



CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION

A BIBLE STUDY AND DISCUSSION GUIDE

**COMMISSION ON THEOLOGY AND CHURCH RELATIONS
THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD**

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This discussion guide and Bible study is based on the 2018 report, *Confession and Absolution*, produced by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, available at lcms.org/ctcr.

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INTRODUCTION

Defining the terms: *What do you think of when you hear the word “confession”? What does “absolution” mean?*

The root of the Greek word for confession, *homologia*, is *homos*, “one and the same.” “If we confess our sins” (1 JOHN 1:9), we are *saying the same thing that God is saying about our sin*. We admit that His judgment is right and true. The word “absolution” is a synonym for forgiveness.

In his Small Catechism, Martin Luther wrote: “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.”¹ Luther spoke of the confession of sins in three settings: 1) private confession to a pastor; 2) confession to God alone (as in the Lord’s Prayer [MATT. 6:12]) and 3) confession made to a fellow Christian (JAMES 5:16).

Read Matt. 16:19–20, Matt. 18:15–20 and John 20:19–23. *Martin Luther wrote, “It follows that the keys or the authority of St. Peter is not an authority at all but a service; and the keys have not been given to St. Peter but to you and me. The keys are yours and mine.”² What do the keys do?*

The keys of the Kingdom, which give or withhold forgiveness, were given by Christ to His apostles and, by extension, to His *entire* Church, and any member of Christ’s Church may assure another person of forgiveness. Concerning confession made to a pastor, we teach: “Before God we should plead guilty of all sins, even those we are not aware of, as we do in the Lord’s Prayer; but before the pastor we should confess only those sins which we know and feel in our hearts.”³ The Lutheran theologian Martin Chemnitz (1522–1586) spoke of private confession as part of pastoral care: “[I]t 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.”⁴ The forgiveness from Christ given in individual confession is no different from that given in public worship.

¹ Martin Luther, Confession, *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 25.

² Martin Luther, “The Sacrament of Penance,” *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 16.

³ Confession, *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation*, 25.

⁴ Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent* (Part II), trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), 561–562.

PART ONE: FOUNDATIONS

Scriptural Witness

Biblical confession

Read Luke 24:46–47. Under what two headings does Jesus summarize the proclamation that is to be made in His name? **Read 1 John 1:9 and Rom. 10:9.** In what two ways is the word “confess” used in these verses?

We confess our sin and confess the faith. We confess what is true about ourselves and our condition before God and we confess what is true about God, who He is and what He has done for us. Confession is not simply a matter of listing our sins; it is a statement that we continually sin and fall short of God’s glory. We live by faith in the promises of the Gospel and desire to live a life worthy of the children of God (PHIL. 1:27).

Read Psalm 106. How does this psalm use the two meanings of confess, to acknowledge sin and to state what we know about God’s mercy? At the close of the psalm, what does the psalmist ask of God, and what are the people to do in response?

Repentance

In the first of his 95 Theses, Martin Luther wrote, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ [MATT. 4:17], he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”⁵ The biblical terms for “repent” in

⁵ Martin Luther, “Ninety-Five Theses or Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences,” *Luther’s Works*, vol. 31, ed. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 25.

Hebrew (*shub*) 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.

Read Joel 2:11–13. Repentance is prompted by God’s word of judgment and by His gracious invitation. How does the prophet Joel speak of God’s judgment and invitation?

Scripture clearly teaches that repentance is not humanly generated. We do not produce it and then offer it to God. Repentance is a gracious gift from God.

Read Acts 5:31, Acts 11:18 and 2 Tim. 2:24–26. How do these verses speak of repentance as a gift of God?

To “bear fruit in keeping with repentance” (MATT. 3:8; LUKE 3:8; ACTS 26:20) means that we honestly acknowledge our sinfulness and God’s mercy. We then express these truths in both our words and our actions.

“I ... will draw all people to myself”
(JOHN 12:32).

