



CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION

A REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON THEOLOGY AND CHURCH RELATIONS
THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD APRIL 2018

Abbreviations used:

AC	Augsburg Confession
Ap	Apology of the Augsburg Confession
LC	Large Catechism
SC	Small Catechism
SA	Smalcald Articles
Tr	Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope
LSB	<i>Lutheran Service Book</i>
KW	Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, ed., <i>The Book of Concord</i> (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000)
AE	<i>Luther's Works</i> , American Edition

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CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION

Introduction

THE 2013 CONVENTION of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod adopted Resolution 4-13, “To Encourage Confession and Absolution for Pastors” (see Appendix). Re-affirming the LCMS scriptural and confessional position on confession and absolution, the resolution seeks to take “seriously the spiritual welfare of her pastors” (second resolve) and encourages them “to seek a father confessor” (third resolve). The fourth resolve maintains Christian liberty, stating “that this resolution makes provision only for those pastors who have a desire to make use of private confession but who are unsure where they may go” The resolution then mandates “that the Commission on Theology and Church Relations provide a document that sets forth our church’s teaching on confession and absolution and offers positive guidance to pastors and congregations in their exercise of the Office of the Keys.”¹

The two words “confession and absolution” are worthy of some clarification. “Confession” occurs in more than one setting or context. The root word from the New Testament is ὁμος, [*homos*] “one and the same.” The basic meaning of the related Greek compound noun ὁμολογία is “an agreement” by which two parties say the same thing, and the compound verb ὁμολογέω is similarly used as “to agree.” Thus, “if we **confess** our sins” (1 JOHN 1:9), we are *saying the same thing that God is saying about our sin*. We are agreeing with what God reveals about us and our sin. We are admitting (acknowledging)

that the Lord’s judgment upon our sin is right and true.² The second word, “absolution,” is a synonym for forgiveness. Lutheran theology dictates that in any discussion of “confession and absolution,” it is this second word that requires emphasis. In Luther’s Brief Exhortation to Confession, he says: “We should therefore take care to keep the two parts clearly separate. We should set little value on our work but exalt and magnify God’s Word.”³

The Small Catechism uses the first word in its question, but emphasizes the second:

What is Confession? Answer: Confession has two parts: First, that we confess our sins, and second, that we receive absolution, that is, forgiveness, from the pastor as from God Himself, not doubting, but firmly believing that by it our sins are forgiven before God in heaven.⁴

Luther speaks of confession of sins in three settings: 1) private confession to a pastor; 2) confession to God alone (as we find it in the Lord’s Prayer, MATT. 6:12); and 3) confession made to a fellow Christian (JAMES 5:16).⁵ We continually admit and confess our sin before God when we pray, “Forgive us our trespasses.” And since the keys

² Both the Hebrew and Greek words for “confess” and its cognates occur in three contexts biblically: as a confession of sin (e.g., LEV. 5:5; PS. 32:5; 38:18; MATT. 3:6), a confession of praise (e.g., DAN. 9:4; 1 TIM. 3:16), and a confession of faith (e.g., IS. 48:1; ROM. 10:9). Common to all is an admission or acknowledgement of truth and a sense of agreement. Thus, one acknowledges one’s sin; one acknowledges one’s faith; one acknowledges God’s greatness. See the “Scriptural Witness” section below.

³ LC, “Exhortation to Confession,” KW 478.18.

⁴ *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 25.

⁵ LC, “A Brief Exhortation to Confession,” KW 476–477.8–12.

¹ Past CTCR documents have also touched on private confession and absolution. These include the following: *The Ministry: Offices, Procedures, and Nomenclature* (1981), *Theology and Practice of The Lord’s Supper* (1983), *Church Discipline in the Christian Congregation* (1985), and *The Pastor-Penitent Relationship: Privileged Communications* (1999). All are available online at lcms.org/ctcr.

of the kingdom (“the power of the keys”), which bind or release a person from the bonds of sin, were given by Christ to His *entire* Church (MATT. 18:15FF.; JOHN 20:19FF.), any member of Christ’s Church may be used by God to assure another person of forgiveness as he confesses his sin. At the same time, in its Confessions and elsewhere, Lutheran theology frequently speaks of confession made to a pastor.⁶ Martin Chemnitz elaborates on private confession in the context of pastoral care:

... It is the duty of the shepherd, if he knows that some sheep is sick or broken, that he bind up and heal it by applying the ministry of Word and sacrament privately. Therefore private absolution remits the sins of the contrite, who seek consolation by faith in no other way than that it privately or to individuals announces the remission of sins through the Word of the Gospel, which also Christ Himself shows by His own example (MATT. 9:2; LUKE 7:48). This proclamation, whether it is called either particular, individual, special, or private, is efficacious for the forgiving of sins because it is a ministry of the Spirit, through which God strengthens faith and forgives sins.⁷

Because the pastor, serving in Christ’s Office of the Holy Ministry, already hears the confession of sins and pronounces Christ’s absolution in the public Divine Service, it is necessary to offer further clarification about the importance of *private* confession and absolution.⁸

First, no one should assume that a different *kind* or quality of forgiveness from Christ our Lord is given in the context of individual confession. All of the Means of Grace — Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, preaching — convey the *same* forgiving Gospel. In this respect, there is no difference between private confession and absolution and that which is conducted on Sunday mornings in public worship. One Lutheran theologian put it succinctly: “Private absolution is neither more nor less than the absolution the whole congregation receives in the gospel. Rather, it is nothing other than the gospel the whole

congregation receives, specifically applied to the circumstances of the individual sinner.”⁹

It is our goal to explain why, even though the same Gospel is given through the various Means of Grace, private confession and absolution may be a considerable aid to all Christians, and especially useful to pastors, who share in the burdens of their people and who are susceptible to unique temptation and discouragement. It is first of all necessary, however, to clearly establish the biblical foundation for confession and absolution.

⁶ See SC Baptism 15–29, KW 360–362; AC XI, KW 44–45; AC XXV, KW 72–75; Ap XI, KW 185–187; Ap XII, KW 188–218; LC, “A Brief Exhortation to Confession,” KW 476–480. For a contemporary order of private confession before the pastor, see Individual Confession and Absolution in *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 292–293.

⁷ Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent* (Part II), trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978): 561–562.

⁸ Another term for private or individual confession and absolution is auricular (meaning “into the ear”) confession.

⁹ J.G. Goesswein, “The 11th Article of the Augsburg Confession,” trans. Christopher Doerr, *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 106, no. 2 (Spring, 2009): 5, also at wlsessays.net/files/GoesswienAC11.pdf.

CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION

Part One: Foundations

Scriptural witness

WE MUST ADMIT with Luther at the outset that the “type of confession, which is now done quietly, into the ear, can be substantiated by no one from divine law.”¹⁰ That is not the same as admitting, however, that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments inform neither our theology nor our practice of confession and absolution. Our risen Lord Himself brings the entire Christian proclamation together under the two headings of repentance and the forgiveness of sins (LUKE 24:47). The “pure, clear fountain of Israel”¹¹ does not suddenly run dry when the topic of confession and absolution is raised. The Word of God is rich in wisdom and truth for the instruction of the life of the people of God, and it is rich in grace in its invitation for every child of God, the pastor included, to find in the Lord God his true hiding place.

Biblical confession

When we call to mind Bible verses that include the word *confess*, we notice immediately that they fall into two categories. We may think, for instance, of 1 John 1:9, a verse that we often speak together in worship:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

¹⁰ For references and discussion, see Albrecht Peters, *Commentary on Luther's Catechisms: Confession and Christian Life*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013), 36–40.

¹¹ KW 527.3.

On the other hand, a passage like Rom. 10:9 will also quickly come to mind:

If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

That believers both confess their sin and confess the faith shows that the Scriptures refuse to separate what we confess to be true about ourselves and our condition before God from what we confess to be true about God — who He is and what He has done for us. This inclusive view of confession will prove to be an important component of Luther's thoughts concerning private confession and absolution. Confession is not simply a matter of listing sins; it is a person's statement before God or before a brother or sister that he continually sins and falls short of God's glory, that he knows God to be gracious and merciful in and because of Christ Jesus his Lord, that he lives by faith in the promises of the Gospel, and that he desires with all his heart to live a life worthy of a child of God.

This unity in confession is beautifully expressed in Psalm 106, which is rich with words that have to do with making known and speaking out. The psalmist seamlessly weaves words of making known the mighty acts and great mercy of the Lord with words recounting the repeated rebelliousness of God's people — including himself. The great chapters of Israel's history appear woven together in this tapestry of confession, and verses 43–45 provide a summary of the pattern:

Many times he delivered them,
but they were rebellious in their purposes
and were brought low through their iniquity.

Nevertheless, he looked upon their distress,
when he heard their cry.

For their sake he remembered his covenant,
and relented according to the abundance of
his steadfast love.

The psalm ends very appropriately with a plea that the Lord our God would save us and with a call for all the people to praise the Lord with a confession of our sinfulness and need for salvation and a confession of the greatness of our God who is worthy to be praised forever.

Repentance

When Luther argued that the Lord willed the “entire life of believers to be one of repentance,” he was, of course, doing no more than reflecting this pattern found in almost every chapter of the Old and New Testaments.¹² Scripture has much to teach us concerning repentance, and we are in constant need of Scripture’s correction. The biblical vocabulary of both Hebrew (*shub*, LXX usually *epistrepho*) and Greek (*metanoio*) imply a turning around; a change of mind, heart and behavior; and a “re-orientation” no longer away from God but toward Him. This is prompted both by God’s word of judgment and by His gracious invitation, as expressed in Joel 2:11b–13:

For the day of the LORD is great and very awesome;
who can endure it?
“Yet even now,” declares the LORD,
“return [*shub*] to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
and rend your hearts and not your garments.”
Return [*shub*] to the LORD your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love;
and he relents over disaster.

Perhaps most important of all, especially for the questions we are considering, is Scripture’s clear teaching that repentance is not a humanly generated sorrow or contrition. Repentance is a gift of God. And it is a good and gracious gift. When we are tempted to think that repentance is our work, something we produce and then offer to God, we need to return again to passages like Acts 5:31 (“God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to *give* repentance to Israel and forgiveness

¹² AE 31:25.

of sins” [emphasis added]) and Acts 11:18b (“And they glorified God, saying, “Then to the Gentiles also God has *granted* repentance that leads to life” [emphasis added]). Echoing the thoughts of the psalmist, Paul declares that God’s kindness is intended to lead us to repentance (ROM. 2:4). The same idea is expressed in 2 Tim. 2:24–26, except that here it is the “Lord’s servant” who must minister in kindness and gentleness, hoping that God may grant to his opponents repentance, which will then lead to knowledge of the truth and salvation from the snares of the devil.

In its teaching of repentance, the New Testament consistently maintains a twofold emphasis: (1) repentance is commanded as the only appropriate response to the knowledge of our sinfulness, and (2) repentance comes as a gift of God by the working of His Word and Spirit. We do not find passages that focus on repentance as *our* work — even though we are commanded to repent; nor do we find passages that stress the *quality* of our repentance — even though the “fruits of repentance” (MAT. 3:8) testify to its reality.

Therefore, the Bible’s teaching on repentance does not lead us to the conclusion that there is no hope for humanity, that God has given up on us, that our future includes nothing but guilt, shame and despair. God shows not only great mercy but also great patience toward us. He does not will that any should perish, rather it is His will that all should finally arrive in that land called “Repentance” (as suggested by the original language of 2 PETER 3:9¹³). Perhaps here more than anywhere else, we pray with Augustine: “Grant us what You command, and command us what You will.”¹⁴

Repentance is one of those good gifts that God grants freely, graciously, having already given us His Son. “[Bearing] fruit in keeping with repentance” (MAT. 3:8; LUKE 3:8), then, does not mean being so sincerely and truly sorry that God counts our contrition as repentance; rather, it means a turning away from the rubbish of our old self-righteousness and a turning toward the God who is just and justifies the sinner. It means the full and honest acknowledgment of both our own vast sinfulness and of God’s boundless mercy. It means expressing not only in words but in actions as well what we know to be true

¹³ ESV ends verse 9 as “but that all should reach repentance.” The verb in this clause, *χωρέω*, may be more literally translated as to go or to come. It is often used in the context of traveling or “arriving” at a certain place.

¹⁴ Augustine, *Confessions* Book X. chap. 29. Translation from *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. Rex Warner (New York: The New American Library, 1963), 236.

about ourselves and about our God. It means an entire life of repentance.

