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The Precious Treasure of Confession and Absolution

Marja Hordern¹

In a typical Lutheran Church, on a typical Sunday morning, the typical congregation will have a typical worship service which includes a “Brief Order for Confession.” In that same typical Lutheran Church, on a typical weekday, in a typical pastoral counselling session, the typical Lutheran congregant will share some of their weightier sins with their pastor, who will remind them that God forgives them. Regardless of what this is called, this is a form of confession. Yet if one asks these same typical Lutherans what words describe “being Lutheran” the typical response will include words such as baptism, communion, grace, justification, liturgy, hymns, vocation and education. Rarely, if ever, will the word “confession” be brought forward. This is especially notable since it has been said that “the reformation was basically a restoration of confession and absolution.”² What, then, makes confession and absolution seemingly theologically at the theological center of the definition of Lutheran, but colloquially in the peripheries?

Revisiting the Lutheran approach to Confession and Absolution

In the *Augsburg Confession*, the articles relating to confession and repentance are articles eleven and twelve,³ a part of the section that addresses the sacraments. Article Nine is about baptism, and Article Ten concerns the Lords Supper. These two articles are followed by two articles on confession and repentance, and the section concludes with Article Thirteen, dealing with the use of the sacraments. While the placement of the articles on confession and repentance definitely imply, at the very least, a “sacramental connection,”⁴ many scholars argue that the placement of the articles on confession, repentance and absolution “makes it natural to assume that the *Augsburg Confession* considers [it] to be one of the sacraments.”⁵ Nevertheless, despite this evidence, the Lutheran Church does not count confession as a sacrament. Instead, the common practice is to acknowledge only two sacraments: the Sacrament of Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar. Which begs the question: why, then, did the reformers place the articles about confession, absolution and repentance amongst the articles about the sacraments?

There are definite reasons to place this rite within the sphere of the formally recognized sacraments. The reformers understood confession to be intimately connected to baptism. Martin Luther described the connection in this way: “if you live in repentance, therefore, you are walking in baptism.”⁶ However, the explanation given for considering confession in sacramental terms is not because of the act of repentance, but rather it is

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² Brent W. Kuhlman, “Holy Absolution: Rejoicing in the Gift,” *Lutheran Forum* 31 no. 3 (1997), 29.

³ *Augsburg Confession*, Articles XI–XII; *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 44–45 (hereafter cited *BC*).

⁴ Kuhlman, “Holy Absolution,” 29.

⁵ Leif Grane, *The Augsburg Confession: A Commentary*, tr. John H. Rasmussen (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981), 128.

⁶ LC, Baptism, 75; *BC* 466.

because of the Word of God that follows confession, the absolution. The absolution, the word and promise of God declaring one's sins forgiven, are the same words that are declared when a person receives the Sacrament of Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar. The Word proclaimed in absolution is the word of forgiveness of sins, just without a sign. Apart from the sign, or earthly element, absolution can be considered as sacramental, but not an actual sacrament.

With this Lutheran understanding, the emphasis in absolution is clearly placed on God's words, words of promise and action. In absolution, as with Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar, God's word both declares, and makes real, the forgiveness of sins and the promise of life and salvation. This is in stark contrast to the Roman understanding of confession where the emphasis was on the person's penitential works rather than on God's salvific work.

In the understanding of Luther and the evangelical reformers there are two parts of confession: first, is the act of confessing one's sins, and second is the absolution that God gives.⁷ This is contrasting to the Roman view of confession which saw it as having three parts: contrition of the heart, followed by an aural confession, and ending with acts of satisfaction for their sins.⁸ Under this penitential system, the people would perform works to eradicate their sins.

The Romanist and Lutheran views also differed over the question of whether all sins needed to be named for absolution to be valid. Under the Roman system, all sins had to be enumerated, and if a single sin went unnamed, the satisfaction for sins was made null and void.⁹ The reformers, however, insisted that even if you "are aware of no sins at all . . . then do not mention any in particular, but instead receive forgiveness on the basis of the general confession."¹⁰ Also in the Roman view, confession was mandatory, compared to the Lutheran view where it was voluntary.¹¹ This Romanist emphasis on human works and activities to forgive sins was in sharp contrast to the Lutheran system that held that forgiveness of sins comes from God's proclaimed word.

While the alterations made by the Lutherans to the rite of confession and absolution were meant to "cleanse what had become corrupted and, on the other hand, to retain what had not been corrupted,"¹² the result was that the Lutheran act of confession had a drastically different result than the Roman act of confessing. Yes, they had the same core, and were from the same family, and from the outside could appear to be family, but their emphases and outcomes are drastically different.

The primary difference between the two approaches is centered on the subject of the action, the one enacting the verb. In the Roman view it is all about the humans making satisfaction for their sins, whereas in the Lutheran view the subject acting is God. The emphasis is not on the works and sins of the people but on the work and Grace of God.¹³

⁷ SC, Baptism, 16; BC 360.

⁸ P.H.D. Lang, "Private Confession and Absolution in the Lutheran Church: A Doctrinal, Historical, and Critical Study," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 56 no. 4 (1992), 243.