We should not hide from God as our first parents did (GEN. 3:8–10). Our fear, suspicion and doubt are known to God, who came to us in a way no one could fear. In a sermon about Jesus’ birth, Luther said:

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.⁶

Not heroes but believers

The Child of Bethlehem is the Savior who came to die and rise for us. The Lutheran theologian Martin Franzmann (1907–1976) spoke of the death and resurrection of Jesus as the confession and absolution of the disciples:

[T]he 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 whole Passion account voices [the disciples'] confession, "All we like sheep have gone astray ... the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (Is. 53:6) ... 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.⁷

Read 1 Tim. 1:12–17. *How does the apostle Paul describe himself as he confesses both his sin and his trust in the grace of God in Christ Jesus?*

The followers of Jesus in the New Testament were restored, confessing sinners, who lived and worked in the grace of Jesus' absolution.

⁶ *The Martin Luther Christmas Book*, trans. Roland H. Bainton (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1948), 40.

⁷ Martin H. Franzmann, *Follow Me: Discipleship According to Saint Matthew* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), 214–215.

***"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven"* (MATT. 16:19).**

Today we cannot take the Baby Jesus into our arms, sit with Him by the sea, stand at the foot of the cross or run to the empty tomb. To whom do we make our confession?

Read Luke 10:16, Matt. 16:18–19 and John 20:19–23. *Where can we hear the absolving voice of our Lord?*

***"That you may be healed"* (JAMES 5:16).**

There is no command in the Bible to practice a specific order or rite of confession and absolution. But Scripture is filled with expressions of God's gracious will that all would repent and it overflows with His gracious promises of forgiveness, life and salvation in His Son.

Read Is. 1:18, Is. 45:22, James 5:16 and Heb. 2:1–4. *How are God's invitation and promises expressed in these verses?*

Confessional Witness

In the sixteenth century, Lutherans reformed the medieval sacrament of penance, changing Roman Catholic practices that obscured the absolution.⁸ Listing all of one's sins in confession, as required by the Roman Catholic Church, is neither commanded nor possible (Ps. 19:12). Such a listing of sins shifts the focus from the Gospel to the work of man. Lutherans also did away with the Roman Catholic requirement that every Christian had to go to confession at least once a year, since such a requirement undermines the Gospel-character of confession and absolution. The Lutheran Confessions also rejected satisfaction imposed by the priest.

The Lutheran reformers made changes in the practice of confession based on the biblical understanding of repentance, confession and absolution. True repentance consists of contrition and faith. 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 receives comfort and the assurance of forgiveness.

⁸ The Roman Catholic Sacrament of Penance involves contrition on the part of the penitent, confession to a priest, absolution and satisfaction, that is, the penitent must make satisfaction or repair the harm caused by the sins confessed.

Read Article XXV, parts 1–6, of the Augsburg Confession:

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, 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.⁹

According to Article XXV, why should people take advantage of the practice of confession? What is especially comforting about the absolution? What false practices and teachings had once tormented the consciences of those making confession?

There is no explicit divine command for private confession, but confession and absolution are not merely human practices. The absolution is divinely commanded, since the Church has the power and duty (the Office of the Keys) to forgive those who are troubled by their sins.

Read Ps. 130. *The psalmist confesses, "With you there is forgiveness." Confident of forgiveness, how is the psalmist's faith strengthened? What does he believe about the LORD?*

⁹ Augsburg Confession XXV, Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 72.1–6.

In confession and absolution, we find the basic structure of what it means to be a Christian — to believe the condemning word of God, to confess oneself to be a sinner before God and to receive the comforting word of forgiveness. The absolution gives what Christ gained on the cross — the forgiveness of sins. Luther wrote, "Therefore, when I exhort you to go to confession, I am doing nothing but exhorting you to be a Christian."¹⁰

History

The early church stressed the importance of a holy life after Baptism. Due to the need for restoration because of sin committed after Baptism, penance became a kind of "second baptism." The theologian Tertullian (c. 160–c. 225) seems to have introduced the term "satisfaction." In Roman private law, one person made amends to another for failing to keep an obligation. For Tertullian, God was the one to whom satisfaction was made.¹¹ The doctrine of satisfaction was further developed during the Middle Ages.