'I will draw all people to myself'

This rich and fruitful life of repentance will remain unknown to us, however, if we regard God as someone to hide from instead of someone to hide in. Perhaps the psalter's talk of the protective shadow of God's wings, of God as our hiding place and shield, strikes us as nothing but poetry. Perhaps the very real terror of appearing before the consuming fire (DEUT. 4:24; 9:3; HEB. 12:29) causes us to run and hide like our first parents. This fear, this suspicion, this doubt and even terror of ours is also known to our God, who not only invites us to come to Him through His gracious and unfailing promises, but who also comes to us, and comes in a way no one could fear. As Luther preaches in his sermon on the nativity of our Lord:

See how God invites you in many ways. He places before you a Babe with whom you may take refuge. You cannot fear him for nothing is more appealing to man than a babe. Are you affrighted? Then come to him, lying in the lap of the fairest and sweetest maid. You will see how great is the divine goodness, which seeks above all else that you should not despair. Trust him! Trust him! Here is the Child in whom is salvation. To me there is no greater consolation given to mankind than this, that Christ became man, a child, a babe, playing in the lap and at the breasts of his most gracious mother. Who is there whom this sight would not comfort? Now is overcome the power of sin, death, hell, conscience, and guilt, if you come to this gurgling Babe and believe that he is come, not to judge you, but to save.¹⁵

This gurgling Babe, this Child, this Man, who came to save, also died and rose again in order to draw all people to Himself. Martin Franzmann's treatment of the death and resurrection of our Lord as the confession ("confiteor")¹⁶ and the absolution of His disciples is worth quoting here at length:

But whatever the mouths of enemies and the eloquent shape of history may have said in witness to the Christ, however mysteriously and wondrously the Father may have attested the Son, the disciples were silent, fearful, and faithless. On the

cross the Law spelled out its last word, and every mouth was stopped. The Gospel is exclusively the Gospel of the Christ; He has no heroes beside Him. He will build His church, thus, in spite of man's failure and by the Son's sole triumph. The disciples are not heroes but witnesses, not lords but servants, not religious geniuses, not men gifted with unusual religious intuition but recipients of revelation, not men of outstanding religious attainments but objects of the boundless condescension of God, not heroes but believers. ...

They came to faith as all men must come, by the way of repentance. The record of the Passion is the disciples' confiteor, their confession of sins. The whole Passion account voices their confession, "All we like sheep have gone astray ... the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (Is. 53:6).¹⁷

Franzmann immediately adds:

If the Passion narrative is the disciples' confiteor, the story of the resurrection is their record of the divine absolution: "He was raised for our justification." The disciples experienced in the resurrection the never-to-be-outdone proclamation of the grace which had spoken the Beatitude upon the beggar, which had cleansed the leper, which had been moved to compassion by the harassed and helpless sheep of the house of Israel, which had rejoiced in revealing to the simple what was concealed from the wise, which had given to the stumbling and halting disciple what had been denied to the prophets and righteous of old, and had bestowed the Kingdom upon children.¹⁸

This pattern of repentance and forgiveness of sins, of confession and absolution, not only unifies the grand, overarching narrative of God's relationship with His people, it is also here, clear and concrete, at the very heart of the Gospel message, the story of Christ's death and resurrection for us.

Not heroes but believers

The Passion and resurrection narratives also bring to mind one other feature of the New Testament's teaching concerning confession and absolution: Which follower of Jesus in the New Testament story was not a restored sinner, a confessing sinner, who did not live and move

¹⁵ *The Martin Luther Christmas Book* (trans. by Roland H. Bainton (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1948), 40.

¹⁶ Literally, the "I confess," the disciples' prayer of repentance.

¹⁷ Martin H. Franzmann, *Follow Me: Discipleship according to Saint Matthew* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), 214–215.

¹⁸ Franzmann, *Follow Me*, 215.

and work and breathe under the absolution of his Lord? From the closest circle of the Lord's disciples, like Peter and John, to His most violent opponents, like Paul, the men who followed and the men who led, the households who repented and believed, those who had been chosen and those who were once far off, all lived in the grace of the absolution of the One who loved them and gave Himself for them.

'I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven'

And what about believers since then? What about those who cannot take the Baby Jesus into their arms, who cannot sit with Him by the sea or walk with Him toward Jerusalem, who cannot stand at the foot of the cross or run to the empty tomb or meet with Him in the upper room? What about us? To whom do we make our confession? Where can we hear the absolving voice of our Lord?

Even during His earthly ministry, Jesus used His followers to extend the proclamation of the Gospel. On more than one occasion, specially designated representatives were sent forth with the message of peace. To His apostles, our Lord said: "The one who hears you hears me" (LUKE 10:16). This representative authority, this speaking of Jesus through the mouths of His chosen servants, is especially focused on the word of forgiveness when Jesus gives to His Church the keys of His kingdom:

"And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (MATT. 16:18–19).

"Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (MATT. 18:18).

"And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld'" (JOHN 20:22–23).

'That you may be healed'

Once again, we must admit that we find in the pages of the Bible no command to practice a specific order or rite of confession and absolution. What we can now add, however, is that the pages of both Testaments overflow with expressions of God's gracious will that all repent

and with God's gracious promises of forgiveness and life and salvation in His Son. In His Word, God urges us: "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed" (JAMES 5:16). Who can deny that we, too, need healing — in our hearts and homes and in our communities and congregations? Who can offer a reason to "neglect such a great salvation" (HEB. 2:3)? God desires to grant repentance. God offers wholeness and healing in forgiveness. The whole thrust of Scripture's teaching is that God's people should seek out every possible way to live in confession and absolution individually and together, to bear fruits in our lives worthy of the precious gift of repentance, to live entire lives of repentance.

Confessional Witness

The Lutheran Confessions interpret and apply this biblical foundation of confession and absolution. In recovering the biblical perspective, the *Book of Concord* examined the medieval institution of the sacrament of penance (pages 12–14 below) and reformed it. The Confessions emphasize that at the heart of private confession is absolution. Thus, article XI of the Augsburg Confession, "On Private Confession," says: "Concerning confession it is taught that private absolution should be retained and not abolished. However, it is not necessary to enumerate all misdeeds and sins, since it is not possible to do so. Psalm 19[12]: 'But who can detect their errors?'"¹⁹

The point of private absolution is the communication of the Gospel to those who are troubled by the Law. The Lutheran reformers changed Roman practices that obscured or vitiated the absolution. Enumeration of all sins in confession, as was required by the Roman Church, is neither commanded nor possible. It shifts the focus from the Gospel as the Word of God to the work of man. Additionally, the Lutheran church did away with the Roman requirement that every Christian had to go to confession at least once a year, since such a requirement also undermines the Gospel-character of confession and absolution and, as noted earlier, there is no specific divine requirement of private confession and absolution.²⁰ Most importantly, the Lutheran Confessions rejected "satisfaction," which is the work of the penitent, imposed by the priest,

¹⁹ AC XI, KW 44.

²⁰ "The marginal note in the *Decretum Concerning Confession* dist. 5, also teaches that confession is not commanded in Scripture, but was instituted by the church" (AC XXV 12, KW 74). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says: "Confession to a priest is an essential part of the Sacrament of Penance" (§ 1456).

in which he makes up for the sins he has committed.²¹

The recovery of biblical teaching informed these changes. A proper understanding of confession and absolution depends on a proper understanding of repentance. The preaching of the Law causes contrition, or sorrow, over sin. The sinner who experiences this “terror over sin” is to be comforted by absolution, which is received in faith. True repentance consists therefore in contrition and faith.²² A person cannot make himself contrite; this is a condition in which a person who is affected by the Law finds himself and from which he seeks help.

Private confession and absolution is one way in which the troubled conscience is to be comforted and the Christian is to be assured that he is forgiven.

Confession has not been abolished by the preachers on our side. For the custom has been retained among us of not administering the sacrament to those who have not previously been examined and absolved. At the same time, the people are diligently instructed how comforting the word of absolution is and how highly and dearly absolution is to be esteemed. For it is not the voice or word of the person speaking it, but it is the Word of God, who forgives sin. For it is spoken in God’s stead and by God’s command. Great diligence is used to teach about this command and power of the keys, and how comforting and necessary it is for terrified consciences. It is also taught how God requires us to believe this absolution as much as if it were God’s voice resounding from heaven and that we should joyfully find comfort in the absolution, knowing that through such faith we obtain forgiveness of sin. In former times, the preachers, while teaching much about confession, never mentioned a single word about these necessary matters but instead only tormented consciences with long enumerations of sins, with satisfactions, with indulgences, with pilgrimages,

²¹ “Satisfaction is truly the most intricate of the three because no one could know how much should be done for each individual sin, to say nothing of all sins. Here they came up with the following solution: they imposed a few satisfactions that a person could easily fulfill, such as saying the Lord’s Prayer five times, fasting for a day, etc. For the penance that remained people were directed to purgatory” (SA II 3,21, KW 315).

²² “Now properly speaking, true repentance is nothing else than to have contrition and sorrow, or terror about sin, and yet at the same time to believe in the gospel and absolution that sin is forgiven and grace is obtained through Christ. Such faith, in turn, comforts the heart and puts it at peace” (AC XII 3–4, KW 44).

and the like. Moreover, many of our opponents themselves confess that our side has written about and dealt with true Christian repentance more appropriately than had been done in a long time.²³

Though there is no explicit divine command for auricular confession, confession and absolution is more than a mere human practice. The absolution has a divine mandate since the Church has the power and duty (in the Office of the Keys) to forgive the sins of those who are troubled by their sins:

It is well known that we have so explained and extolled the benefit of absolution and the power of the keys that many troubled consciences have received consolation from our teaching. They have heard that it is a command of God — indeed, the very voice of the Gospel — so that we may believe the absolution and regard as certain that the forgiveness of sins is given to us freely on account of Christ and that we should maintain that we are truly reconciled to God by this faith.²⁴

The Confessions do not foresee a time in which Christians will not be troubled by their sins and therefore will not need to hear the word of absolution. Even more so, a despising of absolution would be a despising of the Gospel itself and thus a sign of the absence of faith.²⁵

Since the Gospel is only received in faith, absolution also is only received in faith. It must be remembered here, however, that faith is not a work that a person brings to confession and absolution, but rather a work of the Holy Spirit. Absolution has its place in the life of the baptized Christian who confesses Christ, confesses that he is a sinner, and seeks consolation and assurance. The absolution as the word of the Gospel strengthens the faith of the one absolved.²⁶ Thus, in confession and absolution we find the basic structure of what it means to be

²³ AC XXV1–6, KW 72.

²⁴ Ap XI 2, KW 186.

²⁵ “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 key.” (Ap XII, 100–101, KW 204).

²⁶ “The power of the keys administers and offers the gospel through absolution, which is the true voice of the gospel. Thus, we also include absolution when we talk about faith, because ‘faith comes from what is heard,’ as Paul says [ROM. 10:17]. For when the gospel is heard, when absolution is heard, the conscience is uplifted and receives consolation. Because God truly makes alive through the Word, the keys truly forgive sins before God according to [Luke 10:16], ‘Whoever listens to you listens to me.’ ... Thus faith is formed and strengthened through absolution, through hearing the gospel, and through use of the sacraments, so that it might not succumb in its struggle against the terrors of sin and death” (SA III,8, KW 321).

a Christian: to confess oneself to be a sinner before God and thus to believe the condemning word of God, to receive the comforting word of forgiveness and put one's trust in these words which give what Christ has gained on the cross. This is the reason why Luther can say in "A Brief Exhortation to Confession": "Therefore, when I exhort you to go to confession, I am doing nothing but exhorting you to be a Christian."²⁷

History

As indicated earlier, the *Book of Concord's* teachings about confession did not emerge in a vacuum, but within a historical context. The theology and practice of private confession and absolution developed over the course of the church's life.²⁸ The Early Church tended to stress "the absolute requirement to live a life of holiness, without blame, after Baptism."²⁹ As a result of the concern for restoration on account of sin committed after Baptism, penance became a kind of "second baptism."³⁰ Its integrity therefore had to be ensured and so the process of restoration was institutionalized as made evident by Tertullian (third century).³¹

²⁷ KW 479. "A Brief Exhortation to Confession," an appendix to the 1529 revised edition of the Large Catechism that was not included in the Book of Concord of 1580 and subsequent editions.

²⁸ For a more sufficient treatment of confession and absolution in this period, see Thomas Tentler, "Confession," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, Hans J. Hillerbrand, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), I:402. Fred L. Precht, "Confession and Absolution: Sin and Forgiveness," in *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Fred L. Precht, ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993), 322.; Fred L. Precht, "Changing Theologies of Private and Public Confession and Absolution," Th.D. thesis, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 1965; and Thomas Sluberski, "Absolution: An Historical Overview," *Seminarian* 54 (May 1963): 38–42.

²⁹ John A. Guerrieri, "Penance: A Brief Survey of a Problematic History," *Lutheran Forum* (Fall 1997): 26.

