

5-1-2000

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Recommended Citation

Horton, Susan (2000) "Confession, absolution and step five: a Lutheran look at commonalities and differences for pastors who accept fifth step appointments," *Consensus*: Vol. 26 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol26/iss1/10>

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Confession, Absolution and Step Five: A Lutheran Look at Commonalities and Differences for Pastors Who Accept Fifth Step Appointments

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In the mystique of twelve-step recovery, the ancient Christian tradition of individual confession assumes an expanded identity as a datable event necessary for sobriety, serenity, and full participation in the life of the community. Although it may be repeated during a lifetime of maturing spirituality, the Fifth Step event becomes a rite of passage encouraged, discussed, and praised by other twelve-step practitioners. In contrast, particularly in the Lutheran community familiar to this writer, individual confession is rarely mentioned by lay people although it may be practised in the confidential confines of the pastor's study. The historical Lutheran confessional documents offer an honoured place to confession and absolution. The *Lutheran Book of Worship*, one of the major Lutheran service books in use in North America since its publication in 1978, provides a two page format for "Individual Confession and Forgiveness". Despite this, many Lutherans are only familiar with a corporate confession during worship services. What makes Step Five more appealing or more necessary? How can Lutheran pastors handle "Step Five work"? In what ways can these separate but similar traditions of self-examination enrich each other? Such questions require an examination of the history and literature of Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon, of Martin Luther's catechisms, and the experience of ordinary "program" members and Christians.

Step Five may be one of the most dramatic occasions of recovery, but its very place in the sequence of the twelve steps makes clear that it is part of a process that does not begin or end with “spilling your guts to another human being”. Step Five requires the difficult preparatory work of Step Four as well as the even more basic acceptance proclaimed by the first three steps: “I can’t; God can; so I’ll let God.” This act of surrender, this acceptance of powerlessness, came into Alcoholics Anonymous by way of early exposure to the Oxford Group Movement. Indeed, Charles Knippel, in a 1987 dissertation, states that “[Bill] Wilson’s entire program of recovery is basically rooted in...the applied theology”¹ of Samuel Moor Shoemaker, Jr., an Episcopal clergyman who led Oxford Groups in America from the mid 1920s until 1941. In a tribute to Shoemaker in 1961, Wilson declared, “he channelled to us...the message, the understanding, the loving concern, and therefore the Grace that enabled our small band and all the countless thousands who followed afterward to walk in the Consciousness of God – to live and love again, as never before.”² For Shoemaker, as shown in his book *How to Find God* and a lecture entitled “The Experience of Conversion”, the act of surrender included confession and the willingness to make restitution:

Self-surrender to God is the beginning of all living discovery of God...The moment of conversion must contain within it a voluntary renunciation of actual sins...[plus] the willingness to make restitution for any of these that have hurt other people. Getting these things that are on our minds and consciences out in the open with another person...helps to deepen the conviction of sin, to point the definite way out, and to prepare the person for God’s forgiveness...The price of receiving forgiveness, redemption, new life at God’s hands, is more than giving up your sins; it is giving up yourself. The reason many people never really find God is that they want to give Him their sins, but not themselves.³

That giving up of self leads directly to Step Four. As Bill Wilson describes it in “How It Works”, Chapter Five of the “big book” of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, “Next we launched out on a course of vigorous action, the first step of which is personal housecleaning...Though our decision [in Step Three] was a vital and crucial step, it could have little permanent effect unless at once followed by a strenuous effort to face, and to be rid of, the things in ourselves which had been blocking us.”⁴

The discoveries of Step Four can be devastating. “Gail”, an Al-Anon member, tells of a woman participating in a three-month Step Series⁵ who was so shaken by this work that she dropped out of the Step Series

a week or so later and out of Al-Anon completely in a month or two, despite encouragement by other members, and despite her husband's continued recovery in AA.⁶ Yet the need to move forward is clearly stated by Wilson:

AA experience has taught us that we cannot live alone with our pressing problems and character defects which cause or aggravate them. [After Step Four] the need to quit living by ourselves with these tormenting ghosts of yesterday gets even more urgent than ever...We'd have to have outside help if we were surely to know and admit the truth about ourselves – the help of God and of another human being. Only by discussing ourselves, holding nothing back, only by being willing to take advice and accept direction could we set foot on the road to straight thinking, solid honesty, and genuine humility.⁷

