

NLCS

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Chemnitz, *Examination* 2:568-588 [Part Three 2:620-625]

Absolution



Trent

CHAPTER VI.

On the ministry of this Sacrament, and on Absolution.

But, as regards the minister of this sacrament, the holy Synod declares all these doctrines to be false, and utterly alien from the truth of the Gospel, which perniciously extend the ministry of the keys to any others soever besides bishops and priests; imagining, contrary to the institution of this sacrament, that those words of our Lord, Whatsoever you shall bind upon earth, shall be bound also in heaven, and whatsoever you shall loose upon earth shall be loosed also in heaven, and, Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them, and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained, were in such wise addressed to all the faithful of Christ indifferently and indiscriminately, as that every one has the power of forgiving sins,-public sins to wit by rebuke, provided he that is rebuked shall acquiesce, and secret sins by a voluntary confession made to any individual whatsoever. It also teaches, that even priests, who are in mortal sin, exercise, through the virtue of the Holy Ghost which was bestowed in ordination, the office of forgiving sins, as the ministers of Christ; and that their sentiment is erroneous who contend that this power exists not in bad priests. ***But although the absolution of the priest is the dispensation of another's bounty, yet is it not a bare ministry only, whether of announcing the Gospel, or of declaring that sins are forgiven, but is after the manner of a judicial act, whereby sentence is pronounced by the priest as by a judge: and therefore the penitent ought not so to confide in his own personal faith,*** as to think that, --even though there be no contrition on his part, or no intention on the part of the priest of acting seriously and absolving truly, --***he is nevertheless truly and in God's sight absolved, on account of his faith alone.*** For neither would [Page 101] faith without penance bestow any remission of sins; nor would he be otherwise than most careless of his own salvation, who, knowing that a priest but absolved him in jest, should not care fully seek for another who would act in earnest.

CANON IX.--***If any one saith, that the sacramental absolution of the priest is not a judicial act, but a bare ministry of pronouncing and declaring sins to be forgiven to him who confesses; provided only he believe himself to be absolved,*** or (even though) the priest absolve not in earnest, but in joke; or saith, that the confession of the penitent is not required, in order that the priest may be able to absolve him; let him be anathema.

CANON X.--If any one saith, that priests, who are in mortal sin, have not the power of binding and of loosing; ***or, that not priests alone are the ministers of absolution, but that, to all and each of the faithful of Christ is it said:*** Whatsoever you shall bind upon earth shall be bound also in heaven; and whatsoever you shall loose upon earth, shall be loosed also in heaven; and, whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained; ***by virtue of which words every one is***

able to absolve from sins, to wit, from public sins by reproof only, provided he who is reproved yield thereto, and from secret sins by a voluntary confession; let him be anathema. (<http://history.hanover.edu/texts/trent/ct14.html>, emphasis added)

Melanchthon added article XIV to the Augsburg Confession in 1530 because of Eck's slander that these Lutherans have done away with the holy office and contend that everyone is a priest/minister like the Anabaptists.¹ Trent's slander against the evangelical people of the Augsburg Confession is similar to Eck. Consequently, Chemnitz makes the careful distinctions that are not in conflict with Holy Scripture, Dr. Luther's benchmark work of 1520, *The Babylonian Captivity*, the Small and Large Catechisms of 1529, and Articles, V, XIV, and XXVIII of the confession made at 1530 and the Apology of 1531.

