

The Blessings of Private Confession

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The Fifth Part of the Small Catechism bears the heading, “How Christians should be taught to confess.” It may be surprising to recognize that when it does so, it is seeking to teach about private confession. First it states:

What is Confession?

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.

Confession is very simple. First, it means admitting our sins. As the psalmist expressed: “I acknowledged my sin to you, and my iniquity I did not hide; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD” (Psalm 32:50). We confess our sins – we admit before God that we have sinned in thought, word and deed. By this act we repent. We confess our sin before God and ask Him for forgiveness.

The second part of confession is that we receive absolution, that is, forgiveness. The word absolution is based on a Latin word that means “to loose.” Absolution is the word of forgiveness. Our Lord Jesus gave His Church the authority to forgive sins – to speak His forgiveness in His stead. He said, “Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth will have been loosed in heaven” (Matthew 18:18) and “If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven” (John 20:23).

We call absolution, *Holy Absolution*, because it is God’s gift which He carries out in our midst. When we receive forgiveness from the pastor in Holy Absolution, it is in fact God who is forgiving us. We hear the pastor

speaking for God as he says “I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” The pastor serves as the means through which *God forgives us*. The pastor is not able to do this because of who he is as an individual (because of his personal holiness or qualities). Instead, he does this because he has been placed in the Office of the Holy Ministry through ordination. God has given the Office of the Holy Ministry to the Church in order to administer His Means of Grace, which include Holy Absolution. And so the pastor says that he speaks “In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ.” As the Augsburg Confession states: “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” (XXV.3).

Holy Absolution can be described as “the Gospel in its purest form.” In fact the Apology of the Augsburg Confession calls it: “the very voice of the gospel” (XI.2). The Gospel tells us that Jesus Christ died on the cross and rose from the dead in order to win us forgiveness. The Gospel is about forgiveness, and in Holy Absolution we hear God speak to us in the first person singular and say, “I forgive you all your sins.” This is the unique and special character of Holy Absolution. We hear God *speak directly to us* and forgive us of our sins.

This brings us to the great blessings of private confession. The first is that we receive the opportunity to confess those specific sins that trouble us. Before God, sin is sin. However, the devil is able to use some sins more than others in order to trouble us and cause us to doubt God’s forgiveness. When we keep these sins inside, the guilt and anxiety they produce can be very destructive. In private confession we have the opportunity to confess these sins and “get them off our chest” as we confess them to God.

Then, the second blessing is that not only do we confess them, but we also hear God’s forgiveness spoken to us and *to us alone*. God deals with us *individually* as He forgives us through the absolution spoken by the pastor. The Lutheran reformers cherished private confession for this very reason. As Luther wrote: “I will allow no one to take private confession from me and would not give it in exchange for all the wealth of the world. For I know what consolation and strength it has given me” (LW 51:98).

The third blessing is that the practice of private confession aids us in our struggle against sin. Confessing our sins out loud forces us to face our sin for what it is – sin against God. In the absolution we receive the Gospel through which the Holy Spirit strengthens us to resist sin and temptation. And during our daily life as we face temptation, the knowledge that an action is a sin – something to be confessed – helps us to resist and avoid it.