross. Only God can forgive. That’s true. And God only forgives through His Son, who became man, who speaks through his church and the ministry he ordained to speak. It is the living voice of God that we hear when we hear the absolution. We “receive the absolution, that is, forgiveness from the pastor as from God Himself, (Small Catechism) “So if there is a heart that feels its sin and desires comfort, it has here a sure refuge where it finds and hears God’s Word because through a man God looses and absolves from sin” (Large Catechism).

Do you have to go to confession? Does a thirsty deer question whether he has to drink from a cold mountain stream? Does a hungry person ask whether he has to eat a free meal offered to him? Does one who hungers and thirsts for righteousness ask whether he has to hear a Word from Christ? Does a Christian ever ask whether he or she has to be forgiven? Do you have to go to confession? I think you already know the answer. Of course you don't have to go. God never forces anyone to be forgiven. You get to be forgiven! And always as a gift.

If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)