³⁰ Guerrieri, "Penance," 26.

³¹ "Yet the development of the doctrine of the death of Christ was to be shaped by another term, 'satisfaction,' which Tertullian seems to have introduced into Christian language but which was to find its normative exposition only in the Middle Ages. Tertullian's doctrine of 'satisfaction' may have come from Roman private law, where it referred to the amends one made to another for failing to discharge on obligation, or from Roman public law, which enabled the term to be interpreted as a form of punishment. In the language of the church, 'satisfaction' was a term for the reparation made necessary by sins after baptism, within the context of the developing doctrine of penance. Tertullian's treatise on repentance spoke of God as 'one to whom you may make satisfaction' and of confession as motivated by a desire to make satisfaction. One who repented was 'making satisfaction to the Lord,' one who lapsed after repentance was 'making satisfaction to the devil.' The momentous consequences of the introduction of 'satisfaction' into Christian vocabulary did not become evident until later." Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition 100-600* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971): 147.

A number of theological and practical developments characterized the practice of the medieval Roman Catholic Church. Among these, Canon 21, "*Omnis utriusque sexus*," of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) made yearly confession obligatory by ecclesiastical law for all males and females who attained "the age of reason" (age 7 for a normally developing child). Further, the idea of a "treasury of merit," where penitent sinners could draw upon the merits of Jesus and the saints (through works of supererogation) for the forgiveness of their own sins, became increasingly popular.³²

Along with these developments came the threefold understanding of "penance" in the Roman tradition. Penance had three parts: confession, absolution, satisfaction (or four parts if contrition is included before confession). The absolution pronounced in the indicative was still conditioned on the works of satisfaction outlined by the priest — your sins *are* forgiven, but you must still do the works demanded of you to avoid penalties in purgatory. This served as the launching pad for confession and absolution to be viewed as something related to making amends. In the period leading up to the Reformation, Rome officially formulated its position at the Council of Florence in 1439 that established what *poenitentia* (penance) consisted of: *contritio* (contrition/sorrow over sin), *confessio* (confession necessarily made to a priest) and *satisfactio* (the satisfaction or works of penance adjudicated by the priest).³³

Luther believed this was a fundamental misunderstanding of the gift of absolution and strove to bring it back to its biblical foundations. For Luther and the other confessors, the keys convey the Gospel (in the broad sense as both Law and Gospel), by condemning, in God's name, self-assured people of their sin and by assuring the contrite of their forgiveness. The binding key, however, is for Luther only a means to an end. The ultimate aim of the keys is the forgiveness of sins. The loosing key, absolution, like Baptism, creates new life. Absolution is efficacious because Christ works through it. "For Christ has not ordained authorities or powers or

³² See references in footnote 26. "Works of supererogation" is the term used in Roman Catholic doctrine to refer to righteous acts that are considered to go beyond what God requires. These acts on the part of those canonized as saints are then considered to form a treasury of merit that ordinary people can apply against their sins when they purchase or otherwise receive an indulgence.

³³ P.H.D. Lang, "Private Confession and Absolution in the Lutheran Church: A Doctrinal, Historical, and Critical Study," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 56: 4 (1992): 243. See also Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, 4th Edition (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985): 346-347.

lordships in his church, but ministries, . . . For in [baptism and penance] there is a like ministry, a similar promise, and the same kind of sacrament.³⁴ Thus, the application of the loosing key is the act of God, which delivers the life-giving forgiveness of sins won by Christ. Assurance stems from the application of the loosing key.³⁵

The Roman Catholics responded strongly. Between 1545 and 1563, the long-awaited general council of the church began to meet at Trent, but without the presence of any reformers. The Roman doctrine of penance, one of the Council of Trent's key issues, was addressed in the 14th session, held in 1551. The council condemned the Reformation's teaching that the preached Gospel was a means of forgiveness for the baptized person who had fallen into sin. Instead, auricular confession of all sins before a priest was required, with absolution to follow if the priest was satisfied with the contrition of the subject, who then was to make satisfaction.³⁶

Nevertheless, Lutherans maintained the practice of private confession and absolution. For example, the *Church Order for Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel (Braunschweigische Kirchenordnung)* of 1569 states, "Confession is to be maintained, so that private absolution be sought from the Lord Christ in the word through true confession and faith and from Christ through the medium of the servant of the word."³⁷

³⁴ Martin Luther, "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," in *Three Treatises* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 208; translation from AE 36:82.

³⁵ Luther, "The Keys," 375. Luther's themes found their way into the Lutheran Confessions. Melancthon captured the Lutheran emphasis in Article XI of the Augsburg Confession and in Luther's Smalcald Articles of 1537.

³⁶ Session the Fourteenth, Chapter I. Note also Chapter III (emphasis added): "The holy council teaches furthermore, that the form of the sacrament of penance, in which its efficacy chiefly consists, are those words of the minister: I absolve thee, etc., to which are indeed laudably added certain prayers according to the custom of holy Church, which, however, do not by any means belong to the essence of the form nor are they necessary for the administration of the sacrament. *But the acts of the penitent himself, namely, contrition, confession and satisfaction, constitute the matter of this sacrament, which acts, inasmuch as they are by God's institution required in the penitent for the integrity of the sacrament and for the full and complete remission of sins, are for this reason called the parts of penance.*" Heinrich Denzinger, Peter Hunermann, *Enchiridion Symbolorum: A Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations of the Catholic Church*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012).

³⁷ Martin Chemnitz and Jacob Andreae, *Church Order for Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel: How Doctrine, Ceremonies, and Other Church-Related Matters Shall (by God's Grace) Be Conducted Henceforth*, trans. Jacob Corzine, Matthew C. Harrison, and Andrew Smith (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015), 51. The Braunschweigische Kirchenordnung of 1569 is found in *Die Evangelischen Kirchenordnungen des XVI Jahrhunderts*, VI:I (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr Paul Siebeck, 1955), 120, compiled by Emil Sehling, cited in Lange, "Private Confession and Absolution," 246.

Chemnitz maintained the theological basis for the practice:

Moreover, just as the doctrine which rebukes sins and proclaims the wrath of God to the impenitent is to be set forth not only in general but, as pastoral care demands (EZEK. 34:1-10), to individuals privately where necessity calls for it, and sins are to be retained and bound by annunciation of the judgment of God on the basis of the Word, so also the promise of the Gospel is efficacious not only when it is announced in general and when it is apprehended in faith in the general proclamation, but it is the duty of the shepherd, if he knows that some sheep is sick or broken, that he bind it up and heal it by applying the ministry of Word and sacrament privately. Therefore private absolution remits the sins of the contrite who seek consolation by faith in no other way than that it privately or to individuals announces the remission of sins through the Word of the Gospel, which also Christ Himself shows by His own example (MATT. 9:2; LUKE 7:48). This proclamation, whether it is called either particular, individual, special or private, is efficacious for the forgiving of sins because it is a ministry of the Spirit, through which God strengthens faith and forgives sins. For it is the same Gospel, and its efficacy is the same, whether it is proclaimed generally to many, or privately, either to one or a few. And on account of the weakness of faith, for fuller and stronger consolation, God wants the promise of grace set forth not only in general, but to be applied also privately to individuals who seek it, not by the sacraments only but also through proclamation of the Gospel, as Christ shows in Matthew 9:2 and Luke 7:48, in order that my faith may be able to state all the more firmly that the general promise of the Gospel applies to me in particular the benefits of the suffering Christ. Thus the statement of Christ (JOHN 20:23) about remitting sins, whether it be understood of public or general proclamation of the Gospel, or of private absolution, says nothing else than this, that the ministry remits and retains sins by the voice or proclamation of the Word of God.³⁸

³⁸ Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, (Part II), trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978) 2:561-62.

However, already in the latter part of the 16th century, some followers of Luther began to criticize the directions in which the Reformation had developed. The movement that came to be known as Pietism had deep suspicions about the practice of private confession and absolution. The matter was especially tied to the proclamation of the loosing key, the word of absolution, whether delivered individually or corporately. They asked: “Has not absolution become too easy and free? Should we not put a greater emphasis on seeing the necessary fruits of repentance *before* we proclaim the word of absolution? Is mere confession of sins enough?”

What the Pietists started was carried to a far greater extreme by the Rationalists. For them, absolution — involving the speaking of divine words — made no sense at all, because they rejected the inspiration of Scripture and the power of the Word of God. In their view, the forgiveness of sins was obtained simply through the resolution to live a better life.

The new trend transferred to America since Rationalism was amenable with the American Protestant tradition.³⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson “almost single-handedly laid the epistemological foundations for the modernist impulse in American Protestantism. Emerson’s ideas deepened the already present anti-authoritarian, autonomous sentiments exhibited in American cultural Protestantism... Specifically and with the utmost persuasion, Emerson, in his *Divinity School Address of 1838*, stressed the immanence of God in nature and God’s accessibility to the human soul directly, thereby arguing that the mediation of religious symbols was no longer needed.”⁴⁰

These general themes were reflected in the theology of the influential American Lutheran Samuel Simon Schmucker (1799-1873). Schmucker sought to “protestantize” Lutheranism while aligning it with American culture. In doing so, Schmucker revised Lutheranism’s sacramental core, and certain “errors” — in his view — had to be corrected. One of Schmucker’s most egregious actions was to edit the Augsburg Confession. In respect to Article XI of the AC, he argued that for Lutheranism to complete the Reformation, “the omission of this Article [on private confession and absolution] is *demand*ed ...”⁴¹

³⁹ William S. Wiecher, “Piepkorn on the Third Sacrament: An American Lutheran Reconsideration,” *Lutheran Forum* (Fall 1997): 36.

⁴⁰ Wiecher, “Piepkorn on the Third Sacrament,” 36.

⁴¹ *Definite Platform*, 11.

In light of this, the Missouri Synod’s insistence at its founding in 1847 on the retention of private confession and absolution demonstrates its determination to adhere firmly to historic Lutheran doctrine and practice. “Where private confession is in use,” the founders wrote, “it is to be kept according to Article 11 of the Augsburg Confession. Where it is not in use, the pastor is to strive towards introducing it.”⁴²

Despite the retention of private confession and absolution at the Synod’s founding, the practice slowly faded from the life of its congregations in the early 20th century. As Missouri Synod Lutherans entered the mainstream of American religious life, they increasingly discarded what some saw as “peculiar” practices. Still, by the middle of the 20th century, certain groups were working to reclaim the practice.⁴³ As the 21st century has dawned, while some pastors regularly offer private confession and absolution to their congregations, anecdotal evidence suggests that few laity make use of this gift. The resolution addressed in this report (2013 Res. 4-13) suggests that this is also true of a majority of the Synod’s pastors.

Challenges

The preceding material indicates that the authentically Lutheran view of individual confession and absolution is largely unique, occupying a middle ground between Rome and evangelical Protestantism.⁴⁴ Unlike most Evangelicals or other Protestants, Lutherans do not repudiate private confession before a minister and steadfastly uphold the propriety and efficacy of the pastor’s absolution in the name of Christ.⁴⁵ Unlike Rome, however, Lutheran teaching and practice makes private confession

⁴² “Our First Synodical Constitution,” *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 16 (April 1943): 11–13. See also Page 184 in C.F.W. Walther, *American Lutheran Pastoral Theology* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017).

⁴³ See, for example, the unofficial journal *Una Sancta*, which regularly advocated for private confession and absolution.

⁴⁴ In this report, “Evangelical” is used in its common contemporary sense of non-Roman Catholic Christians who claim personal faith in Jesus as Savior with the need for evangelism and also uphold the authority of Scripture, while denying or minimizing that the Sacraments are Means of Grace (e.g., most Baptists, Pentecostals, non-denominational Christians, as well as many others that have separated from or are in protest within the so-called “mainlines”). Protestants refers to the remainder of self-identified Christians (“Mainline churches”) who are not Roman Catholic (e.g., most Methodists, Presbyterians, ELCA Lutherans, Episcopalians). The term “evangelical Protestant” then refers to both of these groups.

⁴⁵ Together with confessional Lutherans, one other group, orthodox Anglicans such as those who make up the Anglican Church in North America, practice auricular confession. An order for it is in the *Book of Common Prayer* in which the priest expressly absolves the sinner in the Triune name (“I absolve you in the name...”).

entirely voluntary, rejects the notion that one must (or even can) enumerate all one's sins before a confessor, and rejects the addition of satisfaction as confession's third element. Lutheran teaching upholds the absolution above all else and affirms its great comfort for the individual penitent.

Nevertheless, although confessional Lutheranism never repudiated its affirmation of individual confession, the practice is not regularly maintained by most Lutheran Christians, including pastors.⁴⁶ Perhaps the most common source of Lutheran discomfort with private confession is the widespread notion that, despite some differences between Lutheran and Roman teaching, the practice is too "Catholic." In this respect, many Lutherans seem to share a Protestant or Evangelical bias against private confession. One may note several reasons for this.

