

# **The Doctrine of Confession and its Application in the Work of a Christian Teacher**

*By Siegbert W. Becker*

[A paper delivered at the Winnebago Teachers' Conference : Green Bay, Wisconsin, February 9, 1979]

## **INTRODUCTION**

Judging by the requests for conference essays over the years, I would conclude that many of our teachers find some difficulty in presenting the doctrine of the ministry of the keys and confessions, or, as I am accustomed to calling it, the office of the keys and confession. When I look back to my own days in the parish ministry, which is now a long, long time ago, it seems to me that I can recall having a certain feeling of dissatisfaction with my own presentation of this subject to my confirmation classes. In the Missouri Synod, and I think that this is true also in some areas of the Wisconsin Synod, and occasionally also in the writings of Martin Luther, the discussion of the office of the keys centered chiefly on the practice of excommunication, often as something divorced from and totally distinct from the ordinary preaching of law and Gospel.

Both the intersynodical catechism and the Gausewitz catechism are written in a way that would tend to discourage such an emphasis, but in my younger years my attention tended to focus on the words, "I believe that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us according to His divine command, especially when they exclude manifest and impenitent sinners from the Christian congregation, and, again when they absolve those who repent of their sins and are willing to amend, this is as valid and certain, in heaven, also, as if Christ, our dear Lord, dealt with us Himself."

The word "especially" in that sentence ought to alert us against the danger of limiting the discussion of the ministry of the keys and confession to the subject of the excommunication of the manifestly impenitent and the absolution of those who repent after falling into manifest sin. It seems to me, however, that the tendency to do this stems from a conscious or perhaps even an unconscious awareness of this that the basic subject matter of the fifth chief part has already been treated in great detail in the first and second chief parts of the catechism. The forgiveness that is spoken of in this part of the catechism is essentially no different from that which has already been treated in detail in the second and third articles. The retention of sins discussed here is in essence no different from the message proclaimed in the first chief part.

The same thing can be said in regard to confession. When the pastor speaks the word of absolution in private, individual, or general confession, he is not manufacturing a new kind of forgiveness, different in some way from the forgiveness proclaimed in the preaching and teaching of the Gospel. While the confessional booth and the general atmosphere in the church edifice may add to the solemnity of the rite, yet the forgiveness given here is no more real and no more efficacious than it would be in totally different circumstances or in a much less formal context.

## **THE HISTORY OF THE FIFTH CHIEF PART**

Perhaps it would be of help to review the history of the fifth chief part of Luther's Small Catechism. Luther began work on the catechisms early in his career as reformer of the church. Between 1520 and 1525 he produced several books intended to be instructional aids for both children and adults. In these he treated only the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer. In 1528 he preached three series of sermons on the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper. The material that he had produced in these sermons became the basis of the Large Catechism, which he issued in the following year, just 450 years ago and it is interesting to note that in the Short Preface he speaks of the Large Catechism as "this

sermon.” It is of some interest to us also in connection with the subject of this essay to note that the Large Catechism to this day contains only five chief parts, the section on the ministry of the keys and confession being omitted.

The first edition of the Small Catechism also contained only five chief parts. When a section on confession was first added it was not one of the chief parts. It was rather a part of what we today think of as the appendix to the catechism. In this appendix, the form of confession was printed together with the litany. It seems obvious that Luther at first added this liturgical form of confession to the catechism as a part of the liturgy of the church by which the people were to be guided in making their confession to the pastor. It is also rather obvious that the confession spoken of here was the formal, private confession to the pastor, which has in large measure disappeared, at least in any fixed liturgical form, from our section of the Lutheran Church. Whether this is good or bad must be a matter of private opinion since it is not commanded by God.

It was not long, however, before Luther added doctrinal instruction on the nature of confession to the catechism. This instruction, together with the earlier form of confession, which might be called the liturgy of confession, was inserted between the sections on Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Of this form of confession nothing survives in the intersynodical catechism and only a small fraction in the Gausewitz catechism, namely the wording of the absolution pronounced by the pastor.

The section on the ministry of the keys was not added by Luther and to this day it is not printed in the Small Catechism as it appears in the Book of Concord. It is therefore not a part of the Lutheran Confessions. These three questions and their answers, however, very correctly reflect the teaching of the Bible and Luther’s theology, accurately reflecting thoughts that Luther expressed elsewhere. But they were not formulated by Luther in the form in which they appear in the Small Catechism we use today. There is a certain overlapping in the two sections of the fifth chief part as we have it in our present catechism. As a result it is not surprising that the retention of sins or excommunication should be stressed in dealing with the first section, which deals with the keys, and the forgiveness of sins or absolution should be emphasized in the second section which deals with confession and absolution. It may be that this also contributes to the difficulty of teaching this part of the catechism, for we are really not presenting something new in the section on confession which has not already been treated in the section on the ministry, and yet it only seems natural to expect something different, since it appears as a separate topic.