Read Luke 18:9–14. *How does the Pharisee demonstrate the common human belief that one is capable of "making satisfaction" according to the demands of the Law? How does the tax collector confess both his sin and his trust in God?*

A decree of the Roman Catholic Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 made annual confession an obligation for all men and women who attained the age of reason (age seven).¹² The idea of a "treasury of merit," in which penitent sinners could draw upon the merits of Jesus and the saints for the forgiveness of their own sins, became increasingly popular.¹³

In 1439, the Roman Catholic Council of Florence decreed that penance consisted of **1**) contrition, or sorrow over sin; **2**) confession that must be made to a priest

¹⁰ "A Brief Exhortation to Confession," *The Book of Concord*, 479.32.

¹¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition 100–600* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 147.

¹² Canon 21 of the Fourth Lateran Council states in part: "All the faithful of both sexes shall after they have reached the age of discretion faithfully confess all their sins at least once a year to their own (parish) priest and perform to the best of their ability the penance imposed, receiving reverently at least at Easter the sacrament of the Eucharist." *Medieval Sourcebook: Twelfth Ecumenical Council, Lateran IV 1215*, accessed April 7, 2019, sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/lateran4.asp.

¹³ These extra merits were called "works of supererogation," good works done by the saints over and above what was required for their salvation. These extra merits could be credited to sinners who fell short in their own works.

and 3) satisfaction, or works of penance, assigned by the priest. The penitent received absolution, but still had to do works of satisfaction to avoid penalties in purgatory. Luther believed that teachings on penance misunderstood the gift of absolution. The binding key is only a means to an end; the aim of the keys is the forgiveness of sins.¹⁴

Read Ps. 49:7–15 and Ps. 51:16–17. *What does the psalmist say about payment made to God? Who will pay to ransom a man? What sacrifice does God desire from us?*

The Roman Catholic Council of Trent (1545–1563) required confession of all sins before a priest. The council decreed that the acts of the penitent — contrition, confession and satisfaction — were “by God’s institution required in the penitent for the integrity of the sacrament and for the full and complete remission of sins.”¹⁵

Lutherans disagreed with that decree, but they kept the practice of private confession and absolution. Martin Chemnitz wrote that “the promise of the Gospel is efficacious not only when it is announced in general ... 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. ... 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.”¹⁶

Read Matt. 9:1–8 and Luke 7:36–50. *In what circumstances did Jesus absolve the sins of individuals? How was Jesus challenged or criticized in both events?*

Later in the seventeenth century, some Lutherans became suspicious of private confession and absolution. These Pietists asked, “Hasn’t absolution become too easy and free? Shouldn’t we put a greater emphasis on seeing the necessary fruits of repentance *before* we proclaim the word of absolution?” Rationalists rejected the inspiration of Scripture and the words of absolution found there. They believed that forgiveness was obtained simply through resolving to live a better life, a trend that found its way to America. The poet Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), in his *Divinity School Address of 1838*, stressed the human experience of God in nature,

¹⁴ The terms “binding key” and “loosing key” reflect Jesus’ promise, “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. 16:19).

¹⁵ Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum: A Compendium of Creeds, Definitions and Declarations of the Catholic Church*, ed. Peter Hünermann (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012).

¹⁶ Chemnitz, *Examination*, 2:561–562.

saying that the human soul had direct access to God and religious rituals were no longer needed.

The American Lutheran theologian Samuel Simon Schmucker (1799–1873) wanted to align Lutheranism with American culture. Concerning Article XI of the Augsburg Confession, Schmucker argued that “the omission of this Article [on private confession and absolution] is *demande*.”¹⁷ In response to Schmucker’s teaching, the Missouri Synod at its founding in 1847 insisted on retaining private confession and absolution.

As Missouri Synod Lutherans entered the mainstream of American religious life, they increasingly discarded what some saw as “peculiar” practices, including, unfortunately, private confession. Still, by the middle of the twentieth century, some churches were working to reclaim the practice of private confession. It seems that more pastors now regularly offer private confession and absolution to their congregations, although its use by laity is apparently increasing only slowly.