Some may assume that since Lutherans do not mandate private confession, it is unimportant. They may recall the words of the Small Catechism: "Before the pastor we should confess only those sins which we know and feel in our hearts." In recent editions of *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation*, we are encouraged to confess sins that "trouble" us.⁴⁷ Therefore, unless they are deeply troubled about a particular sin, private confession may seem to be of little value. Or for those who have forgotten or never studied the Small Catechism, the Lutheran teaching that Jesus uses His Church and its called pastors to forgive sins, entrusting them with the Office of the Keys, may not be fully or clearly understood or appreciated (LUKE 10:16; JOHN 20:23).

In addition, others who have been heavily influenced by Evangelical teaching may be unconvinced of the Small Catechism's doctrine, believing that the pastor's absolution is without a biblical basis and that it is at best doubtful or even blasphemous for anyone but God to claim to forgive our sins.⁴⁸ Central to Evangelicalism is a personal conversion experience, focused on several steps.

⁴⁶ Somewhat surprisingly, private confession is also in steep decline and is minimally practiced by U.S. Roman Catholics. See, for example, James Martin, S.J., "Bless Me, Father," *America: The National Catholic Review* 192: 18 (May 21, 2007), online edition accessed Nov. 9, 2017, americamagazine.org/toc-past/2007-05-21. Across the religious landscape, there is little regard for confession before a minister.

⁴⁷ *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017) includes the text of the Small Catechism, followed by "An Explanation of the Small Catechism." See Page 25 and then question and answer 328 on Page 309.

⁴⁸ See Mark 2:1–11, nb. v. 7, where Jesus' authority to forgive was denied. He claims the authority to forgive as the Incarnate Lord, the Son of Man, and as we note below, explicitly authorizes His disciples to declare the same divine forgiveness.

These include (1) acknowledgement of personal sin, (2) faith in Jesus' death and resurrection, (3) verbal confession of Jesus as one's personal Lord, and (4) heartfelt acceptance of Jesus as one's Savior. While this "plan of salvation" may vary in minor ways, it is foundational for American Evangelicalism.⁴⁹ This leads Evangelicals to view sacraments (or "ordinances"⁵⁰) as, at most, symbols of grace or unity and, at worst, rituals that distract from personal faith.

From an Evangelical standpoint, therefore, confession before a pastor is unwarranted.⁵¹ Having a pastor "forgive" another person is often viewed as a denial that individuals can approach God on their own or that forgiveness comes through faith in Christ alone. Therefore, the "problem" with private confession for Evangelicals is less the confession of sins to a pastor than the pastor's absolution. An Evangelical may confess to his pastor in a context of pastoral counseling, but he believes God forgives sins only in a direct manner and that His forgiveness is not mediated through another. Evangelicalism recognizes that the pastor speaks *about* Christ, but not that he may also speak *for* Christ. Forgiveness therefore hangs entirely on one's personal faith, not on a Word spoken on behalf of Christ.

Certainly, Lutheran theology teaches that forgiveness of sins is given only on account of Christ's atoning death and resurrection. Salvation is by grace through faith *in Christ* for the forgiveness of sins. Moreover, it *is* God alone who forgives our sins. Repentant "faith believes that sins are forgiven on account of Christ, consoles the conscience, and liberates it from terrors."⁵² So Lutherans

⁴⁹ For example, see the Southern Baptist Convention's webpage "How to Become a Christian" at sbc.net/knownjesus/theplan.asp; accessed 11/9/2017.

⁵⁰ Evangelicals express their understanding of the Sacraments in various ways. Not atypical is the Southern Baptist Convention's definition of both Baptism and the Supper as an "act of obedience." See sbc.net/bfm2000/bfm2000.asp; accessed 11/9/2017.

⁵¹ Note the perspective of the Assemblies of God: "In leading people to Christ, the confession of sins is to be directed to God through Jesus Christ. Nowhere does God's Word tell us to confess our sins to a clergyman or human mediator in order to receive God's forgiveness. Instead this is to be done from the repentant heart of the sinner directly to the Savior-Jesus Christ" (Commission on Doctrinal Purity of Assemblies of God, "Confession of Sins," at ag.org/Beliefs/Topics-Index/Sin-Confession-of-Sins; accessed 11/9/2017). Some are harsher. Max D. Younce says, "If you are one who is trusting the Lutheran preacher or Catholic priest to forgive sins, instead of Jesus Christ, you will spend eternity separated from God. Christ encountered these same types of religious leaders in His day and levied a stern rebuke against them." See "Who Can Forgive Sins? The Lutheran Minister, Catholic Priest, or Christ," at jesus-is-savior.com/BTP/Dr_Max_Younce/who_can_forgive.htm; accessed 11/9/2017.

⁵² AC XII 5, KW 45.

condemn the notion that Sacraments (including confession) “justify *ex opere operato*” (that is, by the mere performance of the act). Rather, they are rightly used “when received in faith for the strengthening of faith.”⁵³ It is by “the voice of the gospel” that “we obtain the forgiveness of sins by faith,” and to deny it is “to show contempt for the blood and death of Christ.”⁵⁴

Evangelical rejection of Lutheran teaching is based to some degree on the false view that the pastor’s absolution is grounded on faith in the person or personal word of the pastor who absolves. To help those who have this misunderstanding — including many of our own people — a clarification is critically needed. *The pastor’s absolution is not a substitute for faith in Christ, but it flows from faith in Christ and His promises.* In giving the Gospel to the Church to be proclaimed by pastors, our Lord assures us that this Gospel — although spoken by sinful men — is *His Word*. The forgiveness that is spoken is *His* forgiveness. “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld” (JOHN 20:23). “Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (MATT. 18:18). Only faith in such promises *from Jesus* gives confidence in the “I forgive you” that a pastor speaks, whether in public worship or private conversation. *Faith in Jesus’ words* leads us to “by no means doubt but firmly believe that our sins are thereby forgiven before God in heaven.”⁵⁵ The absolution thereby truly effects the forgiveness it declares. Christ and His Gospel are the sure foundation on which the absolution — spoken by human lips — stands.⁵⁶

Other objections to confession and absolution may also be met by careful teaching about the absolution. As noted earlier, the Roman view of satisfaction is ruled out based on the absolution itself. However, some might wonder whether an absolution without satisfaction implies a lax view of sin — that an absolution means permission to continue in sin (ROM. 6:1). This, of course,

fails to reckon with the two sides of the Office of the Keys. In some cases, an admission of sin may be coupled with an explicit intention to continue it. This is not truly “confession” in the biblical sense, and it must not result in absolution. For good reason, the order of Individual Confession and Absolution from *Lutheran Service Book* has the penitent person end his or her confession with the words, “I am sorry for all of this and ask for grace. I want to do better.”⁵⁷ The appropriate pastoral response to a sham and insincere confession is a declaration that binds instead of looses (MATT. 16:19), one that pronounces the Lord’s judgment against unrepentant sin and withholds rather than declares forgiveness (JOHN 20:23). Or, as the Small Catechism reminds us, the Office of the Keys includes two possible eventualities. One is, of course, the absolution, but the other is when ministers “exclude openly unrepentant sinners from the Christian congregation.” In either case, “this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself.”⁵⁸ This is a frightening responsibility, but a necessary one.

It is also important to note the difference between temporal and eternal consequences of sin. God’s forgiveness covers all sins and saves from God’s wrath and judgment so that His forgiven children will not suffer eternal death and hell (JOHN 3:36; 11:25–26; TITUS 3:5–7; 2 TIM. 1:10). Whether delivered by the preached Gospel, Baptism, the Lord’s Supper or absolution, God’s promise of forgiveness for Jesus’ sake is unconditional and absolute, freeing us from every eternal consequence of sin. But temporal consequences often continue. Therefore, sins against the second table of the Law are indeed fully forgiven, covered by the blood of Jesus Christ (1 JOHN 1:7), but temporal punishment or consequences may not be avoided. So, the unruly child may still suffer in “time-out,” the murderer be subject to incarceration or execution, the adulterer be divorced, the thief imprisoned, the slanderer sued, the addict or alcoholic suffer physical harm, and so forth. Such temporal consequences are permitted by our gracious God, even while His forgiveness graciously frees us of all eternal punishment.⁵⁹ Moreover, this distinction between the temporal and the eternal reminds us that, while we can never repay God for His merciful forgiveness, we may and indeed should amend our sinful life,

⁵³ AC XIII 3, 2, KW 46.

⁵⁴ Ap XII 2, KW 188.

⁵⁵ SC, “Baptism,” KW 360.16.

⁵⁶ As noted above (Page 4), “since the keys of the kingdom (‘the power of the keys’) — which bind or release a person from the bonds of sin — were given by Christ to His *entire* Church (MATT. 18:15FF.; JOHN 20:19FF.), any member of Christ’s Church may be used by God to assure another person of forgiveness as he confesses his sin” (see *Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod*, §30). Our focus in this document, however, is on private confession to a pastor as discussed in the fifth chief part of Luther’s Small Catechism (“Confession”).

⁵⁷ LSB 292.

⁵⁸ *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 314.

⁵⁹ On temporal punishment, see AC XVI 2, KW 48–49; Ap XII 151, KW 214.

and this may require specific restitution and “making amends” to those whom we have hurt by our sins.⁶⁰

Another challenge is more pragmatic. The preached Gospel declares the forgiveness of sins. The general absolution of the Divine Service declares it liturgically. Forgiveness is made personal in Baptism. Forgiveness is promised yet again as one receives Christ’s body and blood at the altar. There is no shortage of the message of God’s grace and forgiveness in Christ Jesus within the Divine Service. Do we need yet another means of forgiveness? Is the private absolution some different or higher level of forgiveness? A careful answer is needed: God’s redeeming work is “plenteous” indeed (Ps. 130:7 KJV). Shall we object to that bounty and stop absolving (or for that matter, baptizing or communing) since we have forgiveness in the preached Gospel? While “forgiveness is forgiveness,” personal absolution is nevertheless a particular help to poor sinners. A person who has grieved deeply over sin, sorrowfully admitted it in private confession and then heard our Lord’s emphatic, unambiguous absolution spoken directly to him in the midst of his shame and sorrow can be exceedingly grateful for our Lord’s kind wisdom in giving this specifically personal word of grace. Moreover, the reality of the fallen nature means that guilty feelings often return, even after one knows what Christ has done and has heard the Word of His forgiveness in the Sacrament of the Altar or in the absolution. This is all the more reason to give thanks that God does not limit or restrict His Gospel, but He declares His forgiveness again and again through various means, including preaching, teaching, Baptism, the Supper, the absolution, and the mutual conversation and consolation of one’s brothers and sisters in Christ.

Another practical challenge to private confession is that the person troubled by sin may need counseling more than confession and absolution. We need to be careful here not to set the two at odds with each other or create a false alternative. An affirmation of private confession is not a condemnation of pastoral counsel or appropriate psychotherapeutic counseling. We can and should affirm and give thanks for appropriate psychotherapy as a “left-hand kingdom” resource, like

⁶⁰ Lutheran orders of confession and absolution have often included the penitent’s express intention to amend his or her sinful life. See Page 48 in the Order of the Confessional Service in *The Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941) and Page 309 in *Service of Corporate Confession and Absolution in LSB*. *LSB* omits the reference to amending one’s sinful life in its order of corporate confession but retains the pastoral blessing from 1 Thess. 5:23–24 with its references to God’s sanctifying work (“may your whole spirit, soul, and body be kept blameless”).

all of medicine, that may be beneficial to believers and nonbelievers alike. Pastoral counsel brings a distinctly spiritual element into counseling, anchored in the Word of God. We can affirm it without implying that it makes confession and absolution irrelevant or unimportant. While the same pastor may well engage in both counseling and private confession, the two practices should be distinguished but not divorced. Private confession may well involve pastoral counsel, but its central task is to address sin in the repentant, broken person with Christ’s Word of forgiveness. It “is not a quick fix for psychological disorders or difficulties.”⁶¹ Moreover, good counseling may in fact help the Christian to better understand what he or she needs to confess.⁶² In addition, *after* private confession and absolution, “the penitent may still need psychological counseling from those whose calling it is to provide this service in the kingdom of the left hand.”⁶³

Finally, we add the potential obstacle of fear that a private confession might not remain private. A pastor’s unwise use of “sermon illustrations” about things someone has said to him would likely undermine confidence in his commitment to uphold confessional confidentiality. Both teaching and practice should emphatically complement one another with regard to pastoral confidentiality. Reference may be made to the explicit ordination vow to that effect — with the implication that violation of the vow would jeopardize the pastor’s standing and ministry.