### **CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION AS THE THIRD SACRAMENT**

It may also help us to establish our theological bearings if we remember that in the earliest days of our church it was customary to speak of confession and absolution as a third sacrament. In the thirteenth article of the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, Melancthon writes,

Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and Absolution, which is the sacrament of repentance, are truly sacraments. For these rites have God’s command and the promise of grace...For when we are baptized, when we eat the Lord’s body, when we are absolved, our hearts must be firmly assured that God truly forgives us for Christ’s sake (Trig. p. 309).

We are no longer accustomed to speaking of three sacraments, but only of two, as Luther does in the Large Catechism, where he speaks of “our two sacraments” (Trig. p. 733). Yet even there he still also speaks of “the third sacrament” (p. 751). But the official stand of the Lutheran Church in this matter, as set forth in the *Apology*, is that “no prudent man will strive greatly concerning the number or the term, if only those objects still be retained which have God’s command and promises” (Trig. p. 313).

The solution to the apparent contradiction lies in the definition that is given to the word “sacrament.” We all know that this is not a Biblical term. The word is not found in the Bible and we therefore have no Biblical context that would enable us to formulate a conscience binding definition. In our Wisconsin Synod catechism we say that a sacrament is

a sacred act, instituted by Christ, whereby He through earthly elements connected with God's Word, offers, gives, and seals unto us forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

In a similar way the Intersynodical catechism defines a sacrament as

a sacred act, instituted by God Himself, in which there are certain visible means connected with His Word, and by which God offers, gives, and seals unto us the forgiveness of sins, which Christ has earned for us.

In the *Apology*, however, sacraments are defined as "rites which have the command of God, and to which the promise of grace has been added" (Trig. p. 309).

It will be noticed immediately that the difference lies in the inclusion of the visible means in the definition in one case and their exclusion in the other. If a sacrament is defined (and it should be noted again that there is no strict Scriptural definition of the word and that the word itself does not occur in the Bible) as a rite which has the command of God and the promise of grace, as the *Apology* defines it, then there are three sacraments.

There is no point or purpose in raising this question of the number of sacraments in the parochial school classroom, for as we define the word there are only two sacraments. But if we as teachers will think this question through, it may help to clarify our thinking about the sacraments. As we become clearer in our minds on the various aspects of the subject, our teaching will, as a natural consequence, become so much clearer.

When we remember that the Lutheran Church in its earliest confessions spoke of three sacraments, it will be understood also why the six chief parts of the catechism are arranged the way they are. Why do the two sacraments not stand side by side in the Small Catechism? In the Large Catechism they are arranged in this way. But in the Small Catechism we have one sacrament, Holy Baptism, followed by the Ministry of the Keys, which is essentially the power to forgive and retain sins, which is done not only in Baptism and the Lord's Supper, but just as surely also in the preaching of the Gospel, and this in turn is then followed by the second sacrament, the Sacrament of the Altar.

What we speak of as confession and absolution in the Small Catechism is exactly what Melancthon has in mind when he spoke of the sacrament of repentance in the *Apology*. Our Lutheran practice of confession and absolution is the purified form of the Roman Catholic sacrament of repentance, or as they call it in their terminology, the sacrament of penance. The parts of this sacrament in Roman theology are contrition, confession, and satisfaction. The sinner is told that he must be sorry for his sins out of love for God, then he must confess his sins by enumerating them into the ear of the priest, and finally the sin must be atoned for by acts of satisfaction whereby the temporal punishment of the sin is borne by the sinner.

While the Lutheran reformers recognized that it might be perfectly proper to speak of a sacrament of repentance, they also knew that the Roman sacrament of penance was not the divine institution. They knew that the Scripture nowhere made the demand that all sins should be enumerated, and therefore they said in the *Augsburg Confession*, "Of Confession they teach that Private Absolution ought to be retained in the churches, although in confession an enumeration of all sins is not necessary."

Moreover, they realized that the Roman sacrament of penance was a perversion of the Scriptural doctrine of repentance. They knew that the Roman practice was totally at variance with the central doctrine of the Christian religion, the doctrine of justification by faith without the deeds of the law. They knew that our sins are atoned for not by the deeds of satisfaction that the sinner offers to God in reparation for his error, but that the only satisfaction for our sins acceptable to the Lord has been rendered by the suffering and death of God's own Son, validated and substantiated by his resurrection from the dead. They knew also that forgiveness is a free gift of God, offered gratuitously in the Gospel, and accepted by faith, and that it is not conditional in any way by the works of men. And because they knew that forgiveness is a free gift, they also knew that contrition in the Roman sense, contrition as sorrow out of love for God, was not a prerequisite for forgiveness. Because they took the doctrine of original sin seriously and knew that man by nature is totally depraved, that the carnal mind is enmity against God, they also knew that man cannot love God until after he has come to believe that God is

gracious to him for Jesus' sake, that man can love God only after he knows that God has forgiven him, and that, therefore, it is wrong to say that first we must be sorry out of love for God and then we will be forgiven.

