

Dear members and friends of St. John Lutheran,

One of the hardest truths for a Protestant to receive is the way God speaks to His people through **Confession Absolution**. I make this conclusion after years of association with converts to the Lutheran church. Years ago, I was in a rapidly growing Lutheran congregation. This parish actually doubled in size from 400 members to 800 members in a little over two years! Many people came in who were unchurched, even though they grew up in a Christian home. Some came directly from other Protestant churches. My wife and I were part of one of the congregation's small groups that met regularly. In this group was a man who grew up attending a **Protestant denomination that rejects the Means of Grace – God's biblical word on how He delivers His grace to man**. This gentleman flatly refused to accept Confession Absolution. He routinely complained about the Lutheran church's "misuse" of this "false belief." And he wasn't the only holdout. Being very vocal about his misgivings, he was eager to find others who agreed with him. Turns out, it wasn't that difficult to find dissention among the ranks! Those new to Lutheranism (and some who weren't new) were obviously confused about this biblical practice.

One hundred thirty four years ago, Rev. Dr. C. F. W. Walther (the first president of the LC-MS) also recognized the problem that Protestants were having with Confession Absolution. He wrote:

So-called "Protestant" churches, which are outside the pale of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, know nothing of the true way to forgiveness of sin by means of the Word and — in general — by the **Means of Grace**. In particular, this is evident from the way they reject **Absolution** as pronounced by the pastor from the pulpit or in general and private confession. These so-called "Protestant" churches claim that, of all Protestant churches, the Lutheran has really been "reformed" the least, for they claim that it still retains much of the leaven of the Roman Church...

First, **their claim** is based on **ignorance** concerning what we really teach about Absolution. They have made a total misrepresentation of our doctrine. They are not diligent enough to ask us what we really mean by Absolution. They are not that honest. Rather, behind our backs they slander us and call us "Papists" who would lead our poor people back to Rome. As a rule, these people imagine that we teach that, once ordained, a pastor is given a certain mysterious power that enables him to forgive sin. They assume that we teach that Absolution is his privilege, so that sins are forgiven whenever an ordained pastor pronounces the words "Your sins are forgiven"... Now, everybody knows that this is **not** our doctrine.

On what doctrine is the Lutheran practice of Absolution based? It is based on the following facts that we teach:

1. Christ, the Son of God, took upon Himself every sin of every sinner, counting them as His own. Accordingly, John the Baptist points to Christ and says, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).
2. By leading His life in abject poverty, by His suffering, crucifixion, and death, Christ wiped out the record of the world's sin and gained for us remission of all sins...
3. By raising His Son, Jesus Christ, from the dead, God the Father confirmed and put His stamp of approval on the work of reconciliation and redemption that Christ had finished on the cross. For by the resurrection of Christ, the Father, in the presence of heaven and earth, angels and people, declared: "Just as My Son cried out on the cross, 'It is finished,' so I announce, 'It is finished indeed!' You sinners are redeemed"...

4. In addition to Christ commanding that the Gospel be preached to every creature, He at the same time commanded that **forgiveness of sins should be preached to all people**. This is what we call the Good News: "All that is necessary for your salvation has been accomplished. When you ask, 'What must we do to be saved?' please remember that all has been done. There is nothing more to do. All you have to do is believe that everything has been done for you — and you will be saved."
5. Christ issued a **general command** to His apostles and their successors in office to preach the Gospel, that is, the forgiveness of sin. Yet He also commanded us to minister to each individual who desires forgiveness by offering this comfort: "You are reconciled to God." For if forgiveness of sin has been acquired for all, it has also been acquired for each individual. If I can offer it to all, I can offer it to each individual. Not only am I allowed to do this, I am ordered to do it.
6. **Now that forgiveness of sin has been acquired as stated, not only does a pastor have a special commission to proclaim it, but also every Christian — male or female, adult or child — is commissioned to do this.** Even a child's Absolution is just as certain as the Absolution of St. Peter — yes, even as the Absolution of Christ would be, were He again to stand visibly before people and say, "Your sins are forgiven." There is no difference, because, note well, it is **not** a question of what humans must do but **what has been done by Christ.**⁽¹⁾

One distinction that must be made is that the **pastor** has been given the "key of forgiveness" (by the church) to proclaim this to the assembly of Christians who have confessed their sins. Christians are commanded to confess their sins publicly (see James 5:16, 1 John 1:8-9, Psalm 32:3, 5). Christians are also commanded to forgive those *individually* who have confessed their sins to them. Therefore, all Christians must accept this responsibility, for it is commanded by God (see John 20:23, Matthew 18:18, 2 Cor. 5:18-21).

The immediate complaint by some will be, "Yes, but what about those who are only **pretending** to confess their sins, and are **not** truly sorrow at all?" Answer: The words of Absolution (forgiveness) have no effect on these individuals. They remain in their sin, for they are without faith, and therefore are lost. Even if we doubt their sincerity, we must not judge their intentions, but simply state the words, "I forgive you your sin(s)." God is actually speaking *through us* as we say the words. So it is **not** the **pastor or the individual** that is forgiving that person — but **God who uses us to proclaim His forgiveness.**

Therefore, Absolution is a great gift meant **to release the penitent soul from the guilt and shame** of their past sins. This is the very Gospel message of Christ's forgiveness going out, so that we may be assured that His grace and mercy applies **directly to us!**

The next worship service where you confess your sins (usually in the beginning of worship) — is your invitation to remember the truth about yourself — **you are not without sin!** Recognizing this truth with contrition (God-given sorrow), receive the very gift of **forgiveness of all of your sins** — through the spoken words of Absolution. **This is God's gift to you!**

Pastor Travis

(1) *Law and Gospel*, Rev. Dr. C. F. W. Walther, 17th Evening Lecture, Feb. 6, 1885; St. Louis: CPH.