For Lutherans, then:

1. Those who exercise the Office of the Keys and confession are entrusted with a twofold power and responsibility: to retain the sins of the impenitent and to forgive the sins of the penitent. The ultimate goal, however, is always to absolve the penitent.
2. Private confession and absolution is an actual Means of Grace. It is one of the ways that sins are forgiven. Forgiveness is not merely an announcement or a proclamation, but it truly gives and effects what is proclaimed. For example, God said, “Let there be light” (GEN. 1:3), and light appeared. In the same way, God says, “I forgive you” in the

⁶¹ John T. Pless, “Your Pastor Is Not Your Therapist: Private Confession — The Ministry of Repentance and Faith,” *Logia: A Journal of Lutheran Theology* 10:2 (2001): 25.

⁶² Richard C. Eyer, *Pastoral Care Under the Cross: God in the Midst of Suffering* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1994): 14. Eyer compares beneficial “clinical psychiatry” over and above “pop psychology,” which often aims at making people feel good while deeper ills remain.

⁶³ Pless, “Your Pastor Is Not Your Therapist,” 25.

absolution, and the forgiveness that Christ won for us is actually conveyed.

3. The pastor is not merely a pastoral counselor or teacher who reinforces what the Christian already knows, but he handles the very Means of Grace that keep the Christian's faith alive.
4. The pastor vows never to reveal the contents of a person's confession.

CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION

Part Two: Helping the Pastor

Introduction

IF CHRIST'S GIFT OF private confession and absolution is to benefit the church today, how may we reclaim it? Any restoration of private confession must begin with pastors, whose office is centered in proclaiming Christ and His forgiveness. Those who preach Christ and His gifts do so rightly when they have received His gracious gifts themselves.

The pastor is first a Christian. Though he is a shepherd, he is also a lamb in need of a shepherd. Tidball observes, "Casualties of the pastoral ministry abound because they themselves refuse to have pastors."⁶⁴ In contrast to this isolation, however, is the pastor who celebrates his place in the Body of Christ: "Skillful shepherds will place their ministry firmly within the body of Christ. They will remember that even while they are shepherds they are also sheep. In this way their isolation will be overcome."⁶⁵ Löhe understood this:

Just as one cannot be judge in his own case, so one cannot rightly pass judgment on the ways of one's own life and heart; and as a patient cannot heal himself, but needs a physician ... so also a person needs a comforter and physician of souls through whom the comfort and medicine of the Holy Spirit can be handed him from the Word of God.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Derek Tidball, *Skillful Shepherds: Explorations in Pastoral Theology* (Leicester: Apollos, 1997), 321.

⁶⁵ Tidball, *Skillful Shepherds*, 337.

⁶⁶ Wilhelm Löhe, "The Sacrament of Repentance," *Una Sancta* 10:2 (1951): 3–4.

Like every child of God, pastors need the saving, relieving and strengthening Gospel, even as they administer it. The pastor is a fallen sinner. Without Christ, he will die in his sins. All share in this fallen condition, but sin also shows its power in unique ways in every life. So, the help Christ gives to pastors through individual confession is like that received by every other child of God and also specific to his calling.

Help for the Pastor as a Child of God

'We poor sinners'

"Almighty God, our maker and redeemer, we poor sinners confess unto You that we are by nature sinful and unclean and that we have sinned against You by thought, word, and deed."⁶⁷ On behalf of the entire assembly, the pastor speaks these words of confession. The congregation's response makes plain that they take them as their own; nonetheless, they remain the pastor's admission as well. Neither office nor ordination exempts him from Adam's fall — from the ranks of that "huge rebellious man."⁶⁸

The Scriptures provide many examples of God's servant-leaders falling into private and public sin, from Aaron (EXODUS 32) to the sons of Eli (1 SAMUEL 2) to the priests in the time of Malachi (1:6). David's great sin and confession are well known (PSALM 51). Isaiah recounts his

⁶⁷ LSB 184.

⁶⁸ LSB 569, stanza 1.

own experience of confession and absolution in Isaiah 6, where his cry of “woe is me” reflects not only his own sin but also the sin of the corporate people. God responds through a messenger of grace with a declaration, and even a touch of absolution, that purifies Isaiah’s unclean lips. Indeed, lips that will proclaim God’s judgment and salvation are lips that have first experienced God’s judgment and forgiveness. “This has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for” (Is. 6:7).

The battle of sin is the war of all wars. Only when sin is finally defeated — in the eschaton — will humanity’s rebellion finally end (1 COR. 15:22–26). What is true for humankind is true also for us individually. Despite the distraction of countless troubles in our lives, no other problem is as serious as our sin. Sin remains the cancer we battle lifelong, the disease that leads to physical death. More importantly, left unaddressed, sin will kill us eternally. We dare not underestimate this enemy — sin and Satan, who scripts its malignancy (EPH. 6:12).

Our Lord teaches us poor sinners to confess our sin, not as catharsis, but in prayerful, honest acknowledgment to our Father (MATT. 6:12). Every child of God — man or woman, old or young, church worker or layperson — and also every pastor “should plead guilty of all sins, even those we are not aware of.”⁶⁹ Therefore, confession is part of daily prayer before God alone and part of the corporate prayers of the church in its worship. But as we have shown above, the Word of God does not command, but it certainly invites *individual* confession of sins before a fellow Christian as another time-tested aid and comfort for poor sinners.

The Church’s regular practice — enacted most obviously in her liturgy — puts onto our lips words that acknowledge this struggle, phrases that beg our hearts to assent to their truth. “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” “Let us then confess our sins”; “we are by nature sinful and unclean”; “we have sinned against You”; “we have not loved You”; “we have not loved our neighbors”; “we justly deserve Your present and eternal punishment”; “I have ever offended You and justly deserved Your temporal and eternal punishment”; “Create in me a clean heart.”⁷⁰ In the Litany, we plead with our good Lord to deliver us “from all sin, from all error, from all evil; from the crafts and assaults of the devil” and

“to beat down Satan under our feet.”⁷¹

Such stark reminders cry out for our attention. Personal reflection in the mirror of God’s Law reminds us that the battle is raging not only cosmically, but within us. We see that we “daily sin much.” And in the first table of God’s Law, we see that “the devil, the world, and our sinful nature” seek to “deceive us or mislead us” into the depths of sin’s rebellion, that is, “into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice.”⁷² We need such a heartfelt, honest assessment. Our sins are seductive — it is all too easy to get friendly with them as no more than dalliances and fail to see how Satan uses them to draw us from the One who is our true hope and joy.

In the order for confidential, individual confession before the pastor from *Lutheran Service Book (LSB)*, the penitent “plead[s] guilty before God of all sins,” including self-centeredness, disobedience to His commands, faltering prayer and a failure to love as we are loved. Such words could be echoed by every child of God without modification. But the penitent adds, “What troubles me particularly is that...” with the ellipsis in the order itself.⁷³ As one finishes the sentence, he is facing the battle head-on, sharing specific sin that “weighs on us or attacks us, eating away at us until we can have no peace nor find ourselves sufficiently strong in faith.”⁷⁴

This invitation to unburden oneself of specific sins before a fellow believer is one of the blessings of private confession. A component of it is that in confession to another, we are inviting that person to be an ally in the battle of sanctification, an “accountability partner” of sorts.⁷⁵ It is a privilege extended to every individual Christian, no matter what that person’s vocation. Although such honest admissions of besetting sin may be made to a trusted friend or another person, confession before a pastor carries with it the emphatic assurance of complete confidentiality that he promised at his ordination. While other trusted friends may keep confidences, they most likely do not have the pastor’s acute awareness of the importance of that responsibility and the compre-

⁷¹ LSB 288.

⁷² LSB 324, *Luther’s Small Catechism*, Lord’s Prayer; cf. SC, “Lord’s Prayer,” KW 358.18.

⁷³ LSB 292.

⁷⁴ “A Brief Exhortation to Confession,” 13, KW 477.

⁷⁵ “Accountability partner” is a term often used in both quasi-therapeutic settings, such as Twelve Step sponsors, and also in Evangelical discipleship practices. It refers to someone with whom one shares weaknesses and sins and to whom one holds oneself accountable. There is no reason to scorn the idea of having someone who knows the battle an individual engages and checks on how we are doing.

⁶⁹ LSB 326, *Luther’s Small Catechism*, Confession; cf. SC, “Holy Baptism,” KW 360.18.

⁷⁰ From *LSB Divine Service*, Setting One and Setting Three, 151, 184, 192.

hensiveness of it. Nor have they taken the pastor's vow of complete confidentiality. To be reassured that what is spoken in the confessional stays in the confessional is a powerful encouragement to those whose sins are attacking them, "eating away" until peace is gone and faith itself is consumed. This is true of every believer.

Recognition of our need for the Lord's constantly nourishing grace is for all. The pastor stands on the same level as those he serves; both need the forgiveness of sins, and both receive it in absolution. Both pastor and people are beggars; there is no difference.

'We flee for refuge'

Confession's alternative is flight from God, attempting to hide our sin. Our first parents introduced us not only to sin itself, but also to denial, hiding from and fleeing the only One who can save us from the scourge that would consume us (GEN. 3:8). To seek the Lord's aid is counter to fallen human intuition; its logic is to flee our judge and hide from Him. Yet, He calls out to us in love: "Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool" (IS. 1:18). Rather than drive us away to run and hide from Him, our God woos us in the preaching of the Gospel, the promises of Baptism and the invitation to the altar. He continually invites us to "flee for refuge to [His] infinite mercy, seeking and imploring [His] grace for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ."⁷⁶ The confidence in these words from the general confession flows from the Lord's promise to welcome sinners. This powerful refrain of God's mercy is woven like a thread through the Old Testament:

Return to the LORD your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love;
and he relents over disaster. (JOEL 2:13; SEE ALSO
EX. 34:6; NUM. 14:18; PS. 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; JONAH 4:2)

In the confidential setting of the confessional, the penitent sinner is encouraged to bold faith and an open admission of the sin(s) that bring turmoil. Our attempts at hiding sin — our exercises in denial — are nothing but self-deceit:

Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.
Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts
no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.
For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away

through my groaning all day long. (PS. 32:1-3)

The penitent is invited to go with David into a full acknowledgment of sin: "I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,' and you forgave the iniquity of my sin" (PS. 32:5).

To be sure, one may honestly acknowledge sin without resort to private confession as we do in personal prayer. But in private confession, the presence of the confessor who hears one's admission of individual sin is a striking instance of how God gives forgiveness through means. The pastor preaches God's Word, not his own (1 THESS. 2:13). He is Christ's hands and mouth in Baptism, bathing with water as the Head commands and speaking the words the Head directs to tongue and vocal chords (MATT. 28:19). The same is true in the Supper as the pastor's voice speaks the Head's Words of Institution over bread and wine and as his hands extend the bread that is the Head's body and the cup full of His blood assuring yet again, "Take, eat, this is the body of Christ. Drink of it, this is the blood of Christ" (see MATT. 26:26-28). So also, then, in the confessional, the pastor provides ears and tongue for the Head to use. The penitent speaks in the hearing of human ears that belong to the Head of the Body. And then the penitent hears a human voice, by which the Head of the Body speaks, forgiving the sins just confessed.

With an honest, candid and private confession of the sin that deeply troubles, all hiding ends. Exposure to the light may frighten. These are fearful words: "What troubles me particularly is that..." Who would not gulp before finishing that sentence with an admission of open disobedience to God's commandments, or with the confession of besetting sin that we have been hiding from ourselves as well as the world, or with an acknowledgment that we feel like a hypocrite because our life falls so far from our Christian convictions? But for the candid penitent, a sense of freedom begins — freedom from deceit, lies and a wasting of our souls.

This is confession's first part in its most profound form. "Note, then, as I have often said, that confession consists of two parts. The first is our work and act, when I lament my sin and desire comfort and restoration for my soul."⁷⁷ It is a hard work for sinners that may involve real anguish, so it cannot be coerced and must always be voluntary. Nevertheless, we should not suggest that somehow there is no more need for this

⁷⁶ LSB 184.

⁷⁷ "A Brief Exhortation to Confession," KW 478.15.

gift.⁷⁸ Every sinner is blessed when hiding ends and sins are laid bare before our gracious God — and pastors are not excluded.