This last statement is given thorough treatment in the *Apology*, in which Melancthon writes, "They (i.e. the Roman theologians) teach that by contrition we merit grace. In reference to which, if any one should ask why Saul and Judas and similar persons, who were dreadfully contrite, did not obtain grace, the answer was to be taken from faith and according to the Gospel, that Judas did not believe, that he did not support himself by the Gospel and the promise of Christ. For faith shows the distinction between the contrition of Judas and of Peter. But the adversaries (here again the Roman theologians are meant) take their answer from the Law, that Judas did not love God, but feared the punishments. (Is not this teaching uncertain and improper things concerning repentance?) When however, will a terrified conscience, especially in those serious, true, and great terrors which are described in the psalms and the prophets, and which those certainly taste who are truly converted, be able to decide whether it fears God for his own sake (out of love it fears God, as its God), or is fleeing from eternal punishments? (These people may not have experienced much of these anxieties, because they juggle words and make distinctions according to their dreams. But in the heart, when the test is applied, the matter turns out quite differently, and the conscience cannot be set at rest with paltry syllables and words.) These great emotions can be distinguished in letters and terms; they are not thus separated in fact, as these sweet sophists dream." (Trig. p. 255).

And therefore, when Luther wrote his *Small Catechism*, his definition of confession has not a single one of the elements found in the Roman doctrine of penance. There is no reference to contrition, as though it were somehow a condition of forgiveness. There is no reference to the enumeration of sins, as though that were somehow necessary as a prerequisite for forgiveness. There is no reference to satisfaction, as though the grace of God in Christ were not enough. Instead he writes very simply, "Confession embraces two parts, one is that we confess our sins; the other, that we receive absolution, or forgiveness, from the pastor as from God Himself, and in no wise doubt, but firmly believe, that by it our sins are forgiven before God in heaven."

### **THE MINISTRY OF THE KEYS AND CONFESSION.**

The Ministry of the Keys is the power of the church to forgive and to retain sin. The forgiveness of sins is the key that opens the door of heaven to the sinner. The retention of sins is the key that locks the door of heaven to the sinner. The forgiveness of sins is the preaching of the Gospel. The retention of sins is the preaching of the Law. In the Gospel we tell men that their sins are forgiven. In the Law we tell men that they are sinners who deserve the eternal damnation of hell.

The forgiveness of sins comes to men through three channels, or means. Two of these are the blessed sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, in which the message of the Gospel, the message of full and free forgiveness for Christ's sake, is offered to men in conjunction with definite visible means. The third channel is the bare Word of the Gospel, which without any visible means, simply brings to man the message, "Thy sins are forgiven thee."

The message is always the same. Nothing different is given to us in the sacraments than is given to us in the Gospel. It makes no difference whether the message takes the form, "Arise and be baptized and wash away thy sins" or whether it comes to us in the words, "Given and shed for you for the remission of sins," or whether it simply says, "The blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanseth us from all sin." In every case it is always the same forgiveness that is offered and conveyed to the sinner.

But this message of forgiveness means absolutely nothing to the man who does not recognize, first, that he is a sinner who has sins that are included in this message of forgiveness, and secondly that he is a lost sinner who has need of the forgiveness of sins. This conviction of the heart should then also lead to a confession of the lips. When a man is convinced in his heart that he is a lost sinner, it is only natural that he should speak of this, for

out of the fullness of the heart the mouth speaketh, also in this matter. It is this conviction of the heart finding expression in the words of the mouth that we call the confession of sins.

It will be very evident that we have, in the fifth chief part, little that is new. The teaching of confession and absolution simply affords us an opportunity to review in a very personal and practical way what our pupils have already learned in the first and second chief parts. The confession of sins is simply the response of the heart to the teaching of the Ten Commandments and the implications thereof. The absolution of the pastor is simply the repetition in a personal, direct way of what has already been taught in the Second and Third Articles. We might say that confession and absolution are Law and Gospel in action. In the confession and absolution we simply have the response of the Christian heart to the preaching of the Word. We confess our sins in response to the preaching of the Law. We receive absolution and accept forgiveness in response to the preaching of the Gospel.

One sometimes hears teachers complain that they find it difficult to make confession really mean something to their classes. It is perhaps true that many of us have often felt this same way. It may well be that a great deal of our trouble in teaching the Fifth Chief Part has come from a failure on our part to realize how little that is really new is presented in this section of the catechism. There is certainly a clear psychological reason for this. Every one of the other sections of the catechism deals with a clearly defined and new area of Christian teaching. We look for the same sort of thing here, and when we do not find it, we unconsciously feel that we must be missing something. To all those who have felt this way it must be a comfort to read the *Large Catechism* of Luther and discover that the subject of confession and absolution is there not treated in a separate section at all, so that the *Large Catechism* has only five parts. This is not to say that the matter is ignored, but reference is made to the doctrine as the occasion arises in the discussion of the other chief parts.