Challenges

What arguments have you heard, if any, opposing the practice of private confession? Why might people avoid the practice? Why might church members welcome private confession?

For Lutherans, private confession is a voluntary practice. We reject the idea that one must (or even can) list all of one’s sins before a confessor and we reject the addition of satisfaction. Lutheran teaching upholds the comfort of absolution above all else. Still, some Lutherans consider the practice to be too “Catholic.” Others may assume that since we do not require private confession, it is unimportant. Unless an individual is deeply troubled about a particular sin, private confession may seem of little value.

Those who are influenced by Evangelical teaching may believe that the pastor’s absolution is without biblical basis, believing that only God can forgive our sins.¹⁸ Forgiveness from a pastor may be viewed as a denial that individuals can approach God on their own. Our Lord

¹⁷ Samuel Simon Schmucker, *Definite Synodical Platform* (Philadelphia: Miller & Burlock, 1855), 11, emphasis added, accessed April 7, 2019, replica.palni.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/copebooks/id/845.

¹⁸ The term Evangelical is used to refer to non-Roman Catholic Christians who claim personal faith in Jesus and the need for evangelism, and who uphold biblical authority but deny or minimize the Sacraments as Means of Grace. For example, most Baptists, Pentecostals and non-denominational Christians may be considered Evangelicals.

assures us that the Gospel — although spoken by sinful men — is *His Word* (JOHN 20:23; MATT. 18:18). We have faith in *Jesus’ Word*, “not doubting, but firmly believing that by it our sins are forgiven before God in heaven.”¹⁹

Read Rom. 6:1–11. *Does an absolution without satisfaction done by the penitent imply a lax view of sin? Does absolution mean permission to continue in sin? What does the apostle Paul say about continuing in sin?*

An admission of sin that comes with the intention to continue it is not a biblical confession and must not result in absolution. The appropriate pastoral response to an insincere confession is the withholding of forgiveness, pronouncing the Lord’s judgment against unrepentant sin (JOHN 20:23). Openly unrepentant sinners may ultimately be excluded from the congregation.

There is a difference between temporal and eternal consequences of sin. God’s forgiveness covers all sins and saves from His wrath and judgment so that His forgiven children will not suffer eternal death and hell (JOHN 3:36; JOHN 11:25–26; TITUS 3:5–7; 2 TIM. 1:10). God’s forgiveness for Jesus’ sake is unconditional and absolute, freeing us from every eternal consequence of sin. But temporal consequences often continue. So, the unruly child may still have a “time-out,” the murderer be subject to imprisonment or execution, the adulterer may bear the consequence of divorce, the addict or alcoholic may suffer physical harm, and so on. Temporal consequences are permitted by God, even while His forgiveness frees us from eternal punishment. This distinction between temporal and the eternal consequences reminds us that we should amend our sinful lives. This may require specific restitution and “making amends” to those hurt by our sins.

Read Deut. 34:1–6, 2 Sam. 12:7–14 and Luke 23:39–43. *What temporal consequences for sin were experienced by these biblical figures, even though they received forgiveness and eternal life?*

The person troubled by sin may need counseling in addition to confession and absolution. Pastoral counsel or appropriate psychotherapeutic counseling may be beneficial to believers and nonbelievers alike. Pastoral counsel brings a distinctly spiritual element, anchored in God’s Word. Good counseling may help the Christian to better understand what needs to be confessed. Yet after private confession and absolution, the penitent may still need psychological counseling.

There is, finally, the fear that a private confession might not remain private. In his ordination vows, the pastor promises never to reveal the contents of a person’s confession.²⁰

¹⁹ Confession, *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation*, 25.

²⁰ At his ordination, the candidate is asked, “Will you faithfully instruct both young and old in the chief articles of Christian doctrine, will you forgive the sins of those who repent, and will you promise never to divulge the sins confessed to you?” The candidate responds, “Yes, I will, with the help of God.” The Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Lutheran Service Book Agenda* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 166.

