



Church Workers and Father Confessors

CONFESSION & ABSOLUTION FOR THE UNDERSHEPHERD UNDER SIN

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I. FOCUS OF THIS STUDY

The focus of this study is on the scriptural and confessional texts which catechize us on the gift, purpose and value of Private Confession & Absolution (P C&A). The practice of P C&A has fallen from use in the LCMS, which is not healthy for the church or her workers. We will discuss questions about how this has happened, what obstacles stand in the way of reintroducing the practice, and how we can bring this precious gift back for the sake of the sheep and shepherd in the church.

Of great importance will be the discussion of father confessors for the clergy of the church. We will see how Luther and Walther both expressed a dire concern for the spiritual welfare of clergy if they do not exercise P C&A. The return and proper practice of P C&A in the Lutheran church begins with a proper understanding and practice of a father confessor for the pastors of the flock.

The Office of the Holy Ministry is under attack by the evil one, and one of his tactics is to keep the pastor away from one of the gifts God has given to the Office. Our inability to sever ourselves from the 19th-century pietism of Europe has left us with Reformed notions and considerations as to the success and failure of the Ministry. Deep depression, anger and misspent energy take a great toll on the pastor when he is expected by the congregation to perform in a manner that is measurable by dollars and ever-new memberships. The value of a pastor is now predicated on his people-pleasing skills rather than his faithfulness to the Treasures of Heaven given by the Lord of the Church to the Church.

In this context, it is ever more important that the ordinary means of pastoral care for the sheep and for the shepherd be at hand and implemented in the LCMS. The focus of this study is to present the biblical and confessional evidence that P C&A is just that: ordinary care for the sheep and a wonderful blessing to the pastor. Our prayer is that P C&A is reintroduced into the ordinary care of the sheep and practiced by the clergy with a father confessor.

II. SCRIPTURE SEARCH

Psalms 29:11 and 85:10 speak of the relationship God has with PEACE.

How do John 14:27 and 20:19–23 help us to understand what is meant by the term “PEACE”?

From the psalm texts one could make the mistake of thinking that “peace” is accomplished because God has exercised His mighty arm and taken all trouble away from the earth, or at least from those He declares are His. Yet the peace spoken of in John is not a peace that results from the absence of turmoil or danger. Peace comes in the divine reality that the “wages of sin” have been paid by He who has been able to suffer the consequences of sin yet rise from death in victory.

In the room where the disciples found themselves hiding for fear of the Jews, Jesus appears with the gift of PEACE. Not the kind of peace that guarantees a life free from trouble and persecution, but a peace that is present especially in the midst of trouble and persecution. The apostles would be sent into the claws and fangs of evil with the gift of peace. Peace meant the restoration of a relationship that had previously been severed. In fact, it was a relationship so severed that there was no hope of reconciliation in even the best-laid plans of man. No human effort had the power to accomplish this desire.

Peace was given in the absolution spoken by the Living Christ. Peace was in the holy absolution, not in a false promise of life as a rose garden. It was with that peace that the apostles would go bring peace to all who would believe in Jesus. The fear of death was overcome by the Word of the Living Lord; the wrath of God was appeased by the “blood of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

Read Psalm 32:1–5 (its historical context is 2 Samuel 12:1–17)

What is the spiritual, emotional, mental and physical effect of unrepentant sin?

Which sins are to be confessed by the confessor?

(Refer also to Psalm 51)

As David points out, his bones wasted away, he groaned all day long, and heaviness of his conscience sapped him of any strength. These are all characteristics of what is today called “depression.”

The sins to be confessed are uniquely comprehensive in this psalm (NIV). Verse 1 and 2 use three different words for sin in the Hebrew language.

- 1 **Verse 1: “transgression” (*pashah*).** The basic meaning is to rebel, to knowingly act contrary to what is right and salutary; i.e., deliberate disobedience.
- 2 **Verse 1: “sins” (*chatah*).** This means to miss the mark. The effort to do what is right and salutary is insufficient due to the fact that no human effort is equal to the task of living up to God’s holy requirements; i.e., unintended sin.
- 3 **Verse 2: “sin” (*avon*).** This means guilt or the quality of being unequal; i.e., original sin, which makes man unequal to God and forever guilty before Him.

All sin is to be confessed before God: original sin, unintended sin and deliberate sin. When we are aware of these, we are to confess them. One need not confess all sins of which they are not aware, for they are so many that we could not accomplish such a requirement.