There may be another reason for our difficulty in dealing with confession and absolution. Our Lutheran Church is a liturgical church and there are perhaps few of us who would be willing to trade in the rich liturgical forms of our church for the informal and often haphazard worship of the sectarians. But we must be careful not to equate liturgical forms with true worship, and we should be conscious also of the specific dangers that confront a liturgical church. (Incidentally, we ought not for one moment believe that these dangers are any greater than those that are faced by churches who look upon all liturgical forms as an invention of the devil. They are not greater dangers, but only dangers in a different direction.)

This warning has special significance for the subject at hand. When we think of the words “confession” and “absolution” we are inclined to limit our thinking very often to the formal, liturgical, and ritualistic practice of confession and absolution as we have learned to know it in our church. It certainly includes this practice, but the subject is not exhausted in this practice. Our liturgical forms present us with one way of carrying out the Biblical directives in this matter, but it is not the only way to make the Biblical doctrine operative in the life of the church and of the individual Christian. As soon as we reduce confession and absolution to a liturgical form, as soon as we let confession become a formalistic rite limited to the formal worship service rather than the very natural expression of the contrite heart in the whole of life, as soon as we tend to make of confession and absolution a part of our liturgical life divorced from the daily response of the heart to the preaching and teaching of the Word of our God, so soon we will also have missed a great deal of the significance of this doctrine in our own life, and having missed it in our own life we will find it missing also in our teaching.

## **THE CONFESSION OF SINS**

In dealing with the subject of confession proper, then, we may well ask ourselves first of all this question, “When I taught the First Chief Part of the catechism, what was my chief and primary aim that I had in mind always as a *Christian* teacher?” The public schools in their avowed secularism also teach law. They may not call it this, but when public school teachers seek to inculcate the principles of good citizenship, the principles of honesty and decency and respect for the rights of others, they certainly seem to be doing the same thing that we do when we teach the Ten Commandments, and many times they will be able to say exactly the same things in exactly the same words in which we say them. Is our chief aim in teaching the law this that we seek to make our

pupils good citizens, that we teach them respect for the lives and property of other people? We all know what the answer to that question is.

And if our answer to that question is unequivocally in the negative, then what *did* we intend to do when we taught the First Chief Part? Was it not this that we wanted these boys and girls to know, to realize with all their heart and soul that they are sinners, lost and condemned creatures?

If this statement were to be made anywhere but in a Lutheran, Christian context, we could at this point hear a howl of protest going through the audience. It is just at this point that naturalistic theologians and religious psychologists become particularly vicious and vehement in their condemnation of our theology. And even our own heart, sinful as it is, rebels against this statement. It is certainly no “How-to-Win-Friends-and-Influence-People” approach to the problem that we face in our teaching of religion.

We must ourselves take seriously what we teach our children when we tell them that the Law is a mirror in which we are to learn to see ourselves as God sees us and by which we are brought to conviction of our complete sinfulness and total unworthiness in the sight of God. Moreover, we must see here the wrath of God against all sin. We must learn to take seriously the threats of God against all those who disobey His commands. We must strive to make sin and damnation and hell real concepts to our children.

When we say such things as this, we are immediately confronted with the question, “But don’t you want to be known as a teacher of the Gospel, of the Good News of salvation?” However, we remember that the Lord Jesus Himself said, “I am not come to destroy the law.” If the Gospel is to have its proper effect, then the Law must also be preached and taught, for the Gospel can be understood only in relation to the Law. In our day, when so much emphasis is placed on the goodness and the grace of God at the expense of His holiness and justice, there is great need of what we might call “sin-conscious” teaching. The church needs to recover the simple teaching which John Bunyan so aptly set forth in *The Law and Grace Unfolded*, when he wrote, “That man that doth not know the Law doth not in truth know that he is a sinner; and that man that doth not know he is a sinner doth not know savingly that there is a Savior...If thou wouldst then, wash thy face clean, first take a glass to see where it is dirty; that is, if thou wouldst indeed have thy sins washed away by the blood of Christ, labour first to see them in the glass of the Law, and do not be afraid to see the besmeared condition, but look on every spot thou hast, for he that looks on the foulness of his face by the halves will wash by the halves; even so, he that looks on his sins by the halves, he will seek for Christ by the halves.” On this point the author of *Pilgrim’s Progress* was a good Lutheran.

This has always been one of the great emphases of the Lutheran Church. The Lutheran Church, where it has been faithful to its Confessions and to the Holy Scriptures, has always held that the Law and the Gospel must stand side by side, or the Gospel itself will lose its charm and its power. We often hear it said in our times that God is too good to send anyone to hell, that he is too gracious to punish anyone eternally, that he loves all his erring children with such perfect love that he demands nothing from them. Sadly enough, this note is sometimes sounded also in Lutheran circles. But while this may seem to some to be real Gospel preaching which exalts the love and the grace of God, it is actually a type of teaching which will destroy not only the Law but also the Gospel. It is not long before those who do not take all of the Law seriously also begin to call the Gospel an old-fashioned blood religion. No, the Law must take its place alongside the Gospel or the Gospel itself becomes meaningless. The Gospel could not exist unless the Law had existed first. Without the Law, the Gospel can offer men no real comfort, yes, without the Law; the Gospel has no value. Dr. Walther, in his *Law and Gospel* says that we must preach sinners into hell before we can preach them into heaven.