Yes, indeed, the keys have been entrusted to the church on earth. However, WE ARE NOT ANABAPTISTS! *Contra* the smears of Eck and Trent, Chemnitz states: "We nevertheless by no means hold that any and every Christian without distinction should or can take to himself or exercise the ministry of the Word and sacraments without a legitimate call" (2:621; see also 2:96-98; for what constitutes a legitimate call see 2:700-714). A layman may have passion for the "ministry," but he dare not publicly preach, baptize, absolve or lord's supper unless he is *rite vocatus-ed*. He can't just put himself/herself in without being educated, examined, called and ordained. The Lord Jesus calls and puts qualified men into the holy office through the call of church. In addition, Chemnitz writes elsewhere:

Luther showed from the Word of God against the various sects of Anabaptists that no one, even if he were the most learned, ought to

¹ "All Christians, as many as are baptized, are equally priests. And any lay person can consecrate churches, confirm children, and so forth. Luther." Article #268 of his "Four Hundred Four Article for the Imperial Diet at Augsburg," in *Sources and Contexts of The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 65. In order to lump the Lutherans with the heretics of the past, and present, Eck writes in Article #266, "Anybody can absolve anybody. So unlimited authority for hearing confessions is given to all brothers and sisters. Luther" Ibid., 64.

usurp the ministry of the Word and of the sacraments in the church without a special and legitimate call. And he most earnestly admonished the church that she should not permit those to exercise the ministry of the Word and of the sacraments who do not have proof of a legitimate call, because it is written: ‘How can men preach unless they are sent?’ (Rom. 10:15) and ‘I did not send the prophets, yet they ran’ (Jer. 23:21) (2:96; see also 2:97ff.).

And at the same time Chemnitz rightly confesses: “As however the ancients say that in case of necessity any Christian lay person can administer the sacrament of Baptism, so Luther says the same thing about absolution in case of necessity, where no priest is present” (2:621).

We do not eliminate the holy office. It has been instituted by the Lord for the very reason AC V confesses. The order of the articles are very telling: I (The Holy Trinity), II (Original Sin), III (Jesus Christ), IV (Justification by grace through faith), and V (Divine Institution of the *Predigtamt* for preaching and sacramenting because the Holy Spirit creates justifying faith through means / *Solchen Glauben zu erlangen, hat Gott das Predigtamt eingesetzt, Evangelium und Sakrament geben, dadurch er als durch Mittel den heiligen Geist gibt* . . . [rejected most clearly are the Anabaptists]).²

And yet there are these words of our church based upon the clear teaching of Holy Scripture:

²”In order to get this [justifying] faith, God instituted the preaching [sermon] office to give the gospel and the sacraments” (my translation). Tappert’s functionalist presuppositions are inserted into his English translation. He inserts a *das ist* (“that is”) between the *Predigtamt* and the gospel and the sacraments. He also changes the *geben* (“to give”) into a past participle, *gegeben* (“has given”). Tappert: “To obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments.” Include his editorial footnote that simply piggybacks on the 1979 editorial position of the *Bekennnisschriften* (page 58, note #1) claims that office of the ministry is not to be thought of in clerical terms and you’ve got rank functionalism that disintegrates the office into only functions. The Latin allows no such collapsing: *Ut hanc fidem consequamur, institutum est ministerium docendi evangelii et porrigendi sacramenta* (“In order that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted”).

just as in an emergency even a layperson grants absolution and becomes the minister or pastor of another [*sicut in casu necessitates absolvit etiam laicus et fit minister ac pastor alterius / wie dann in der Not auch ein schlechter Lai einen andern absolviern und sein Pfarrherr werden kann*]. So Augustine tells the story of two Christians in a boat, one of whom baptized the other (a catechumen) and then the latter, having been baptized, absolved the former. Pertinent here are the words of Christ that assert that the keys were given to the church, not just to particular persons: ‘For where two or three are gathered in my name . . .’³

There is also the holy office. There is the holy and royal priesthood. We confess and extol them both most highly. We don’t play one off against the other as if only the pastors can speak the gospel. Both church and ministry [ministry and church] exist together and for the sake of each other. Can’t have one without the other.

You remember from April that Chemnitz maintains both the office and royal priesthood. And when it comes to Matthew 18:18 he argues that “God promises that He will regard this fraternal reconciliation as valid in heaven” (2:595). He provides the quote from Theophylact (2:595) that he summarizes briefly: “that whatever is either loosed or bound in fraternal reproof and reconciliation is loosed and bound in heaven itself” (2:621).