'Seeking and imploring Your grace'

Liturgical confessions of sin explicitly declare the confidence expressed throughout Scripture, as noted above in Joel 2 and Psalm 32: The poor sinner who flees toward God is welcomed, not spurned. In faith's paradox, even as we recognize the weight of sin and the legitimacy of divine wrath, we also confidently confess that "with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared" (Ps. 130:4). *Lex orandi, lex credendi* — our worship here reflects our faith.⁷⁹

We urge you, however, to confess and express your needs, not for the purpose of performing a work but to hear what God wants to say to you. The Word or absolution, I say, is what you should concentrate on, magnifying and cherishing it as a great and wonderful treasure to be accepted with all praise and gratitude.⁸⁰

If this motivation is true in public heartfelt confession of sin, it is doubly true in private confession. The absolution is an even more precious treasure when Christ's servant, having heard a shamed admission of the particular sin(s) troubling the penitent, gently lays his hands on the penitent's head and declares: "In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."⁸¹

Certainly no less than for any lay member, for every pastor this is "a great and wonderful treasure." Regular study of the Word for preaching and teaching makes pastors especially aware of God's Law and His Gospel. But, as it does for every child of God, the proclaimed Law of God is in many ways the message that resonates most readily for pastors, since it is echoed by the law already written on our hearts (Rom. 2:15). Even in a fallen creation and in sinful hearts, the Law of God is still reflected in nature itself and is written on our hearts. But the Gospel must come exclusively from outside us, always breaking through the wall of human reason. Luther reminds us of this, noting the precious nature of the Gospel as

⁷⁸ Note Luther's frustration with those who see no need for or value in confession in "A Brief Exhortation to Confession," KW 476–477.5–7.

⁷⁹ The Latin expression *Lex orandi, lex credendi* literally means "the law or rule of prayer is the law or rule of faith."

⁸⁰ "A Brief Exhortation to Confession," KW 478.22.

⁸¹ LSB 292.

preserved in the Creed.⁸² Thus, with the ranks of all the sinful, pastors ought to cherish the Gospel in private absolution.

Help for the Pastor in His Unique Calling

In Luther's guidance for one who is preparing to confess, he answers the question about which sins one should confess:

Here reflect on your walk of life in light of the Ten Commandments: whether you are father, mother, son, daughter, master, mistress, servant; whether you have been disobedient, unfaithful, lazy, whether you have harmed anyone by word or deed; whether you have stolen, neglected, wasted, or injured anything.⁸³

This invites each individual to look at sin in light of his or her daily callings (vocation).⁸⁴ The father's sins will be unique to his fatherly responsibilities, even as the mother's will be to hers; so also the master versus the servant. Therefore, the pastor will confess as a citizen and, likely, as a husband and a father. But he will also confess as a pastor in ways that are unique to his office and different from a layman's. The pastor may helpfully reflect on Scripture that addresses his office as, for example, in 1 Tim. 3:1–7:

The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own

⁸² See his comment from LC II 67–69, KW 440.

From this you see that the Creed is a very different teaching than the Ten Commandments. For the latter teach us what we ought to do, but the Creed tells us what God does for us and gives to us. The Ten Commandments, moreover, are written in the hearts of all people, but no human wisdom is able to comprehend the Creed; it must be taught by the Holy Spirit alone. Therefore the Ten Commandments do not succeed in making us Christians, for God's wrath and displeasure still remain upon us because we cannot fulfill what God demands of us. But the Creed brings pure grace and makes us righteous and acceptable to God. Through this knowledge we come to love and delight in all the commandments of God because we see here in the Creed how God gives himself completely to us, with all his gifts and power, to help us keep the Ten Commandments: the Father gives us all creation, Christ all his works, the Holy Spirit all his gifts.

⁸³ SC, "The Sacrament of Holy Baptism" (How simple people are to be taught to confess), KW 360.20.

⁸⁴ The German word *Stand* is behind KW's phrase "walk of life." KW 360, fn. 84.

household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.⁸⁵

The Law always accuses.⁸⁶ As the pastor examines his conscience, Paul's words will enable him to see areas of his life in which personal confession is needed. His character, the character of his marriage, his fatherly responsibilities, his use of money, his reputation among others — all are under scrutiny.

'Measuring up'

The demands of the Law are severe, but just and godly. Oftentimes, however, other demands feel even heavier. Is the pastor "measuring up" in comparison with his peers? Is the pastor "bearing up" under the demands of congregational needs and ecclesial superiors?

Sinful flesh turns ministry into competition. One pastor's church is thriving, and another feels like a failure in comparison. One pastor's family life appears rosy, but another has a faltering marriage or a dear child who is in trouble. One pastor can afford things that another cannot. One pastor is confident and articulate; another fumbles for words.

Pastors may begin to dread conferences where experts and successful models only point out inadequacies — or at least that is all some may hear. Pressure groups on one side may leave pastors feeling like theological dunces, if not heretics, and another side's exhortations make them doubt their love for Christ and His mission.

The Law's terrifying function can be a tool of Satan. Its standards and judgments can drive us from God into Satan's arms. He gladly adds a whole list of "laws" that are from man alone. "Run and hide, you are unworthy!" is his message. The Word alone can silence him:

Not that we dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who are commending themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another,

they are without understanding. (2 COR. 10:12)

One little Word stands against all sin, both genuine and imagined (the kinds of "sins" that are really based on human values and not the Word of the Lord). It is God's "I forgive you all your sins." This is the treasure the pastor needs not only in general, but also in the face of the unique responsibilities of the ministry.

'Bearing up'

I will "refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested," says the Lord God (ZECH. 13:9). This is both promise and threat.

The threat is real. What we often refer to as "burnout" is the result of the ongoing fires of life — fires that God would use for good, but that often overwhelm us. Exhaustion and despair to the point of inability to serve is too often the result of the combination of genuine guilt over sin and the demands, both legitimate and illegitimate, that pastors face. What do we mean by "burnout?" One definition of burnout is:

A syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do "people work" of some kind." Its symptoms include increased fatigue, tiredness even after a good night's sleep, loss of interest in one's work, and a pessimistic, critical spirit often accompanied by withdrawal, depression, and a feeling of futility.⁸⁷

Pastoral stress or burnout often results from over-involvement — wearing too many "hats." As pastoral identity blurs, burnout may ensue, leading to withdrawal from others, a loss of vocational meaning, hopelessness and depression.⁸⁸ One study revealed that one-third of pastors had considered leaving the ministry on account of burnout. While any worker in any vocation can experience burnout, pastors are especially susceptible.⁸⁹

Luther describes the burden of the ministry: "The household sweat is great; the political sweat is greater; the church sweat is the greatest."⁹⁰ Chrysostom's characterization of ministerial stress is no better: "[M]aking a list of all the difficulties involved [in ministry] is like

⁸⁵ Cf. Titus 1:5–9.

⁸⁶ "Paul says [ROM. 4:15]: 'The law brings wrath.' He does not say that through the law people merit the forgiveness of sins. For the law always accuses and terrifies consciences." Ap IV 38, KW 126.

⁸⁷ Erwin Lutzer, *Pastor to Pastor: Tackling the Problems of Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1998), 59.

⁸⁸ Lutzer, *Pastor to Pastor*, 59. See also Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology: Essentials of Ministry* (New York: HarperCollins, 1983), 5.

⁸⁹ Lutzer, *Pastor to Pastor*, 60.

⁹⁰ Thomas C. Oden, *Ministry Through Word and Sacrament* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1989), 10.

trying to measure the ocean.⁹¹ A seemingly endless list of demands invites an overwhelming sense of failure to seep into the pastor's soul.⁹² Endless expectations and demands may also make the ministry a *lonely* vocation in which the pastor feels spiritually and emotionally starved.⁹³

In the midst of myriad ministerial models, philosophies and paradigms, the pastor's fundamental identity is one who proclaims Jesus and administers publicly the forgiveness of sins that He alone provides. Yet, as he serves so that Jesus may be known, the pastor will realize his failures in this high calling, not only because his proclamation may fall on deaf ears, but especially in the face of his own sins. Such guilt is one reason pastors leave the ministry or, if they remain, lose the joy of their calling. Such guilt-ridden despair is Satan's lie. It tempts the pastor to neglect the resources of the Gospel and lose both his baptismal and pastoral identity.

Our gracious God would use these trials to serve a purpose. As Franzmann says, "Until a man has been molten in the fires of failure and has been shaped by divine forgiveness, he is not yet a real disciple of Jesus."⁹⁴ Such testing (1 PETER 1:6-7) is "part of [our] training," and our failure brings us to a "beggary"⁹⁵ that readies us for absolution and fits us for service:

The new faith, the new love, the new hope that are the disciple's by the resurrection of his Lord are designed to fit him for service. The beggar receives the Kingdom as gift and as promise in order to become the instrument and vehicle of the kingdom of God. He receives mercy in order that he may bestow mercy.⁹⁶

Goesswein reminds pastors of their acute need for God's mercy and love. "Who needs it more than we do? Where does temptation more dearly love to live than in the parsonage? And how can you emphatically advise everyone to take a medicine, the healing powers of which you haven't experienced yourself?"⁹⁷ Our need for such

medicine is real.

'Conversation and consolation'

While some may view all this only from a psycho-social perspective, Luther sees it — especially depression — as a spiritual battle. For Luther, "it is the influence of the adversary that elicits depression."⁹⁸ The same may be said for destructive comparisons and attempts to measure up to others. Why should we regard this as a *spiritual* battle? Because the adversary's goal is to drive the pastor out of the ministry!⁹⁹ Luther elaborates:

For I know [says Christ] that the devil will harass you severely for My sake, to sadden and weary you, to make you impatient, to induce you to defect, and to make you say: "I wish I had never had anything to do with this!" That is the sentiment of many right now. I myself have been assailed by such aversion and weariness, and the thought has come to me: "If I had not begun to do so, I would never again preach another word; I would let everything take whatever course it may." ... But Christ declares: "That is not the right attitude. Do not let the devil, the world, or your own flesh overcome you; but think of how I have loved you and still love you."¹⁰⁰

The pastor who finds himself under such attack should not wait until he gains the victory over these spiritual foes before availing himself of the benefits of private confession and absolution. On the contrary, he will find in confession and absolution the very allies that can bring support and encouragement as he continues to wage war on these satanic forces. Confessing his failures and acknowledging his helplessness may even bring the pastor to a better understanding of the sources of the anger and discouragement. It will work to restore and strengthen his conviction that all pastors serve their Lord as both recipients and stewards of the Gospel's absolution, helping him once again to "major in" the things that really are important. Although private absolution is addressed individually, its promises also hold true towards parishioners and ecclesial leaders. A pastor's anger and disappointment and despondency are not defended, but absolved in Christ's words spoken by the confessor. That absolution enables the pastor to extend forgiveness back

⁹¹ Oden, *Ministry Through Word and Sacrament*, 10.

⁹² Oden, *Ministry Through Word and Sacrament*, 13.

⁹³ Tidball, *Skillful Shepherds*, 316. The practice of hearing confession itself will often add an additional burden on the pastor as he bears secret sins and burdens of the dear sheep that he seeks to forgive, console and guide.

⁹⁴ Franzmann, *Follow Me*, 185.

⁹⁵ Franzmann, *Follow Me*, 206.

⁹⁶ Franzmann, *Follow Me*, 220.

⁹⁷ J.G. Goesswein, "The 11th Article of the Augsburg Confession," trans. Christopher Doerr, *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 106, no. 2 (Spring,

2009), also at wlsessays.net/files/GoesswienAC11.pdf: 19.

⁹⁸ Oden, *Ministry Through Word and Sacrament*, 14.

⁹⁹ Oden, *Ministry Through Word and Sacrament*, 14.

¹⁰⁰ Oden, *Ministry Through Word and Sacrament*, 15, quoting Luther's sermonic comments on John 15:9 from AE 24:247.

to those he serves and those who supervise him.¹⁰¹

Such an evangelical cycle inherently “sorts out” confusion over priorities as pastors are reminded through direct experience that in absolution we receive the Gospel, which is the heart of the ministry to which they are called. “Majoring in majors” is not theoretical, but lived as they receive “the one thing needful” — the very gift that we are also called to give (LUKE 10:42).

One great value of the confessional for the pastor in particular is that a fellow brother in the ministry will hear his anguish. That brother can not only absolve real sin, but he can also encourage the pastor to see where he may “[lack] wisdom” (JAMES 1:5), having believed Satan’s lie that the judge of the pastor’s vocation is not God, but man. Such conversation and consolation is also the Gospel.¹⁰² Here, private confession facilitates a freeing path toward an open admission of a debilitating sin and a joyful reception of Christ’s forgiveness spoken directly to that sin — lest his bones waste away or his strength dry up (Ps. 32:3–5). Just as directly relevant is the counsel and encouragement of a brother who knows the journey that pastors are called to walk.