Men must be brought to a knowledge of their sin and of their lost and condemned condition because a man cannot believe that he has been found by the Good Shepherd until he knows that he was a lost sheep. He cannot believe that he is saved until he first knows that he is damned and needs saving. He cannot believe that his sins are forgiven until he believes that he is a sinner. He cannot believe that Christ has rescued him from hell until he believes that he would go to hell without Christ. In other words, saving faith in the Lord Jesus and his precious

blood is impossible until a man has been brought to a conviction of sin. If we understand this, we will understand also what the man meant who said that it is the business of the church to afflict the comfortable, and, to comfort the afflicted. It is this aspect of the Christian faith that is neglected in the Norman-Vincent-Peal-“positive-thinking” type of religion.

It is this conviction of sin that is to find expression in our confession of sins. Our teaching of the Law should be so personal and so direct that the boys and girls who sit at our feet will be moved to say, when we have finished speaking of the demands and threats of God in the Law, “I have sinned against the Lord.” It should be the type of teaching that will cause them with the publican in the temple to say, “God be merciful to me, a sinner.”

It is this conviction that finds expression in that wonderful prayer, which we ought to pray often, “O almighty God, merciful Father, I, a poor, miserable sinner, confess unto Thee all my sins and iniquities with which I have ever offended Thee and justly deserved Thy temporal and eternal punishment. But I am heartily sorry for them and sincerely repent of them, and I pray Thee of Thy boundless mercy and for the sake of the holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death of Thy beloved Son, Jesus Christ, to be gracious and merciful to me, a poor sinful being.”

But it makes absolutely no difference whether this confession is spoken in this formal way in the formal church service, or whether it is spoken in childish words to the teacher in the classroom after the other children have left, or whether a little boy says it to his father or his mother, or whether it is just spoken in the heart for none but God to hear, in any case this confession is and should be the anticipated outcome of our teaching of the Law.

Every prayer for forgiveness is truly a confession of sins. If someone whom we had never seen before would come to us and say, “Please forgive me,” we would have to conclude either that this man is speaking utter nonsense or else he has committed a sin against us which is troubling his conscience and concerning which we know nothing. If we would then say to him, “But I do not know for what I should forgive you; I do not know of any wrong that you have done to me,” and he would answer, “Oh, I have never done you any wrong, but I would just like to have you forgive me,” we would know that now it is high time to run for the nearest telephone.

It is very clear, then, that in asking for forgiveness I am admitting that I have sins that need to be forgiven. This is what Luther had in mind when he said, “Before God we should plead guilty of all sins, even those, which we do not know, as we do in the Lord’s Prayer.” When we say, “Forgive us our trespasses,” we admit first that there are sins in this world of which we must say that they are our sins, and we confess secondly that these sins need to be forgiven. In this prayer we include all the sins that we have committed; knowing full well that there are many sins among them of which we are not conscious, either because we did not even know that they were sins at the time we did them or because we have long since forgotten them.

Sometimes, it is true; there are special sins that weigh upon our conscience. Especially here, it is true that confession is good for the soul. First of all, we ought to be the kind of teachers of whom the children know that they can be trusted. They ought to know that we will respect their confidences. We ought to let them know in word, but especially in deed, that they can come to us, that we love them, that we are concerned about the welfare of their souls, that we want to help them. When we have won their confidence so that they truly discuss with us the things that are closest to their hearts and also those sins that weigh heavily upon their souls, then we will have succeeded in making the doctrine of confession a real vital and living force in their lives and in our own.

We should teach them too that God has given us pastors for this purpose that we may go to them and obtain help in our spiritual struggles and in our doubts and fears. In the final analysis, the pastors will have to win this confidence for themselves, but we as teachers in the schools can do a great deal to condition the boys and girls and the young men and the young women whom we teach to make use of their pastor’s services in the way in which they are intended to be used. Men could spare themselves a great deal of grief if only they would take

their pastors into their confidence, if they would get the things that trouble them off their chest, as we say. It is a very practical and in some ways a very ordinary thing that Luther has in mind when he says, “Before the pastor we should confess those sins only that we know and feel in our hearts.”

Finally, we should teach our children too that they ought to confess their faults one to another. How much grief could we not avoid in our congregation, how many quarrels could we not quickly settle, how many bitter feelings could we not eliminate if we would from childhood train our Christian people in such a way that when they have wronged their fellowmen they go to them to confess their fault, to express their sorrow, and to ask for forgiveness.