Like Dr. Luther before him, Chemnitz endeavors to let the Gospel remain whole. Any slicing and dicing of or mathematics with the Gospel and it is no longer the Gospel. Thus the proper distinction between the Law and Gospel is to be maintained. So Chemnitz writes: “Moreover, there is no doubt that when the Word of the Gospel is proclaimed, God works efficaciously, no matter by whom it is proclaimed” (2:621). Confess all there is to confess about the holy

³Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, in *The Book of Concord: Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Kolb-Wengert, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 341:67-68. Please note that the emergency situation [*Not*] is not the shortage of clergy or the distances between congregations that make it hard for pastors to serve. The emergency described by the Treatise is what comes by complete surprise. Who planned for this? But there you are. The boat’s going under. They’re going to die and there’s no pastor. You’d better do it. Thus page 312 in *Lutheran Worship*.

office and its gospel vocation – but not exclusively so. Confess all there is to confess about the royal priesthood and its gospel vocation – but not exclusively so. This is the Scriptural ground upon which we walk. The deep and great temptation is to diminish the holy office at the expense of the royal priesthood (Anabaptists of the past and Pietists of recent days like Oscar Feucht, Kent Hunter, David Luecke, and Hans Küng) or to diminish the royal priesthood for the sake of the holy office (Rome).

We observed in our study of the Lord’s Supper with Dr. Luther that the *Verba Christi* are the main thing. In fact they are everything: “These words . . . are the main thing in the Sacrament” (1529 Small Catechism). “For in that word and in that word alone, reside the power, the nature, and the whole substance of the mass” (1520 “Babylonian Captivity” LW 36:36). “For we have before us the clear text and the plain words of Christ: . . . These are the words on which we take our stand” (1526 “*The Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ Against the Fanatics*” LW 36:335-336). “Everything depends on these words . . . for they are the sum and substance of the whole gospel” (1523 “The Adoration of the Sacrament” LW 36:277). “Mark this and remember it well. For upon these words rest our whole argument, our protection and defense against all errors and deceptions that have ever arisen or may yet arise” (Large Catechism V:19).

With Rome, of course, it’s just the opposite. The *Verba Christi* can only be effectively said by the sacramentally ordained priest. The emphasis is on the indelibly character-ed man through the laying on of hands in order to offer the atoning sacrifice of the mass for the living and the dead. Still to this day, despite the Joint Declaration on Justification, you ring-neck, tab, rabot vest, Veggie Tales and Mickey Mouse tie wearing Lutherans are not in “the” ministry. When you preach, baptize or lord’s supper, it doesn’t totally count. The best the pope can say about you is that you are “separated brethren.” He won’t call you “church.” You’re out there on the most outer edge of holy mother church. You must come home to Rome like Richard John Neuhaus to be properly ordered, ordained, and churched. The

Muslims, Jews, and atheists can be Christians anonymously. But you should know better. You're in worse shape than they.

As Chemnitz critiques Trent's teaching regarding the absolution, we encounter the same problem. With Rome the absolution doesn't depend on the *Verba Christi*⁴ but on the person who absolves, the priest. "They place the integrity, genuineness, and efficacy of the sacraments not simply and completely in the words of Christ, but in part also in the character they imagine is imprinted on priests in ordination. Therefore also, they want the comfort of the absolution to depend not so much on the Word of the Gospel as on the person of the one who absolves" (2:621). And the priest is there as judge to do a judicial act. He will pronounce a sentence upon as in a law court. And the sentence can only be pronounced after your confession is complete, your contrition is genuine, and the intention to do satisfactions is present (see also 2:614).

But the ministry of the Gospel is so much different than a court trial.