Read 1 John 1:5–9. **What comfort does the promise in this passage offer?**

In our dark and dirty lives of sin, God has come with His incomparable Light. Light shatters the darkness of our lives with purity and cleanliness. Our toxicity is purified, our failures are corrected, our faults are covered, our unrighteousness is replaced with Christ's righteousness, and our death is taken into Jesus and His life is given to us.

Along with peace and comfort, absolution also brings strength. What is the strength spoken of in the following verses?

Isaiah 40:31, 41:10: Hope in the Lord is more than the crossing of one's fingers. It is a confidence that rests in an absolute reality. A reality that is not going to be fickle or change, but that is sure and guaranteed by divine promise. The renewed strength is not based on our ability to pick ourselves up by our own boot straps. It is a strength that soars, walks and runs without getting weary, for it is founded on the One who has survived all persecution and even death. It goes on without worrying what others say about us because it is focused on we can say about Christ to others.

Luke 22:32: Jesus takes on the great enemy (Satan) and defeats him. He continues to fight the evil one when he attacks us with accusations and condemnations of our sin. The defeat of Satan is the core of Holy Absolution. By this victory we are able to bring strength to our brothers. This is practiced ecclesiastically with a father confessor.

Hebrews 12:4–13: Here the author of Hebrews talks about discipline from God. Discipline is not punishment for a wrong deed. It is a process by which God catechizes us in life and the need to trust our theology of the ministry. If a member is angry with us, it is not evidence that we have failed at our ministry. It may very well be a mark that we are doing exactly what we are called to do. Brother-to-brother admonition and counsel is also one of the good reasons to have a father confessor.

Holy Absolution bestows forgiveness, peace, comfort, strength and, finally, courage. What is the courage spoken of in the following verses?

John 21:15–19: Peter is confronted by Jesus with his denial after the Sanhedrin trial. Jesus absolves him with a threefold command. The first two times he asks Peter if he loves (*agape*) Him and each time Peter answers that he does so with brotherly love (*philos*). Finally Jesus asks him a third time if he loves him but this time uses *philos*. Jesus' point was made: Peter couldn't love Jesus with a divine, unconditional love. But he does love Jesus with a brotherly love (*philos*) that recognizes the power of the love that Jesus has for him, surpassing anything in creation. With this love of Christ for him and with him he had the courage to go out, sinner that he was, and be a vessel through which the love (*agape*) of Christ would be preached in the Word of God. One could even say "in the holy absolution."

Acts 4:8–13: Peter courageously preaches in the midst of threat and enemies.

Acts 23:9–11: As the Pharisees echoed the Holy Absolution of God "we find nothing wrong with this man," Paul preaches and carries on his ministry in the midst of a raging mob. That night the Lord tells Paul that his preaching in front of mobs and in positions of danger are not over. He will continue to do so in Rome. Paul was not deterred by fear but was able to go forth with "courage" based on his confidence in the ministry that God gave him. The ministry where we serve is no less given by God. Compare also Acts 27:21–26.

III. LUTHERAN PERSPECTIVE

From the Book of Concord, the norm of our faith that has been normed, we find these references about Confession and Absolution. It is clear that the Lutheran Fathers had a concept of and a practice of Private Confession and Absolution. Read the passages referenced below and ask yourselves if we reflect their thoughts and practice concerning P C&A today.

Augsburg Confession, Article XI, XXV

Apology to the Augsburg Confession, Article XI, XXVIII (especially paragraph 5)

Smalcald Articles IV, VIII

Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope (paragraph 26, 60–61)

Luther's Small Catechism, Chief Part V

Luther's Large Catechism, Chief Part V (a brief exhortation to confession)

IV. POINTS TO PONDER

What emphasis do the following two quotes from our Lutheran Fathers place on the role of P C&A in the life of the church today?

C.F.W. Walther: “In an evangelical way, through instruction and exhortation, and through praising it, [he should] work toward the goal that it [P C&A] be diligently used in addition to general confession and that, where it is possible and advisable, it be finally reintroduced as the exclusive custom and that it be properly preserved where it exists. But by all means he may under no circumstances yield to a congregation which does not want to permit the use of private confession and Absolution even on the part of the individual members...” (Walther's *Pastoral Theology*, p. 120).