From what has been said, it must be realized that the teacher’s approach to the doctrine of confession ought to be a very practical one. The whole doctrine covers about three pages in the explanation of the catechism, and if we have done a thorough job of teaching the Law and the Gospel in the First and Second Chief Part, it will not take us long to finish these three pages. But learning the significance of this doctrine in our relation to our God and to each other is a task that ought to be before us day after day and at which we ought to be busy all year long. In other words, we ought teach the doctrine of confession not only in the few periods set aside for the formal consideration of the topic in the classroom, but it should be inculcated day by day as one of the basic attitudes of the Christian life. This is certainly one of the things that Luther had in mind when he said in the first of the 95 theses that when our Lord Jesus Christ said, “Repent ye,” He meant that the whole life of the Christian should be one of repentance.

## THE ABSOLUTION

The Confession of sins is only half of the story, however. The most important part of the doctrine of confession is the absolution, the forgiveness of sins. It is here that we pass from Law to Gospel. To the confessing sinner, the declaration of God’s pardon is to be announced. And here again it should be remembered that it does not make any difference whether this is done in a formal way in the confessional service, when the pastor says, “Upon this your confession, I, by virtue of my office, as a called and ordained servant of the Word, announce the grace of God unto all of you, and 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 Ghost,” or whether he says it in the less formal way in the lesser absolution in the words, “God our heavenly Father hath had mercy upon us and hath given His only-begotten Son to die for us and for His sake forgiveth us all our sins,” or whether he says it in the sermon by telling his congregation that the Lord Jesus has taken away all their sins by His holy life and innocent death, or whether he assures some troubled soul in private confession, “Son, be of good cheer, thy sins are forgiven thee,” or whether he says in a completely informal way in a sick call, “But, George, your sins are all forgiven,”—whether it is done in any of these ways, it is always the same absolution that is pronounced. Here, too, we must be on our guard lest we think that somehow the formal ritual that we have developed in our church is the most efficacious and effective way that this absolution can be carried out. There is nothing in Scripture that would indicate that it must be done in some special way in set forms.

It should be remembered also that the power to absolve is not given only to certain individuals. Our Synodical catechism says, “We receive absolution, or forgiveness, from the minister.” Luther said that we receive absolution from the confessor, *von dem Beichtiger*, which simply means from the person to whom the sin has been confessed. However, there can be no doubt that in this expression Luther had in mind the pastor of the congregation, for in Luther’s catechism the section on confession was followed by directions for private confession which begin with the words, “Reverend and dear sir.”

But anyone acquainted with Luther’s writings will know that Luther believed with Scripture that every Christian has the office of the keys. The public ministry is indeed to be limited to those who have been properly called by a Christian congregation, and no one is to usurp this office on his own authority. But every individual Christian, man or woman, adult or child, is a priest of God and as such has the right and the power to pronounce the absolution of God. That this was Luther’s view is very clear from his words. “*So nun jemand Vergebung der*



*Suenden begehrt, der gehe zu seinem Pfarrherrn, oder zum naechsten Christenmenschen, da er Gottes Wort bei weisz und findet; da soll er auch Vergebung der Suenden gewisz finden.*” (If anyone desires forgiveness of sins, let him go to his pastor or to the first Christian he meets, with whom he knows the Word of God to be, -- there he will also surely find the forgiveness of sins” (St. L. XIIIa, 548). In another place he said, *“Dazu hat Gott deinen Pfarrherrn, deinen Vater und Mutter, deinen naechsten Christenmenschen berufen und geordnet, und sein Wort in ihren Mund gelegt, dasz du Trost und Vergebung bei ihnen suchen sollst...Gott hat Vergebung der Suenden in die heilige Taufe gesteckt, in das Abendmahl, und in das Wort; ja, er hats einem jeden Christenmenschen in den Mund gelegt; wenn der dich troestet, und dir Gottes Gnade durch das Verdienst Christi Jesu zusagt, sollst du es annehmen und glauben, nicht anders, denn so es Christus selbst mit seinem Mund dir haette zugesagt.”* (God has called and ordained your pastor, your father and mother, your Christian neighbor and put His Word in their mouth for this purpose that you should seek comfort and forgiveness from them...God has placed forgiveness of sins into holy Baptism, into the Supper, and into the Word; yes, He has placed it into the mouth of every Christian; when he comforts you and declares that God is gracious to you through the merits of Christ, then you should accept and believe it just as if Christ Himself had made that declaration with His own mouth.) (St. L. XIIIa, 919-921.) In 1518 Luther said in a sermon, *“In dem Sakrament der Busze und Vergebung der Schuld... (tut) ein Pabst, Bischof (nichts mehr) denn der geringste Priester; ja, wo ein Priester nicht ist, eben so viel tut ein jeglicher Christenmensch, ob es schon ein Weib oder Kind waere.”* (In the sacrament of repentance and forgiveness of sins... a pope, a bishop (does nothing more) than the lowliest pastor; yes, if there is no pastor there, a Christian layman can do just as much, even if it is a woman or a child.) (St. L. X, 1235.)