PART TWO: HELPING THE PASTOR

Introduction

How can we reclaim Christ's gift of private confession and absolution for the benefit of the church today? A restoration of private confession must begin with pastors. The pastor, though a shepherd, is also a lamb in need of a shepherd. Pastors need — and receive — the very same help that Christ gives to every child of God through individual confession.

Help for the Pastor as a Child of God

"We poor sinners"

On behalf of the congregation and on his own behalf, the pastor confesses: "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."²¹ The pastor's office and ordination do not make him exempt from Adam's fall.

Read Ex. 32:1–6, 1 Sam. 2:12–17 and Mal. 1:6–7.
How do the priests in these accounts fall into sin?

²¹ The Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 184. See also The Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Lutheran Worship* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982), 136, and The Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America, *The Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941), 6.

Read Is. 6:1–7. *How does the prophet Isaiah confess his sins? How is he absolved?*

Despite the countless troubles in our lives, no problem is as serious as our sin. Left unaddressed, sin will kill us eternally. We dare not underestimate sin and Satan (EPH. 6:12).

Read Matt. 6:9–15. *How, in the prayer He gave us, does the Lord Jesus address the deadly issue of our sin? Read 2 Cor. 2:5–11.* *How would our failure to forgive one another allow us to be "outwitted by Satan"?*

Confession is part of our daily prayer before God, both alone and in worship. In the liturgy, we acknowledge our struggle: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 JOHN 1:8). *Individual* confession of sins before a fellow Christian is another form of comfort (JAMES 5:16).

In the written order for individual confession, the penitent pleads guilty before God of all sins, adding, "What troubles me particularly is that ..." ²² Finishing this sentence, we share 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."²³ Although such honest admissions of sin may be made to a trusted friend or another person, confession before a pastor carries with it the assurance of complete confidentiality promised at his ordination.

²² *Lutheran Service Book*, 292. See also *Lutheran Worship*, 310.

²³ "A Brief Exhortation to Confession," *The Book of Concord*, 477.13.

“We flee for refuge”

Read Is. 1:18 and Joel 2:12–13. Although we want to flee from God and hide our sins, as Adam and Eve did (GEN. 3:8), what is His invitation for us? **Read Ex. 34:6, Ps. 86:15 and Jonah 4:2.** How is God described in these verses?

The pastor preaches God’s Word, not his own (1 THESS. 2:13). The penitent hears a human voice, through which Christ speaks, forgiving the sins just confessed.

Read 1 John 1:7–10 and Ps. 32:1–5. What does Scripture say about our attempts to deny or hide our sins? What is God’s promise to us?

Private confession may involve real anguish for sinners. Nevertheless, every sinner, including the pastor, is blessed when hiding comes to an end and sins are laid bare before our gracious God and forgiven.

“Seeking and imploring Your grace”

The poor sinner who flees to God is welcomed, not rejected. We recognize the justice of God’s wrath, but confidently confess to Him, “With you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared” (Ps. 130:4). The Law of God is written on our hearts (ROM. 2:15), but the Gospel must come from outside us. The pastor 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.”²⁴ These words are a treasure for pastors and members alike.

Help for the Pastor in His Unique Calling

Luther addresses the question of 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.”²⁵ Each individual looks at sin in light of his or her daily callings, or vocations. The pastor confesses *as a pastor* in ways that are unique to his office and may be different from some of the concerns of a lay member.

²⁴ Lutheran Service Book, 291, 293. See also Lutheran Worship, 309.

²⁵ The Small Catechism, *The Book of Concord*, 360.20.

Read 1 Tim. 3:1–7. In light of these verses, in what ways might a pastor’s confession differ from that of a lay member?

Paul’s words to Timothy help the pastor to see areas of his life in which personal confession is needed. The pastor’s character, the character of his marriage, his fatherly responsibilities, his use of money and his reputation are all under scrutiny.

“Measuring up”

Some pressures may feel heavier for the pastor than the demands of God’s Law. 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 dread conferences where experts only point out inadequacies. Pressure groups may leave pastors feeling like heretics, or make them doubt their love for Christ and His mission.