Walther intended for P C&A to be the ordinary care of a pastor for his flock, not something to be used in emergency cases only. It is to be as ordinary as the ordinary rubrics in the Divine Service.

Luther: “For it is the Christians' first, most necessary, and most useful school in which they learn to understand and practice God's Word and their faith, which they do not do so powerfully in public readings and sermons” (as quoted in Walther's *Pastoral Theology*, pg. 121).

While Luther does not deny the power of the Gospel in the sermon or in the public reading of the Scriptures, he contends there is better learning of the Gospel and growth in the life of faith in P C&A.

Walther uses two more quotes from Luther in his *Pastoral Theology*. What is Luther cautioning us against with these words?

“But whoever has a firm, strong faith in God and is certain that his sins have been forgiven him, he may well omit confession and confess to God alone. But how many are there who have such firm, strong faith and confidence in God? Let everyone look to himself that he does not mislead himself” (p. 112).

and

“If, as sadly often happens, the preacher himself does not make use of this glorious means of comfort and so cannot speak from experience about its glory, it is not amazing if his teaching about this institution remains without results in his congregation” (p. 122).

To think that one does not need a father confessor is dangerously overestimating one's ability to avoid and contest the accusations and derision of the Devil. Luther claims that the pastor who does not make use of the Absolution should not be surprised if their preaching and practice does not reflect the precious gift God has given to His Church.

With our doctrine of Church and Ministry (officially adopted by the LCMS in the convention of 1855), how do we address Walther's admonition in the following quote?

"Every preacher should rather choose his own father confessor, confess to him regularly, and receive absolution from him. The preacher also needs this important means. How can he expect his listeners to respect the holy preaching office if he himself gives the appearance of despising it (by not having a pastor of his own)?" (p. 129)

While our polity on church and ministry is not familiar with the term "a pastor to pastors," the closest term we have to that, as Walther suggests, is a "father confessor." The father confessor is not to be your district president since he also holds the office of "supervisor," nor should it be the circuit counselor. A father confessor is a fellow pastor in the holy ministry, maybe in a different circuit, who has years of experience and the ability to give sage counsel to the confession laid out before him. The confessional with a father confessor is SEALED.

Why have we lost use of P C&A in the LCMS as an ordinary means of pastoral care? Why has the use of a father confessor fallen by the wayside? What are the consequences we experience in the ministry because of these neglects?

In a sermon preached in 1872 on Matthew 9:1–8, Walther gives five reasons he thinks P C&A falls by the wayside. Read these and discuss whether you agree or disagree.

- 1 It is seen as either something too new or something that is a return to Romanism.
- 2 Many no longer believe that the Christian church has the power on earth to forgive sins, and believe that such a spoken word through a human being is not efficacious.
- 3 Sin is no longer seen as a shame before God.
- 4 It has not been correctly taught or introduced into the parish.
- 5 The pastor will know intimate details about the confessor and the parishioner will not be able to look at the pastor again.

Are these legitimate reasons? If so, how shall you overcome them?

V. FOR CONVERSATION

What is the difference between "general" confession and absolution and "private" confession and absolution?

The difference is not the absolution. That is always the same. The difference is in the confession. More exact, detailed and revealing of what troubles the soul.

What do you think about Luther's comment that the absolution in P C&A is more catechetical than the absolution in the sermon?

Is Luther speaking of the value of a father confessor in the following quote? "Thus others bear my burden, and their strength is my strength. The faith of the church comes to the aid of my fearfulness; the chastity of others the temptation of my flesh; the fastings of others are my gain; the prayer of another pleads for me" (LW 42:161).

Is there a difference between “announcing” the forgiveness of sins and “bestowing” the forgiveness of sins? Use this analogy: If I announce to my brother that there is a sandwich in my lunch box, I only inform him of a truth. If I put the sandwich in his mouth, I have given him a reality as gift.

Discuss this statement: If the point of absolution is to do nothing other than communicate to him the intelligence that Christ has interceded for him in his sorry plight and that God has restored him to favor, it has sold the sinner short. The sinner’s problem was not ignorance but wrath. His load is not lack of information but unbelief, unbelief in the face of so much and such valid evidence that God is not pleased with him. Absolution does not inform a man about a change that has taken place once upon a time! Absolution changes the present relation to God by being the action in this time (in the voice of God) by the God whose act in Christ was once and for all time.

Soli Deo Gloria

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