These quotations from Luther are simply clear and emphatic concrete expressions of the doctrine of the universal priesthood of all believers. All believers, all Christians, have the right and the power to forgive sins, and they do it simply by telling men that their sins are forgiven. The *Smalcald Articles* state, “In a case of necessity even a layman absolves, and becomes the minister and pastor of another” (Trig. p. 523). Dr. Koehler, in his *Summary*, says, “A promise of God, when quoted by a layman, is as valid and certain as it is when pronounced by an ordained clergyman. The official character of the minister does not add virtue and power to any statement of the Word of God” (p. 193).

The Lutheran doctrine of absolution is attacked especially by the Protestant Churches. They say that it is the grossest arrogance for any man to stand before a group of people and tell them that he is forgiving them their sins. If we were Calvinists, believing contrary to the Holy Bible, that God loved only the elect, that Christ died only for the elect, that only the elect have been redeemed, and that all the rest of the world is predestined to eternal damnation, then we would have to agree that no man can say to any other man that his sins are forgiven, for before he could say this to him he would have to have the omniscience of God, who alone knows who is elect, who is redeemed, who is forgiven.

This contrast to our doctrine will make clear where the heart of the Lutheran doctrine of absolution lies. No one will clearly understand what the Lutheran church teaches on absolution unless he has first of all clearly understood the doctrine of objective justification, or universal justification. This doctrine is the glory of our church. There is no other church in which this doctrine is taught as clearly as in the Lutheran Church, and there is no Lutheran church in which this doctrine is as clearly and emphatically taught as in our own Wisconsin Synod.

We believe very simply that when God raised his Son from the dead he by that act declared the sins of every man to be forgiven. By the resurrection he said to the whole world that he had been reconciled to all sinners by the death of his Son. Dr. Walther, in an Easter sermon, speaks of this and says, “Now, who was justified in him? Who was declared clean and guiltless through him? It was we human beings; it was the whole world...Christ’s resurrection is the absolution which God himself has spoken upon all men” (Evangelium Postille, p. 161).

And because God has already long ago forgiven the sins of every man, believer and unbeliever alike, so that nothing more remains to be done by the sinner himself before the anger of God is removed, therefore a

Christian can go to any man on earth and say to him, “Your sins are forgiven you.” And when he says this, it is as valid and certain as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself, for Christ already said it long ago. Having atoned for the sins of the world, the risen Savior told His disciples, “Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them.”

St. Paul says, “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the Word of reconciliation.” And the word of reconciliation that we are to speak to men is this: “Your sins are forgiven you.” This is the word of reconciliation that is spoken to us by our fellow-Christians, by our pastors, and by our teachers: “Your sins are forgiven you.” And when it is spoken to us, we should remember that this is God’s Word coming to us through men, it is God who speaks this Word through His people, and when they speak it we should by no means doubt but firmly believe that by it our sins are forgiven by God in heaven. Christ has taken away the sin of the world. God has forgiven the sins of all men. And He has commanded us to preach this Gospel to every creature. This simply means that we are to go to every man and tell him that his sins are forgiven, that they were forgiven long ago when Jesus died and rose again.

This is why a pastor can stand before a congregation and say, “I announce the grace of God unto all of you and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins.” He knows, as well as his Calvinistic critic, that there *may* be men in this audience who are impenitent sinners, men who are hypocrites, men who will tread the treasures of God underfoot, but he does not hesitate to say, “I announce the grace of God unto *all* of you and forgive you all your sins.” And what he says is true. There may be murderers there and thieves and atheists, but the pastor has a perfect right to tell them that they are forgiven. If he knows that they are murderers and thieves he will first speak to them of sin and of God’s wrath and the eternal damnation of hell in order to bring them to a realization of their sin. But from God’s standpoint it makes no difference who they are and what they are. Jesus died for them and took their sins away. And we will tell them this whether they are believers or unbelievers, again because we know that it is true. And we will hope and pray that this time they will believe us so that they too will know that it is true, for we know full well that it is only by faith that this Word of reconciliation can profit men. It is told to them so that they may believe it and find joy and hope and comfort and eternal life in it. Dr. Walther says, “We cannot look into people’s hearts; but that is not necessary at all; we are to look only in the Word of our heavenly Father, which informs us that God has absolved the entire world. That assures us that all sins have been forgiven to all men...Does this apply also to an impious scoundrel, who may be plotting a burglary tonight, with the object of stealing and robbing? Indeed it does. The reason why he is not benefited by absolution is because he does not accept the forgiveness offered him; for he does not believe in his absolution. If he believed the Holy Spirit, he would quit stealing.”