Guidance for the Pastor

Pastors of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod serve in circuits with brother pastors more or less close by. Some pastors, therefore, may look to a pastor near them with whom they might develop an ongoing confessor-penitent relationship. Others may prefer a classmate some distance away. Still others may wish simply to seek out another pastor — it doesn’t matter whom — if and when they sense the need for private absolution. Our guidance here does not run in the realm of the Law, so as to say, “You *must* find a regular confessor.” Absolution is a Gospel gift that any brother pastor could give as the need may arise. We do note, however, that the pastor himself generally does not have a “*pastor loci*,”¹⁰³ that is, a pastor specifically assigned to him by God’s call. But this also means the door is open for him to seek a brother pastor, whether or not an ongoing relationship

¹⁰¹ On the struggle with depression that pastors also sometimes face, see Todd A. Peperkorn, *I Trust When Dark My Road: A Lutheran View of Depression* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2009), at lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=721.

¹⁰² SA III, 4, KW 319.

¹⁰³ “*Pastor loci*” is a Latin phrase meaning “pastor of the place.” The pastor’s wife and children, in a technical sense, have as pastor their husband and father. Because of these unique and close relationships, there may be circumstances where the pastor’s family may wish to seek the gift of private absolution from another nearby pastor.

develops, with whom he is comfortable and of whom he is confident.

Luther’s example

Part and parcel of Martin Luther’s transformation from fearful sinner to bold Gospel witness was his having a confessor, Johannes von Staupitz, “who presented him with quite a different version of confession, one that stressed divine agency, divine love, and the importance of faith.”¹⁰⁴ As a result of this confessor-penitent relationship, Luther also found a trusted teacher and counselor. Luther described his ecstatic joy after having received Staupitz’s counsel on true penitence as the love of God’s righteousness:

Your word pierced me like the sharp arrow of the Mighty. As a result, I began to compare your statements with the passages of Scripture which speak of *poenitentia* [repentance]. And behold — what a most pleasant scene! Biblical words came leaping toward me from all sides, clearly smiling and nodding assent to your statement. They so supported your opinion that while formerly almost no word in the whole Scripture was more bitter to me than *poenitentia* (although I zealously made a pretense before God and tried to express a feigned and constrained love for him), now no word sounds sweeter or more pleasant to me than *poenitentia*. The commandments of God become sweet when they are read not only in books but also in the wounds of the sweetest Savior.¹⁰⁵

From Staupitz, his father-confessor, Luther learned that true penitence began with the heart having turned to God. Undergirding this insight was that the only way this could happen was by the grace of God, who reveals Himself in Jesus Christ.¹⁰⁶ Clear absolution brought great joy! So, Luther’s need for a pastor encourages pastors today also to have their own pastor.

Qualities of a confessor

How does a pastor go about seeking another pastor to serve as his confessor? Whether a pastor in need of absolution desires a continuing confessor-penitent relationship or simply has an immediate acute need, what he is looking for in a confessor are the very qualities the people of his parish have a right to expect from him. Thus,

¹⁰⁴ *Repentance in Christian Theology*, eds. Mark J. Boda and Gordon T. Smith (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006), 193.

¹⁰⁵ AE 48:66.

¹⁰⁶ AE 48:66.

we assume every pastor will keep sacred the “confessional seal,” that is, “never to divulge the sins confessed to [him]”¹⁰⁷ and to carry out the office entrusted to him with an integrity wrought by the Holy Spirit.

What are some important qualities and characteristics to consider? Certainly, there will be in his circle brother pastors who demonstrate an obvious measure of theological insight and maturity, men who understand the dark internal storms of sinner/saints, who know the crosses Christians bear and are familiar with the schemes and temptations of the devil. An experienced *Seelsorger*¹⁰⁸ will know how to help the penitent pastor give up any evasions or rationalizations for his sins. Instead, such a man will faithfully encourage true repentance, applying appropriate Law and Gospel. Such pastors, in hearing confessions, will avoid pious platitudes but will bring clear words of absolution for him as penitent. Simply put, he should be confident that his fellow pastor will keep his ordination vow — that he will enter his storm and walk with him to love him, to guide him with the Word of God, and to speak full and free forgiveness in the name of Christ.¹⁰⁹

It may be that a particular pastor will come to mind who might serve in this way. Or it may be that a pastor will need, through the mutual conversation and consolation of the brothers, to inquire who might serve best for him. In any case, he will want to commit the matter to prayer, trusting God to hear and to provide. We observe that one of the greatest obstacles to the pastor’s use of individual confession and absolution may be his fear of being exposed before one of his peers. But our Lord Christ speaks to our fears: “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (LUKE 12:32). The honest confessor will admit to his own fears and will point the penitent to the One who casts out fear.

In His gracious provision — despite our fears, despite church politics and despite all human sin — our Lord still prepares faithful undershepherds, so every pastor ought to be confident of finding a trustworthy confessor and a wise and gentle shepherd. God is faithful.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Ordination Rite, *Lutheran Service Book: Agenda* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 166. Never means never, without exception. Only Jesus can enable a pastor to carry this burden.

¹⁰⁸ *Seelsorger* is a German term for a pastor that may be translated as “carer of souls.” The value of someone experienced, learned, wise and proven trustworthy may be especially important. Yet only the Lord who called him can sustain the pastor in this calling.

¹⁰⁹ Often, people may assume that the district president will be the “pastor to the pastors” of his district. While district presidents are called to carry out their responsibilities in a caring and pastoral manner, because they are also ecclesiastical supervisors who may have to discipline pastors, this can be an impediment to the district president serving as a “father confessor.” For this reason, district presidents may refuse to hear a pastor’s confession “under the seal.” At the very least, if he does hear a confession, he will warn the pastor beforehand of his dual role. Of course, district presidents must be pastors, but they also carry out a supervisory function. This is why in most cases it is wise to seek out a pastor who is *not* a district president.

¹¹⁰ It is important to say, with our Confessions, that, “in an emergency even a layperson grants absolution and becomes the minister or pastor of another” (Tr 68, KW 341). Albrecht Peters suggests that Luther himself opened the door for a Christian, other than a pastor, to serve as a confessor. See *Commentary on Luther’s Catechisms: Confession and Christian Life*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013): 10. The practice of confession before a pastor, however, is not only a matter of good order, but it is also proper because a pastor is uniquely prepared to hear confession by his theological and practical training. Moreover, in his call and his ordination vow, he is committed to confidentiality in a way that no layman is.

CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION

Part Three: Extending the Gift to the Congregation

The General Need

WHEREAS WE HAVE ADDRESSED the particular need and value of private confession for the pastor, it is also evident that this practice addresses needs for every individual Christian. We may then briefly consider how the practice of private confession and absolution might be presented to the congregation as a whole.

However, one caveat is necessary. This document suggests that, in implementing private confession, the pastor is helped first and then the congregation is served. Korby emphasizes this order rather aggressively:

[The pastor] who does not make confession dare not be trusted to hear confession. He cannot be trusted with this delicate assignment of a raw soul before him. He will either be shocked or sentimental; or he will be reminded of his own similar sin and spend all his time listening to his own inner accusations — paying only partial attention to the penitent. Or some may be so pressured and burdened by the things they hear that they have to let out what they have taken in.¹¹¹

It may also seem that introducing private confession

and absolution to a congregation is too daunting a task, especially since, as we noted, Scripture does not demand the practice. But this is to risk taking God's generosity too lightly. He knows how much we struggle in our sin and how much and how often we need to receive the forgiveness of sins. One who questions the value of private confession may just as well question how often and in how many different ways a husband and wife should express their love. Poor sinners cannot receive the Lord's comfort and aid too often.

Luther rejoices in this gracious gift of God's love:

As to the current practice of private confession, I am heartily in favor of it, even though it cannot be proved from the Scriptures. It is useful, even necessary, and I would not have it abolished. Indeed, I rejoice that it exists in the church of Christ, for it is a cure without equal for distressed consciences.¹¹²

Korby distinguishes Law and Gospel in this matter:

Does this mean that confession is a divine law? No! Confession is not a law, it is an offer of divine help for the sinner! Mutual brotherly confession, or confession to our pastor-priest, is given to us by God in order that we may be sure of the divine forgiveness. Therefore no one is to be forced to make confession.¹¹³

¹¹¹ Kenneth Korby, "A Suggested Program for the Reintroduction of Private Confession and Absolution in Our Parishes" (A paper delivered to the English District Pastoral Conference of Greater Detroit, April 19, 1966), 17–18.

¹¹² AE 36:86.

¹¹³ Korby, "Suggested Program," 13.

Therefore, we must never mandate private confession and absolution, but neither should we lose it from neglect. We receive individual confession because of need, not demand. As Bonhoeffer says:

As long as I am by myself in the confession of my sins everything remains in the dark, but in the presence of a brother the sin has to be brought into the light. But since the sin must come to light some time, it is better that it happens today between me and my brother, rather than on the last day in the piercing light of the final judgment. It is a mercy that we can confess our sins to a brother. Such grace spares us the terrors of the last judgment.¹¹⁴

The Great Benefit for Pastor and People

Wherever it is employed in ministry, private confession and absolution can strengthen the pastor and also be a blessing to the Lord's people he serves. Private confession is an effective way (1) for God's people to face that which they sometimes need to name in confession; (2) to reinforce that the Gospel is personally received and personally believed in; and finally, (3) to help the pastor grow closer to and know even better the flock he shepherds.

Facing sin directly

As noted, our Confessions reject the enumeration of sins as an unnecessary and impossible burden on consciences.¹¹⁵ There are, however, some sins that plague the conscience. Luther says, "For since it [the conscience] cannot change a sin committed in the past and in any way avoid the future wrath, it cannot escape being distressed and troubled, no matter where it turns."¹¹⁶ Sins which distress and trouble the conscience are the ones that we are wise to address. Löhe explains how the anxious heart may be comforted by individual confession:

How many a Christian heart has some secret anxiety, or is pitifully tormented by the remembrance of particular sins and does not know which way to turn. For such God has ordained His servants as a comfort, into whose lap we should in confidence throw all our anxieties and regard it as though we had personally uncovered it to God alone and laid

it in His fatherly heart.¹¹⁷

It is easy to reduce sin to a general state while avoiding private confession, which names that which has become a stumbling block. An over-generalization of sin enables us to avoid dealing with its specific manifestation: "Confession helps to make sin concrete for the penitent, and delivers him from this futile imagination of not being able to put his finger on anything particular. Such vagueness about sin makes for weakness of humility and faith, strength of indifference and self-deception."¹¹⁸

For the precise reason that particular sin attacks the conscience and causes distress, Luther said confession "is a cure without equal for distressed consciences."¹¹⁹ He adds, "Yea, the devil would have slain me long ago, if the confession had not sustained me."¹²⁰

As beneficial as the general confession is in the liturgy, Ted Kober identifies what might occur in respect to it: "When we recite these familiar words often enough, it is easy to rattle them off without examining our hearts or being disgusted about the ugly truth of our sinful condition."¹²¹ Why would we settle for this and avoid individual confession? Dietrich Bonhoeffer gave this answer:

Why is it that it is often easier for us to confess our sins to God than to a brother? ... Why should we not find it easier to go to a brother than to the holy God? But if we do [find it easier to go to God], we must ask ourselves whether we have not often been deceiving ourselves with our confession of sin to God, whether we have not rather been confessing our sins to ourselves and also granting ourselves absolution. And is not the reason perhaps for our countless relapses and the feebleness of our Christian obedience to be found precisely in the fact that we are living on self-forgiveness and not a real forgiveness? Self-forgiveness can never lead to a breach with sin; this can be accomplished only by the judging and pardoning Word of God itself.¹²²

¹¹⁷ Wilhelm Löhe, "The Sacrament of Repentance," *Una Sancta* 10:2 (1951): 7–8.

¹¹⁸ Korby, "Suggested Program," 13.

¹¹⁹ AE 36:86.

¹²⁰ AE 51:98.

¹²¹ Ted Kober, *Confession & Forgiveness: Professing Faith as Ambassadors of Reconciliation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002), 94.

¹²² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1954), 115–116.

¹¹⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1954), 116.

¹¹⁵ AC XXV 7, KW 73.

¹¹⁶ AE 29:209.

Rather than some counterfeit “self-forgiveness,” individual confession and absolution pin-points exact sins. This admission of the “concrete reality” of sins prepares us for the “concrete reality” of their absolution.

Personal reception of the Gospel

Clearly, then, individual confession and absolution is a Means of Grace. As He does also in Baptism and the Supper, Christ directly applies His saving work to individuals in holy absolution, promising them forgiveness, life and salvation — a promise the individual receives by faith. Christ is direct in describing absolution’s power in Matthew 16, Matthew 18 and John 20 as discussed above. In the words of the one who speaks in the stead of Christ, the sins that are loosed and forgiven on earth are loosed and forgiven in heaven. In Luke 10:16, Christ assures us: “The one who hears you hears me.” Thus, Luther affirms in the Small Catechism that when we receive this absolution, it is not a forgiveness from man, but “from God Himself.”¹²³ And in the individual absolution, there is no mistaking the one for whom Christ’s forgiveness is intended. As is the case in Baptism — “I baptize *you*” — and in the Supper — “Given for *you*” — so also in individual absolution, the pastor lays his hands on *your* head, etches the sign of the holy cross upon *your* forehead and pronounces the absolution of God directly to *you*.