This viewpoint is strongly emphasized by John E. Keller, a pastor called by the American Lutheran Church in 1955 to serve as a chaplain with the special assignment of learning about alcoholism and counselling with alcoholics. After ten years of such work, he asserted: "The person who is still asking 'Why is this necessary?' or 'Is this necessary?' will never know the answer until he takes the steps. The alcoholic who has honestly gone through these steps never asks this question. He knows the answer. All Twelve Steps are written in the past tense, which is an indication that the answer lies in the doing."⁸

The internal and external pressure to be "doing" Step Five, to get this difficult task over and done with, can be intense, especially for someone involved in a Step Series. Despite this pressure, caution is advised in choosing someone to hear this intimate sharing. Such sharing makes a person incredibly vulnerable. For this reason *Al-Anon's Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* reminds readers that confidentiality is not the only concern, that the traditional trustworthiness of the clergy needs to be balanced by knowledge of the purposes of the steps.⁹ According to "Gail", several members of Al-Anon Adult Children, badly shaken by an especially critical reception of their Step Fives by a new clergy person in their city, were redirected by other members to a clergy person with a solid reputation in the twelve-step community; this is evidence of great trust that healing could yet happen in God's name. The name of the first clergy person was removed from the formal and informal lists of suitable people that circulated across the city.¹⁰

Since such a great number of Step Fives are done with clergy peo-

ple, the newly ordained may reasonably expect questions on their availability for such work. In some communities, ministerial associations are approached to compile lists of those who will accept such appointments. Keller gives a solid reason for being involved in such a way:

The alcoholic needs more than sobriety. Without the Fourth and Fifth Steps he may have sobriety, but he will have no basic understanding of God's grace and of the spirituality of the AA fellowship and recovery. These steps are essential to his emotional and spiritual growth...The pastor, hopefully, will look upon the Fifth Step as a real pastoral "soul care" relationship for which he must and can find time on his busy schedule whether or not the alcoholic is a member of his congregation.¹¹

To take such a role, a pastor obviously needs some knowledge of the disease of alcoholism and the process of twelve-step recovery, but the most effective ministry may happen when this is integrated with a denominational understanding of confession and absolution. For Lutheran clergy this comes in the Lutheran confessions gathered in the *Book of Concord*, confessions that candidates promise, at ordination and installation, to accept as reliable guides for preaching and teaching. Particularly in the Small Catechism and the Large Catechism, Martin Luther encourages the practice of confession and absolution without the hierarchical coercion known in the sixteenth century. In his "Brief Exhortation to Confession" Luther claims: "We have the advantage of knowing how to use confession beneficially for the comforting and strengthening of our conscience."¹² While Luther acknowledges that confession and absolution happen regularly in the Lord's Prayer, he spends much time on the action of private confession:

...confession consists of two parts. The first is my work and act, when I lament my sin and desire comfort and restoration for my soul. The second is a work which God does, when he absolves me of my sins through a word placed in the mouth of a man...We should set little value on our work but exalt and magnify God's Word. We should not act as if we wanted to perform a magnificent work to present to him, but simply to accept and receive something from him...what you must do is lament your need and allow yourself to be helped so that you may attain a happy heart and conscience.¹³

In the Small Catechism, Luther provides a simple format for a pastor hearing a confession, clearly titled "How Plain People Are to Be Taught to Confess". Echoes of this form appear in the previously mentioned section of the *Lutheran Book of Worship*. Despite such practical and

theological encouragement, few Lutheran lay people are familiar with the process, although Lutheran pastors making use of the ritual have found it an effective tool of ministry. Professor Cameron Harder states that he often initiated use of this form in counselling sessions as it gave such a new start to those blocked by guilt. In his experience, only two lay people actually asked to use it, both of whom had a twelve-step background.¹⁴

One significant difference between Lutheran confession and absolution and the current practice of Fifth Steps is the inclusion of strengths and positive actions in the Step Four inventory which is being shared. According to Rev. Tim Posyluzny, "private confession (and absolution) has a specific purpose: recognizing a sin(s) by name, apologizing to God for the pain-causing offense, and receiving forgiveness (the power/freedom to start over or to change). Does listing strengths fit? Perhaps as part of absolution which incorporates encouragement."¹⁵

When asked about the value of listing strengths in an inventory, Posyluzny added:

From a pastoral perspective, listing strengths is most useful as a self-esteem building exercise. Many people simply have never allowed themselves the enjoyment and self-respect [that] recognizing gifts and talents can bring. Instead they mistake it for a "prideful" activity...Listing strengths as an expression of gratitude is always right and does produce healthy humility; that is, if I can appreciate my strengths, I can appreciate yours.¹⁶

Rev. Ron Wesley, a veteran in receiving Fifth Steps, expressed the differences in this way: "Step Five by its nature is more objective. Private confession by its nature gives more opportunities, more leeway and more license for dialogue and theological reflection...Private confession moves more to the next step, absolution from God, with a flow of contrition, confession and repentance...the 'full-meal deal'."¹⁷

Wesley concurred on the benefits of asking people to list their strengths before they came for their Step Five, always asking in the telephone conversation that set up the appointment, "Have you included anything good about yourself?" He followed this practice because

people are so empty, [they have lived with] so much emphasis on the negative. It's good to end on a positive note. It counteracts low self-esteem, give a more balanced view of life, God, and self. It's not all negatives and limitations; [it shows that you are] still able to live with

yourself. [It also] emphasizes God's grace [with a recognition that these are not] "my" strengths.¹⁸

The importance of grace, humility, and the recognition of God's action, so evident in conversations with these Lutheran pastors, was summarized succinctly in an earlier student essay by Professor Harder: "Recovery for the alcoholic, like salvation for the sinner, is based not at all on what the individual does, but on what God does and has done for and in him, by grace."¹⁹

This emphasis on the work of God may be of some comfort to clergy who fear that Step Five in some way negates the Christian practice of absolution which Luther considered of such importance: "The Word or absolution, I say, is what you should concentrate on, magnifying and cherishing it as a great and wonderful treasure to be accepted with all praise and gratitude."²⁰ Lutheran Pastor Dennis Morreim, in his examination of the bridges between the "two different roads"²¹ of AA and the church, offers a helpful comment:

The realization that they have been declared "not guilty" (justified) by God through Christ's death on the cross certainly may not happen the moment alcoholics complete their fifth step. Because of years of living alienated from God, the Holy Spirit continues to lead these people into the meaning of grace. Hopefully that day will come.²²

Morreim illustrates his point with the story of the Prodigal Son,²³ reminding us that the father embraced the son in love before the son's carefully worded confession, and that the father offered actions of forgiveness rather than words of forgiveness. Morreim calls the father's commands for a party

life-giving words. They were words of affirmation. They reminded the son of the status he had always had. They were words of grace! Suddenly all the shame and guilt, carried those many miles throughout life, fell away. As he felt his father's arms around him and as he heard these words of grace, he recognized a feeling he had never known before. He was accepted! He was forgiven! He was *free!*...It is in the reality of freedom that the bridges of confession, forgiveness, grace and justification can be appreciated in anyone's walk of faith.²⁴

John Keller does not close the door on all possibilities of absolution following a Step Five. For a person with current or previous connections to the church, conversation about how God sees them now can be most meaningful. Closing prayers and even formal rituals of Confession and

Absolution can also have a great impact as “the most significant evidence of restoration in their relationship with God”,²⁵ but should never be pushed by the pastor. For the agnostic, Keller suggests “some conversation about the simple matter of asking for help each morning and expressing thanks each evening may be helpful.”²⁶

Members of twelve-step groups who have connected more deeply with God because of their Step Five experience have a great witness to offer everyday Christians. Many would fit under Martin Luther’s definition that “the essence of a genuinely Christian life [is] to acknowledge that we are sinners and to pray for grace.”²⁷ Our common need is well expressed by a devotional writer: “There may be some whose self-confidence has been shattered, who are sure that they are nobody and nothing. But if so, they are ripe for God. For when we come to God having given up faith in ourselves, then he can recreate us and become our life.”²⁸

Cameron Harder suggests a further similarity: “It is not sin that is the chief obstacle to the sinner’s salvation, as Luther sees it, nor alcohol that stands in the way of the addict’s recovery; it is pride.”²⁹ For those whose pride has been crushed by addiction or their reaction to it, the Twelve Step community advises Step Five. For those whose pride has been crushed by their inability to live up to the Christian faith they profess, Luther advises:

If you are poor and miserable, then go and make use of the healing medicine. He who feels his misery and need will develop such a desire for confession that he will run toward it with joy...Those who really want to be good Christians, free from their sins, and happy in their conscience, already have the true hunger and thirst...If you are a Christian, you should be glad to run more than a hundred miles for confession, not under compulsion but rather coming and compelling us to offer it.³⁰