This doctrine should have great significance for the teacher in our parish schools. Here, too, it will not take us very long to tell the children what the Bible says about absolution. After we have thoroughly covered the Second Article and the Third Article there is not a great deal left to say when we come to the fifth chief part. But what is perhaps far more important for us as teachers is this that we learn to practice the doctrine of absolution in our daily teaching. Teachers who have been called by a Christian congregation to feed the lambs of Christ have a special duty to perform in this respect. They, too, are to pronounce God’s absolution to the boys and girls whom God has committed to their care.

As we stand before these children, who have their doubts and their fears, their uncertainties and misconceptions, it is very important to remember what the absolution is. Dr. Schmieding of the faculty of Concordia Teachers College some years ago made a study the results of which ought to shock all of us into doing some very serious thinking along these lines. He found that approximately half of the children in the parochial schools of the Missouri Synod were not sure of the forgiveness of their sins. If we were told that this is the case in the public schools, we would say that this is about what we would expect. But this study was made in parochial schools, it was made in Lutheran parochial schools.

What *have* we been telling our children? Do we tell them that God will forgive them *if* they will be good? Nothing but tragedy can come out of such a statement, for there are only two possible conclusions for the child when once this has been said to him. Either he will think that he is good and that therefore God will look upon him with favor, in which case we have a self-righteous little Pharisee on our hands, or he will think that he is not good because he takes the law of God seriously and in that case he will also believe that God is not yet ready to forgive him.

Do we tell them that God will forgive them *if* they are sorry, or even *if* they are sorry enough? Have you every looked into your own heart and asked yourself, “Am I really sorry? Am I sorry enough?” Under such conditions we will have a hard time being really convinced that we are forgiven, for what is “sorry enough?” Would I be sorry enough if I could weep constantly from birth to death over my many, many sins? Do you think that this would be “sorry enough?” Did God say that the wages of sin is tears, or did God say that the wages of sin is death?

Do we tell them that God will forgive them *if* they believe? Where does it say that in the Bible? Bainton in his biography of Luther says that the early educational materials put out by Luther’s collaborators boiled down to this message, “You are a bad child. You deserve to be punished forever in hell, but since God has punished His Son Jesus Christ in your place, you can be forgiven if you will honor, love, and obey God.” “That if,” says Bainton, “bothered Luther.”

And all these “ifs” ought to bother us too. We know the doctrine of universal justification. We know the doctrine of absolution. Now what should it mean in our classrooms? Must it not mean this that we simply tell these boys and girls who sit before us every day, “God has forgiven you all your sins.” No “ifs” and no “buts,”—just “God has forgiven you all your sins.” Human reason can think of a thousand reasons why this ought not to be done, but we are to teach the Word, and the Word says that their sins are forgiven, the Gospel says that God looks on us with favor, and these children too are included in the command that tells us to preach the Gospel to every creature. Let us teach it to them, for God’s sake, and let us not be deterred by all sorts of objections that human reason may have to offer. Their sins are forgiven. God has told you to tell them that. It may be that many children are uncertain of the forgiveness of sins because they have never been taught that their sins are really forgiven, because they have instead been left under the impression that there is a pretty good chance that they might be forgiven if they will be good boys and girls. That is good Roman Catholic doctrine, but it is not Lutheran doctrine and it is not Christian doctrine. And we must constantly be on our guard against drifting into such a teaching of forgiveness, for it is the easiest thing in the world in an unguarded moment to say, “God will forgive us *If*,” for such a statement is thoroughly in harmony with the natural religion of man which still lives in the Old Adam that we have in our own hearts. And there are probably very few of us who have not slipped into that pitfall at some time or other. Dr. Pieper in his *Christian Dogmatics* quotes with approval the words of Christian Chemnitz, “The forgiveness of sins must not be based on the contrition and faith of the recipient, but on the promise and offer of God” (II, 551). Dr. Pieper himself says, “Absolution is not based on the state of man’s heart, but entirely on the state of God’s heart. And as to God’s heart, we are well informed, not as though we were omniscient, but because God has bared His heart to us in the Gospel. From it we know most certainly that, *before* contrition and faith, God is fully reconciled to each and every man through Christ, does not impute the sinner’s trespasses to them, but remits their transgressions; and that all Christians, also their public servants, have God’s command to reveal God’s reconciled heart, to proclaim the remission of sins in all the world, proclaim it particularly also to those who expressly confess their sins and desire absolution...Among all nations and in all climes not a single person can be found whom we would be deceiving if we not only assured him, but affirmed it with an oath in the name of God: ‘Through Christ God is reconciled to you, does not impute your sins to you, but forgives them.’”

## **CONCLUSION**

Therefore, as faithful teachers of the infallible words of our blessed Lord, we ought to teach the Law with all seriousness so that men may be brought to a knowledge of their sins and of their lost condition, so that they may confess it before God and men. And having accomplished this by the Word of the Law, we must also go on to comfort these afflicted hearts with the divine assurance, “Son, be of good cheer; thy sins are forgiven thee.” This is the whole doctrine of confession and absolution. God keep it pure among us. Amen.

- File from WELSNET (Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod) BBS: (414)475-7514