We should not think, however, that absolution (any more than Baptism or the Supper) conveys a different forgiveness. There is but one Gospel. The difference lies only in application of that one Gospel of life and salvation in Christ Jesus.

Private absolution does not confer upon the sinner a better or more powerful or another kind of forgiveness than that given by the preaching of the Word, but it makes a special application of the Gospel to men, and it gives the individual a greater comfort and certainty that forgiveness has been conferred upon him personally. . . . By believing in Christ a person obtains forgiveness of sins (Acrs 10:43), but absolution gives a person reassurance and renewal and repetition of forgiveness.¹²⁴

This same absolution and justification is given through all the Means of Grace and every application of

¹²³ SC, “Holy Baptism” (How simple people are to be taught to confess), KW 360.16.

¹²⁴ Curtis C. Stephan, “The Office of the Keys,” in *The Abiding Word: An Anthology of Doctrinal Essays for the Year 1945*, Vol. 1, ed. Theodore Laetsch (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 352–353.

the Gospel. Private absolution gains distinction in that it addresses specific sins that weigh a Christian down. As the Formula of Concord says:

Accordingly, Christ offers the promises of the gospel not only in general but also through the sacraments, which he has attached as a seal of the promise and by which he confirms the promise individually to each and every believer.¹²⁵

Increasing the bond between pastor and people

As noted, it may be a challenge to introduce the practice of private confession. Nevertheless, its benefits make the challenge worthwhile. Another beneficial aspect of individual confession and absolution in pastoral ministry is that it can increase the closeness of the pastor and his congregation.

A warning is in order, however. It is necessary to point out that the pastor never proceeds in the restoration of individual confession out of a warped sense of curiosity. When it comes to private confession, he must live in strict accord with his ordination vows. His ears are to be the tomb where the sins confessed are buried and forgotten. The pastor develops the attitude of not making any kind of effort to *remember* what is confessed, much less ever to recount it to another or let it become an “illustration” for a sermon. At the same time, when the shepherd hears the hurts and sins of one of his sheep, this enables him to become more prayerful over their temptations and more encouraging in making the most of the penitent’s gifts. As he retains silence and exercises pastoral sensitivity toward the penitent, trust and appreciation for his ministry will grow.

This involves a paradoxical duality (no surprise for Lutheran theology!): The pastor is to forget and remember at the same time. That which is confessed, together with the Law’s threats and condemnation, is dead; buried in the absolution. However, knowing the particular needs and weaknesses of penitents, the *Seelsorger* is better equipped to serve them. Rightly distinguished, this dynamic does not estrange the pastor from his parishioner. Rather, it endears him because “My pastor knows all about me, and he loves me more than ever before.” Thus, Löhe: “If he [the pastor] is to care for and guard the souls of the flock entrusted to him, yes, even to give account according to Heb. 13:17, then he must know them, that is, I dare say, especially their sins, weaknesses and temptations.”¹²⁶

¹²⁵ FC SD XI 37, KW 647.

¹²⁶ Wilhelm Löhe, “The Sacrament of Repentance,” *Una Sancta* 10:2 (1951): 4.

Moreover, individual confession and absolution may provide a natural doorway to instruct and fortify God's people with the teaching of God's Word. It can lead to practical insights on how to battle the flesh, the world and the devil as one lives out the fruit of the total forgiveness already received. Such personal instruction with personal application also invariably fosters a closer relationship between pastor and parishioner. Again Löhe: "Private Confession offers the best opportunity to instruct people;... [the pastor] ... can instruct each one in Law and Gospel according to his need. Also, a person understands easier and retains better what is told him alone on such a hallowed occasion than what he hears publicly preached."¹²⁷

Restoration and Practice

The pastor must lead the way toward a restoration of the practice of individual confession for he is the steward of Christ's mysteries — His Means of Grace (1 COR. 4:1). He is Christ's undershepherd, and so he leads the flock. As the pastor establishes a personal rhythm of confession and absolution, he will increasingly experience the great benefit of the practice and naturally encourage and lead others into it as one who knows its great consolation.

This salutary counsel should not minimize the fact that the "practice of private confession is actually an extension of ... preaching."¹²⁸ Sermons and teaching that include reference to the value of individual confession are a vital part of encouraging its practice — Advent and Lent may be opportunities for such special attention. In addition, regular catechesis should always address the fifth chief part in Luther's Small Catechism on confession, both for youth and for adults. For established members, Bible studies, newsletter articles, blogs, weekly email and/or other pastoral communications may be utilized. Moreover, the pastor would be wise to discuss the practice with the leadership of the congregation: both officers and also other key leaders. In all teaching, the pastor should be prepared to deal with "challenges" to private confession, such as those mentioned above (especially that it is "too Catholic").

A few concerns about the actual implementation of private confession should be considered.¹²⁹ One imme-

diately question is whether to offer individual confession at specific set times or simply to make public his willingness to hear confessions at any mutually agreed time and place. Some are concerned that the pastor should *not* have a set time for private confession and absolution, because parishioners will know that fellow members are seeing the pastor for this purpose, discouraging the practice. Another view is that part of the catechetical preparation is to lead the congregation to recognize and affirm the fact that private confession and absolution is offered, and regular times enable penitents to realize "I'm not the only one." Thus, the realization that others are using the resource can actually serve as a motivator and encouragement to a fellow member. However one evaluates these perspectives, it is apparent that a pastor may also prefer a both-and approach, offering confession both at set times and by appointment.

As for the actual meeting with the penitent, while private confession and absolution can occur anywhere, the setting is not unimportant. A private setting is essential. Lang notes suggestions from Walther and Löhe that a private area may be designated near the communion rail or in a corner of the nave.¹³⁰ If confession is heard in the sanctuary, then a confessional chair or location for kneeling should be identified. Another obvious possible location is the pastor's study, where the penitent may sit or kneel (if a kneeler is available).

The pastor may be flexible in his clothing when he hears confession and gives private absolution. However, the use of vestments, especially the stole, may be appropriate as a way to emphasize the gift of the Sacrament — God's grace administered through the Office of the Public Ministry.¹³¹

Either a printed order or the use of the hymnal is encouraged. A set order is a reminder of the universal nature of this gift — that it is approved by our church and not a pastoral idiosyncrasy. On the first occasion for a confession, the pastor should explain the brief order, emphasizing that: 1) penitents need only confess what is troubling them; 2) they are there to confess their own sin, and not the sins of others; 3) they can be confident that the pastor will maintain confidentiality in accord with his ordination vows; 4) absolution is the central

¹²⁷ Löhe, "The Sacrament of Repentance," 6.

¹²⁸ Pless, "Your Pastor Is Not Your Therapist," 24.

¹²⁹ Helpful practical resources for implementing private confession include Lang, "Private Confession and Absolution"; Korby, "Suggested Program"; Ronald F. Marshall, "Salvation Within Our Reach," *Lutheran Forum*, Fall, 1997; and Pless, "Your Pastor Is Not Your Therapist."

¹³⁰ Lang, 258–259. The source of this suggestion, according to Lang, is Chaplain Delvin Ressel writing in an article from the *Lutheran Chaplain* in 1949.

¹³¹ Lutherans may refer to confession and absolution as a Sacrament. The Lutheran Confessions do so in LC IV and Ap XIII. See Question 294 in *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation*, 282.

purpose and value of individual confession; and, finally, 5) absolution is given without qualification, and any counsel is not penance but guidance and encouragement in Christian life.

Pless provides helpful guidance for hearing confession:

The diagnostic key is self-examination in view of one's vocation or place in life according to the Ten Commandments. Here the pastor does not unduly probe or coerce; he is not a moral detective. Rather, he bids the penitent to stand before the mirror of God's law so that the inbred sin is brought to light, to paraphrase the words of the hymn. Here the pastor will need to be attentive to the words of the penitent, guiding the penitent away from complaining about his sins to actually confessing them, naming them. When there is confusion or lack of clarity here, the pastor may need to press the penitent to identify which commandment of God he or she has sinned against. Likewise the pastor will be on guard lest the penitent slip into the Adamic mode of confessing the sins of another: "The woman you put here with me — she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it" (GEN. 3:12).¹³²

Having heard the confession, the pastor stands before the penitent, places his hands on the penitent's head and pronounces the absolution: "In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit."¹³³ If there is further conversation, the pastor may first emphasize the absolution just spoken as the only true source of strength for Christian living. He may also then provide guidance for a life of repentant and joyful faith, carefully avoiding any hint of demanding "satisfaction."¹³⁴

¹³² Pless, "Your Pastor Is Not Your Therapist," 25.

¹³³ LSB 293.

¹³⁴ On satisfaction, see the historical background on Pages 12–16 above. Some recommend that the pastor deliberately engage in pastoral counsel up front and then end with private confession and absolution. The danger here, however, is at least twofold: 1) We take the risk of minimizing absolution and over-emphasizing counsel; and 2) we take the risk of missing the absolution — the one thing needful — altogether.

CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION

Conclusion

FOR PASTOR AND PEOPLE — for all the sheep who follow their Good Shepherd¹³⁵ — the Shepherd calls in countless ways, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (MAT. 11:28). His sheep rejoice in the preached promises of forgiveness, life, salvation, peace, joy, confidence and all other good things from the Shepherd’s hand. They luxuriate in the bath of Holy Baptism where sin is cleansed and their Lord joins them to Himself in death and resurrection (ROMANS 6) given by Him who gives the water of life (JOHN 4:14). They feast together at His table on His body and blood for sin’s remission — the one bread and one cup that makes them one. And where they struggle, they are freely welcomed to confess their sins and be assured by a word from their shepherd Himself — “The one who hears you hears me” (LUKE 10:16) — a voice that declares with absolute certainty: “I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

So it is that God’s children may stand before God without shame, without guilt and without sin. So it is that they can join the psalmist’s relieved prayer: “For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,’ and you forgave the iniquity of my sin” (Ps. 32:3–5).

¹³⁵ SA Part III, 12:2, KW 324–325.

CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION

Appendix

2013 RESOLUTION 4-13

To Encourage Confession and Absolution for Pastors

Overture 4-13 (CW, p. 168–169)

Whereas, In confession “[i]t is not the voice or word of the man who speaks, but it is the Word of God, who forgives sin, for it is spoken in God’s stead and by God’s command” (AC XXV 3 [Tappert]); and

Whereas, Our pastors are bound by the Word of God and their ordination vows “never to divulge the sins confessed to them” (*Lutheran Service Book: Agenda*); and

Whereas, While no one should be forced to go to confession (“no one should be compelled to recount sins in detail” [AC XXV 7]), it is also true that confession should be made available for those whose conscience is troubled (“Yet the preachers on our side diligently teach that confession is to be retained for the sake of absolution, . . . for the consolation of terrified consciences” [AC XXV 13]); and

Whereas, Pastors may also become aware of sins that they themselves have committed and desire to confess them to another pastor, as Luther describes in the Small Catechism, and so receive absolution; and

Whereas, The Synod in 2007 “[r]esolved, that both laity and pastors be encouraged to make greater use of individual confession and absolution” (RES. 2-07A); therefore be it

Resolved, That the Synod in convention state its commitment that in all activities, offices, and agencies of the Synod, the goal is that all might “hear the Word of the Gospel” (ACTS 15:7), as referenced in the Preamble of the LCMS Constitution; and be it further

Resolved, That the pastors of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod be reassured that the Synod takes very seriously the spiritual welfare of her pastors and encourages them, when they feel a need to avail themselves of private absolution, that they should do so; and be it further

Resolved, That pastors be encouraged to seek a father confessor or the district president will provide for the penitent pastor the name and contact information for another pastor who is able and willing to hear that confession and offer absolution; and be it further

Resolved, That the convention make clear that no one is being forced to confess sins, or even to confess privately, but that this resolution makes provision only for those pastors who have a desire to make use of private confession but who are unsure where they may go to make such a confession to another pastor and hear the word of absolution; and be it further

Resolved, That the Commission on Theology and Church Relations provide a document that sets forth our church’s teaching on confession and absolution and offers positive guidance to pastors and congregations in their exercise of the Office of the Keys; and be it finally

Resolved, That the Synod in convention give thanks to God for all the means He has given to His church where-by the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ is received.

Action: Adopted (9)

(After debate, the resolution was adopted as presented [Yes: 840; No: 32].)

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *2013 Convention Proceedings*, 135.