The ministry of the Gospel . . . has the command to announce and impart the benefit of Another, namely Christ, for the remission of sins to such as labor and are heavy laden and seek to be revived. Now whoever seeks absolution sets two before himself: First, God Himself as the one from whom he seeks and asks remission of sins; therefore he pours out his whole heart before Him. Then he also sets before him the minister, whose voice or ministry God uses as that of an ambassador or messenger or agent for imparting and

⁴Dr. Luther on Psalm 51:8: "This is the doctrine for which we bear not only the name 'heresy' but punishment, namely, that we attribute everything to hearing or to the Word or to faith in the Word – these are all the same – and not to our works. Yes, in the use of the Sacraments and in confession **we teach men to look mainly at the Word**, so that we call everything back from our works to the Word. The hearing of gladness is in Baptism, when it is said: 'I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Matt. 28:19); 'He who believes and is baptized will be saved' (Mark 16:16). The hearing of gladness is in the Lord's Supper, when it is said, 'This is My body, which is given for you' (Luke 22:19). The hearing of gladness is in confession, or, to call it by its more proper name, in absolution and the use of the keys: 'Have faith. Your sins are forgiven you through the death of Christ.' . . . We call men back to the Word so that the chief part of the whole action might be the voice of God itself and the hearing itself" (1532 "Commentary on Psalm 51," LW 12:369-370, emphasis added).

sealing the absolution. Therefore when I have made known my fault to God, there is no need for a scrupulous enumeration before the minister, who is only the dispenser of Another's benefits (2:615).

Again, at issue is the proper distinction between the Law and Gospel. If you're a Lombard contritionist, your judicial pastoral care is to speak the absolution simply for the sake of confirming for the penitent that his contrition worked forgiveness before he came to confession. In addition, your judicial pastoral care would be to make sure that the penitent is made right with the church but not completely *coram Deo*. If you're from the Thomistic school, the absolution has the power to change attrition into contrition. The judicial pastoral care is to change eternal punishment into temporal punishment. Imposing satisfactions is the binding work. The loosing work is to alleviate the temporal punishments.

Chemnitz again reminds us of the opposite: "Ministers, however, act only as ambassadors . . . they have not been commanded to search the hearts but to proclaim the remission of sins to those who indicate that they repent and believe the Gospel" (2:616). Similarly: "Now when some object that a judge ought to hear a case before pronouncing a sentence, that is irrelevant because absolution is not judgment but the administration of another person's gift."⁵

Ask the people you serve and your "convention junky" peers the following questions. What is absolution? What effects does it have? Does it console you? What is the basis of absolution? Generally speaking, I believe the answers will shock you. Why? Because all they read are Max Lucado, *The Da Vinci Code*, *The Purpose Driven Life*, *The Purpose Driven Church*, *Aquachurch*, *Your Best Life Now*, *So, You Want To Be Like Christ? : Eight Essentials to Get You There*, and of course, *The Left Behind* series. You'll learn quite quickly if you haven't already, that the chief thing on their minds and practice with regard to repentance is either contrition ("I said I am sorry!"), confession ("I've made the good confession!"), or satisfaction ("I promise never to do it again!"). In other words, most people you talk

⁵Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XII, "Repentance," 204:103.

to believe they're forgiven because of something in them or what they've done or not done. Christianity is a marketplace and God is the "Deal Or No Deal" man upstairs making offers. The "I forgive you – Jesus died for your sin – you are forgiven" is practically unheard of in the homes and congregations we serve.

Don't believe me? Look at your own family life, the voters' meetings, circuit meetings, district and synodical events you attend. They're full of strife, raw power plays, murder and idolatry. Never any confession for the sake of the absolution. The "most weighty matter" (2:622) of faith in the absolution is going the way of the Tyrannosaurus Rex and the observance of The Presentation of the Augsburg Confession by LCMS congregations: extinction. Trent worked and confessed for this very loss. "Good God, how great is the darkness!"⁶ even in our times.

Thankfully we have Chemnitz to teach us. He's not the first. Before him there were the prophets, John the Baptist, Jesus, the apostles, the evangelists, Dr. Luther, Melancthon, and the confessors at Augsburg. Clear explanations of absolution have been given from these Christians from the Word of God. After all, what is at stake "concerns a most important subject, the chief topic of the gospel, the forgiveness of sins."⁷ And this, of course, is absolution.