It is possible that many more alcoholics and people connected to them “compel” pastors to hear Fifth Steps than Christians “compel” them to offer private confession. This is not to be wondered at, when Twelve-Step communities are so clear that drinking, insanity, or death can easily follow a failure to face this difficult cleansing. Their common problem encourages trust in a common recovery. This sense of oneness operates in a different way in Christian communities where varied life experiences can obscure emotional similarities of guilt and despair. On the other hand, churches are more able to emphasize the forgiveness that

cascades from God's hands, a forgiveness that transcends our abilities to make the complete amends that would allow full self-forgiveness. Samuel Shoemaker, in an address to the Twentieth Anniversary Convention of AA in St. Louis in 1955, summarized the relation in this way: "I am thankful that the Church has so widely associated itself with AA, because I think AA people need the Church for personal stabilization and growth, but also because the Church needs AA as a continuous spur to greater aliveness and expectation and power. They are meant to complement and supplement each other."³¹

Twelve Step groups can continuously remind Christians of the great benefits of "admitting to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs". The church can regularly remind twelve-steppers of the full nature of the Higher Power present in the process. As Luther put it almost five hundred years ago:

We should not act as if we wanted to perform a magnificent work to present to [God], but simply to accept and receive something from him. You dare not come and say how good or how wicked you are. If you are a Christian, I know this well enough anyway; if you are not, I know it still better. But what you must do is lament your need and allow yourself to be helped so that you may obtain a happy heart and conscience...We urge you...to confess and express your needs, not for the purpose of performing a work but to hear what God wishes to say to you.³²

As pointed out by Dennis Morreim and John Keller in their comments on the Parable of the Prodigal Son, what God most wishes to say is "Welcome home". Those are words we could honestly and usefully say to each other.

Notes

- ¹ Charles Taylor Knippel, *Samuel M. Shoemaker's Theological Influence on William G. Wilson's Twelve Step Spiritual Program of Recovery*. A Dissertation presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of Saint Louis University (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Dissertation Information Service, 1987) 1.
- ² *Ibid.* 92.
- ³ *Ibid.* 136-137.
- ⁴ *Alcoholics Anonymous*. 3rd ed. (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services Inc., 1976) 63-64.

- 5 A Step Series is usually conducted over a three-month period, with experienced members chairing meetings using a teaching type of presentation and with other members attempting to work one step each week to the best of their ability.
- 6 Personal recollections shared by "Gail", Prince Albert, summer 1998.
- 7 *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services Inc., 1953) 56, 59.
- 8 John E. Keller, *Ministering to Alcoholics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976) 126.
- 9 *Al-Anon's Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (New York: Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters Inc., 1981) 33.
- 10 Personal recollections by "Gail".
- 11 Keller, *Ministering to Alcoholics*, 127, 122.
- 12 Martin Luther, "Large Catechism," *Book of Concord*. Trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959) 457.4.
- 13 Ibid. 458-459.
- 14 Personal interview with Professor Cameron Harder, Lutheran Theological Seminary at Saskatoon, Sept. 9, 1998. Used with permission.
- 15 Letter from Rev. Timothy Posyluzny, Edmonton, Aug. 19, 1998. Used with permission.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Phone conversation with Rev. Ron Wesley, Edmonton, July 28, 1998. Used with permission.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Cameron Harder, "Spirituality in Alcoholics Anonymous: Parallels with Lutheran Pietism" (Paper for Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon, November 1985) 7.
- 20 Luther, "Large Catechism," 459.22.
- 21 Dennis C. Morreim, *The Road to Recovery: Bridges between the Bible and the Twelve Steps* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1990) 9.
- 22 Ibid. 81.
- 23 See also Keller, *Ministering to Alcoholics*, 125.
- 24 Ibid. 81-82.
- 25 Ibid. 126.

- ²⁶ Ibid. 125.
- ²⁷ Luther, "Large Catechism," 458.9.
- ²⁸ Fred Daniel Gealy, *Let Us Break Bread Together: Thoughts on the meaning of Christ* (Los Angeles: Acton House, 1976), 30.
- ²⁹ Harder, "Spirituality in Alcoholics Anonymous," 6.
- ³⁰ Luther, "Large Catechism," 460.28-30.
- ³¹ Samuel Shoemaker in Keller, *Ministering to Alcoholics*, 10.
- ³² Luther, "Large Catechism," 459.18-22.