Satan wants us to believe that we are not worthy of forgiveness. But God’s Word of absolution is greater than our self-condemnation — whether that is based on genuine or imagined sins (imagined “sins” are based on human values and not on God’s Word).²⁶ This is the treasure the pastor needs in the face of the 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). We may speak of “burnout.” The demands and genuine guilt that the pastor faces can lead to exhaustion, despair and the inability to serve. Burnout can be defined as “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.”²⁷ Burnout may lead to withdrawal from others, a loss of vocational meaning and hopelessness and depression.

²⁶ Cf. 1 John 3:19–20.

²⁷ Erwin Lutzer, *Pastor to Pastor: Tackling the Problems of Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1998), 59.

Read 1 Kings 19:1–18. *What events cause Elijah to be overwhelmed by the pressures and disappointments of ministry? What are his symptoms? How does God restore His prophet?*

The pastor proclaims Jesus and announces the forgiveness of sins. Yet the pastor's own failures and guilt may lead him to lose joy in his calling or even leave the ministry. 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 identities. But God uses these trials to serve His purpose. Such testing is part of our training and our failures make us beggars ready for absolution and continued service.

Read 1 Peter 1:3–9. *We rejoice in our salvation, but we are grieved by various trials. According to these verses, what is the purpose of these trials?*

“Conversation and consolation”

Although a pastor's burnout can and should be viewed from a psychosocial perspective, it is even more importantly understood as a spiritual battle because Satan wants to drive the pastor out of the ministry. The pastor will find support and encouragement in private confession and absolution as he wages war against Satan. Confessing his failures and acknowledging his helplessness may even bring the pastor to a better understanding of the sources of his anger and discouragement. In confession and absolution, his anger, disappointment and dependency are not defended but absolved. Another great value of the confessional for the pastor is that a fellow brother in ministry will hear his anguish. That brother can absolve sin and encourage the pastor to see where he may lack wisdom (JAMES 1:5).

Guidance for the Pastor

The pastor does not have another pastor specifically assigned to him as a confessor. He may seek a brother pastor with whom he is comfortable and in whom he has confidence. Pastors serve in circuits and 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.

Luther's example

Martin Luther's confessor was his superior in the monastery, Johannes von Staupitz. Luther described his joy after having received Staupitz's counsel on true penitence:

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.²⁸

Read Rom. 2:1–5 and 2 Cor. 7:5–10. *Do you consider the word “repentance” to be sweet and pleasant? Why or why not?*

Qualities of a confessor

The pastor will look for a confessor with the same qualities that the people of his parish have a right to expect from him. He will seek a brother pastor who demonstrates an obvious measure of theological insight and maturity, who knows the crosses Christians bear and is familiar with the schemes and temptations of the devil. A pastor who knows how to care for souls will know how to help the penitent pastor give up any evasions or rationalizations for his sins. He will encourage true repentance and apply appropriate Law and Gospel.

Read Titus 1:5–9. *Which aspects of Paul's description of an elder or overseer might especially apply to a confessor who provides absolution and encouragement for a fellow pastor?*

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 the honest confessor will admit his own fears and point the penitent to the Savior whose love casts out fear (1 JOHN 4:18).

²⁸ Martin Luther, letter to John von Staupitz, Wittenberg, May 30, 1518, *Luther's Works*, vol. 48, ed. Gottfried G. Krodel (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 66.

PART THREE: EXTENDING THE GIFT TO THE CONGREGATION

The General Need

In implementing private confession, the pastor should first make use of the practice himself. Scripture does not demand *private* confession, but God knows how we struggle in sin and need forgiveness. Luther rejoices in the gracious gift: “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.”²⁹

We must never require private confession and absolution, but neither should we lose it from neglect. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: “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.”³⁰

The Great Benefit for Pastor and People

Facing sin directly

The Lutheran Confessions reject the practice of listing

²⁹ Martin Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” *Luther’s Works*, vol. 36, ed. Abdel Ross Wentz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 86.

³⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1954), 116.

all sins as an unnecessary and impossible burden on consciences.³¹ There are, however, sins that distress and trouble the conscience that we would be wise to address. “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.”³² The general confession in the liturgy is beneficial, but we may at times speak its words too easily: “[W]hen 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.”³³

Read Ps. 38:1–11. *What does the psalmist experience because of his sins? Read Ps. 51:7–17.* *What blessings come to the psalmist, and to others, when he confesses his sins and receives God’s forgiveness?*

Bonhoeffer wrote: “Why is it that it is often easier for us to confess our sins to God than to a brother? ... [W]e 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

³¹ “Concerning confession, it is taught that no one should be compelled to enumerate sins in detail. For this is impossible, as the psalm [19:12] says: ‘But who can detect their errors?’ And Jeremiah [17:9] says: ‘The human heart is so devious that no one can understand it.’ Miserable human nature is so mired in sins that it cannot see or know them all. If we were absolved only from those sins that we can enumerate, we would be helped but little.” Augsburg Confession XXV, *The Book of Concord*, 72–74.7–10.

³² Kenneth Korby, “A Suggested Program for the Reintroduction of Private Confession and Absolution in Our Parishes” (A paper delivered to the [LCMS] English District Pastoral Conference of Greater Detroit, April 19, 1966), 13.

³³ Ted Kober, *Confession & Forgiveness: Professing Faith as Ambassadors of Reconciliation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002), 94.

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.³⁴

Personal reception of the Gospel

In Baptism, we hear the words, “I baptize *you*,” and in the Lord’s Supper, “Given for *you*.” In individual absolution, the pastor lays his hands on *your* head, makes the sign of the cross upon *your* forehead and pronounces the absolution of God directly to *you*. It gives the individual great comfort and certainty to receive forgiveness conferred upon him personally.

Read Luke 7:47–50 and Matt. 9:2–7. What does Jesus grant to these individuals, along with the forgiveness of sins?

Increasing the bond between pastor and people

In strict accord with his ordination vows, the pastor’s ears are the tomb where the confessed sins are buried and forgotten. When the shepherd hears the hurts and sins of one of his sheep, he can pray about the temptations and encourage the penitent to make use of God-given gifts.

Restoration and Practice

The pastor, having experienced the benefit of private confession himself, can encourage others to make use of it. In sermons and teaching he can explain the value of individual confession and encourage its practice. Advent and Lent may provide opportunities to give special attention to the practice of private confession.

Regular teaching for youth and adults should include the topic of Confession in Luther’s Small Catechism. The pastor should discuss the practice with the leadership of the congregation and might use Bible studies, newsletter articles, blogs, weekly email and social media to encourage the practice. The pastor should also be prepared to deal with challenges to private confession, including the belief that it is “too Catholic.”

Will private confession be offered at specific set times or will the pastor simply announce his willingness to hear confessions at any mutually agreed time and place?

³⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 115–116.

A private setting is essential. Although the pastor need not wear vestments when hearing confession, their use, especially the stole, may be appropriate. It is helpful to use the order for private confession in the hymnal or another printed order.³⁵

Why is it helpful to follow a printed order of confession?

Read through the service of “Individual Confession and Absolution” on pages 292–293 in the Lutheran Service Book. What readings are suggested as preparation for the rite? What warning is given concerning efforts to list all of one’s sins? What guidance is given for the penitent during the confession? What does the pastor ask the penitent concerning the absolution?

On the first occasion of private 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, not the sins of others; 3) they can be confident that the pastor will maintain confidentiality; 4) absolution is the central purpose of individual confession; and 5) absolution is given without requirements or restrictions. Any counsel given is not penance but guidance and encouragement in Christian life.

Conclusion

The Good Shepherd calls to pastor and people, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (MATT. 11:28). The sheep hear the good news: “I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” They stand before God without shame, without guilt and without sin. “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).

³⁵ Ted Kober offers a printed order for private confession in the book, *Go and Be Reconciled: What Does This Mean?* (Billings: Ambassadors of Reconciliation, 2016). The same printed form, “Proclaiming God’s Forgiveness,” is also available for free download at aorhope.org/.