But what is absolution? For those of you in the darkness Chemnitz answers. "Absolution is nothing else than the proclamation of the Gospel itself, announcing the forgiveness of sins gratis because of Christ, generally, to all who repent and believe the Gospel" (2:622). This proclamation of the Gospel can also be given individually. "For the sake of firmer and surer consolation this proclamation of the Gospel is applied by means of private absolution to individuals who seek it" (2:622).⁸

⁶Ibid., 188:6.

⁷Ibid., 189:10.

⁸ Apology, XI, 186:2 says that the absolution is "the very voice of the Gospel [German: *eine Stimme von Himmel*]." Compare also XII, 188:2 "This is the very voice of the Gospel [German: *Dieses Wort ist nicht unser Wort, sondern die Stimme und Wort Jesu Christi unserts Heilanders*]." Also XII, 193:39, "which is the true voice of the gospel [*ist*

How is the absolution or proclamation of the Gospel to be received? “It must be accepted by faith” (2:622). Faith does not trust in one’s contrition, confession or works of satisfaction. Faith trusts in the *Verba Christi*. And then the most scandalous part of what we confess: “It must be accepted by faith, so that the individual believes the proclamation of the Gospel in absolution and considers it certain that remission of sins is given, applied, and sealed to him by God gratis because of Christ, through the ministry, **and that by this faith he is truly reconciled to God**” (2:622, emphasis added). This is precisely what Trent condemns: the *sola fide*. It’s what Rome, her theologians, and the ecumaniacs will not confess even to this day.⁹

The effect of absolution is consolation for “fearful and terrified consciences” (2:622). Does God have mercy? Does He care about me? Is God like the deadbeat Dad who sleeps on the couch in a drunken stupor while his child plays near the stairs and then tumbles to his death? Is God so totally sovereign that He’s consumed with Himself (like Narcissus who falls in love with Himself) way up there where it’s comfy and clean? If He’s way up there, does He have to deal with all our calamities, disasters, and the filth of our sin?

das Evangelium selbst],” XII, 193:40, “Therefore we must believe the voice of the one absolving no less than we would believe a voice from heaven [German: *denn wenn wir Gottes klare Stimme von Himmel hören, und die Absolution, das selige, tröstliche Wort*],” and XXV, 73:2-4 “because it is the voice of God . . . God’s own voice resounding from heaven.” LW 12:371, “Our whole certainty is placed in Thy Word . . . 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.”

⁹See e.g. Wayne Stumme, editor, *The Gospel of Justification in Christ: Where Does the Church Stand Today?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006). The only article that would not be sympathetic or in agreement with Rome is Steven Paulson’s “The Augustinian Imperfection: Faith, Christ, and Imputation and Its Role in the Ecumenical Discussion of Justification.” See also David E. Aune’s *Rereading Paul Together: Protestant And Catholic Perspectives on Justification* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2006) for the scholarship against the Scriptural *sola fide* and forensic justification.

God does have mercy. He is Immanuel. The Word takes on flesh. He's way down here in the crib and cross. While we were yet sinners Christ died for us. To borrow the language of Dr. Luther, He's with us in the muck and mire so much that His skin smolders. He's in the Worded water, bread, and wine. He's in the mouthed Word (*mündlich Wort*) of absolution: for you! To comfort you. As Gerhard Forde has written: "As abstraction he is always a terror to us, hidden, wrathful . . . The problem is simply that as abstraction God is absent from us and we are inexorably 'under wrath' . . . The only solution to the problem of the absolute, we might say, is actual absolution!"¹⁰

And He's there in the absolution to give you certainty (*Gewiss*) and to strengthen your faith. "He died for all. But did He die for me? Are my sins forgiven?" Absolutely. "Thus fearful and terrified consciences receive consolation from absolution, so that they do not doubt the benefits of the Mediator, which in the Gospel are promised generally to all who believe, belong also to themselves in particular and are given and applied to themselves in particular by God" (2:622). This is huge! This is precisely why private absolution is retained in our churches (AC XI, XIII, XXV; Ap XI, XII, 204:99-101: "For we 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 [*wider Gott/ impium*] to remove private absolution from the church"). Absolution, you remember is nothing else than proclamation of the Gospel. And this Gospel "is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith,' regardless of whether it is proclaimed generally, to many, or privately to but few, or even to only one" (2:622).

We are not against contrition. We're all for it. Rome can't play that card against us either. It is the result of God's crushing, killing and damning work on us through the Law. But again, it must be clearly stated that the efficacy and consolation of absolution rest on the *Verba Christi* and not in our contrition and obedience. The absolution "bestows and proclaims remission of sins . . . gratis, on

¹⁰Gerhard Forde, "Caught in the Act: Reflections on the Work of Christ," in *A More Radical Gospel: Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Ecumenism*, edited by Mark Mattes and Steven Paulson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 95.

account of Christ” (2:622). Faith clings to “the Word of promise which offers and bestows remission of sins gratis, because of Christ” (2:622). And then Romans 4:14, 16 come ringing in: “That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed.”

But what if my pastor’s a schmuck? An idiot? A maintenance minister? A Kuhlman? A Poppe? People are told to stay away from them! They’re not team players. Not people magnets. Unloving and against the saving of the lost. *Noli timere*. “If the Word of the Gospel is proclaimed, faith lays hold of it and is certain that it is absolved before God, no matter what the priest’s intention may be” (2:622-623). “Nor does this detract from the efficacy of the sacraments when they are distributed by the unworthy, because they represent the person of Christ on account of the call of the church and do not represent their own persons, as Christ himself testifies [Luke 10:16], ‘Whoever listens to you listens to me.’ When they offer the Word of Christ or the sacraments, they offer them in the stead and place of Christ [*Christi vice et loco porrigunt*]. The words of Christ teach us this so that we are not offended by the unworthiness of ministers.”¹¹ Thanks be to God!

All of the above Trent condemns. “They do not want absolution to be the ministry of proclaiming the Gospel” (2:623). Faith is not in the *Verba Christi* that proclaims forgiveness free for nothing *propter Christum*, but in the *intra nos* contrition, complete confession, and works of satisfaction of the sinner that the priest must judge (see especially 2:624 where Chemnitz briefly mentions the scholastic teaching that went into Trent).

Trent’s innuendo that we are Anabaptists is simply untrue and slanderous. God does forgive sins. But He does it through means, in particular “through the ministry of the Word and sacraments. Now private absolution proclaims the message of the Gospel through

¹¹Apology, Articles VII and VIII, “The Church,” 178:28. The German even refers to wicked Judas, that when he was sent to preach and to sacrament he did so in Christ’s stead: *Also ist auch Judas zu predigen gesendet. Wenn nu gleich Gottlose predigen und die Sakrament reichen, so reichen sie dieselbigen an Christus statt.*

which God is without doubt efficacious and remits sins to those who by faith lay hold of the message of the Gospel in absolution” (2:623). Yet again, God alone forgives sins! He does it through and outward, external, mouthed Word of absolution (*durchs mündlich Wort / das äusserliche Wort*). “Therefore in absolution God Himself remits sins through the ministry of the Gospel to individual believers, and in this way the absolution of the minister is a testimony of divine absolution, from which the conscience has the testimony that one’s sins are truly forgiven him by God” (2:623).

All this reminds me of what every Christian should know from the Small Catechism.

What is Confession? Confession has two parts. First, that we confess our sins. Second, that we receive absolution, that is, forgiveness from the pastor as from God Himself, not doubting but firmly believing that by it [the absolution] our sins are forgiven before God in heaven.

What do you believe according to these words [John 20:23]? I believe that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command . . . this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself.

Do you believe that my forgiveness is God’s forgiveness? “Yes, dear confessor.” 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.

Not Trent’s judicial pastoral care but the high evangelical pastoral theology and care of the baptized.

Jesu Juva. Amen.