⁹ LC, A Brief Exhortation to Confession, 2; BC 476.

¹⁰ SC, Baptism, 25; BC 361.

¹¹ Luther and the other reformers firmly held that a true Christian would undoubtedly partake of the opportunity to confess one's sins.

¹² Lang, "Private Confession and Absolution," 243.

¹³ Grane, *The Augsburg Confession*, 137.

Further, the Roman view of needing to name every single sin in order to make the confession valid, puts the entire emphasis on the sinful human and their many and numerous sinful actions. With the Lutheran view, while recognizing the importance for a person to acknowledge their sin, along with not requiring the penitent to enumerate every single sin, puts the emphasis on God's gracious activities. Thus, the Lutherans understood confession, not as a mandatory form of punishment or burden, but a privilege – in fact, it was now a life-giving event flowing forth from God's mouth. Eiffert summarizes this succinctly when he states that the Reformation "elevated [confession] to its proper position. It changes it from an obligation to a privilege, from a method of control to the application of the Gospel that liberates and frees the individual from the bondage of fear and guilt."¹⁴ As Luther describes it, confession is a "precious treasure."¹⁵

Confession and Absolution and the Article on Justification

With the emphasis in the Roman system on needing the penitent to do works of satisfaction to have their sins remitted, the insinuation is that people can do something to merit their own forgiveness, and by implication, salvation. In the Lutheran view though, the emphasis is not on works but faith. The reformers, as seen throughout the *Augsburg Confession*, and in their articles on confession in particular, reinstated "the importance of absolution grasped by faith over against forgiveness obtained by the satisfactions of various sorts."¹⁶ Absolution is grace, grasped by faith, not by works. The pattern found in absolution echoes the understanding Lutherans have about justification: God's grace is bestowed through faith, and not by human works. It is a free, unmerited gift. When this connection is made, one sees how confession and absolution can be viewed as located in the very heart of the reformation, as it intrinsically continuous with Article Four of the *Augsburg Confession*. The problems that the reformers had with the Roman view of confession are the same issue that are at the heart of Article Four. At stake for the Lutherans was the question, who is in control of our salvation?

Human salvation is not inside of us nor is it the result of our doing.¹⁷ Neither is the forgiveness of sins: such a life-giving gift comes only from God. The Lutheran doctrine of confession is in line with Article Four because the doctrine "placed confession, which is the work of [humans], over against absolution, which is the work of God."¹⁸ It is through God that a person is saved, not through their own actions or activities, or even the strength of their belief system.

The switch to emphasizing that the central and key part of confession and absolution is God's work, is very formative for the faith. First, the emphasis reinforces that the most important and radical news that humanity has been given is the Gospel which proclaims the grace that God daily and abundantly gives. In the one action of absolution, the entire relationship that God has with humans is not just summed up but enacted. As Lang states,

¹⁴ Eric D. Stumpf, "Private Confession: A Call for Restoration in Pastoral Care," *Concordia Journal* 19 no. 3 (1993), 225.

¹⁵ LC, Brief Exhortation to Confession, 20, *BC* 478.

¹⁶ Stephen P. Verkouw, "The Confessing Pastor," *Dialog* 32 no. 1 (1993), 15.

¹⁷ Brent Kuhlman, "Holy Absolution: Rejoicing in the Gift," *Lutheran Forum* 31 no. 3 (1997), 29.

¹⁸ Lang, "Private Confession and Absolution," 244.

“In the absolution the essence of the Christian religion is present, namely the dispensing of grace to [humans]. It is a form of the gospel of Jesus Christ.”¹⁹

Second, the Lutheran view of confession is centrally formative for faith because it is all about reminding ourselves, and being reminded by God, that we are not God.²⁰ There is only one God. When we think that our actions and works can make up for our sins, we are trying to be God in God’s place. When we decide that we have to name every single sin because our human sins are the focus of confession, and not God’s gift of forgiveness, we are trying to be God in God’s place. When we make judgements on people and tell them how bad their sins are and what they have to do to make it right before God, we are trying to be God in God’s place. The Lutheran view of confession does not allow us to try usurp God: only God can absolve sins and give life and salvation.

To cast this in another light, absolution is a way that God appropriates our baptism. Baptism brings about the forgiveness of sins, and every time we receive absolution, we again receive an affirmation that our sins are forgiven. As the twentieth century Confessing Church theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer so eloquently describes it, “What happened to us in baptism is bestowed on us anew in confession. We are delivered out of the darkness into the kingdom of Jesus. That is joyful news. Confession is the renewal of the joy of baptism.”²¹ Confession is not a sacrament. Baptism is the sacrament; Confession is a sacramental affirmation of that baptism.

Baptism, Confession and Absolution: One and the Same

The connection between baptism and confession is one that Luther himself uses. Luther describes confession as a return to baptism: penance “is really nothing else than baptism. What is repentance but an earnest attack on the old creature and an entering into new life? If you live in repentance, therefore, you are walking in baptism, which not only announces the new life but also produces, begins, and exercises it . . . Repentance therefore, is nothing else than a return and approach to baptism, to resume and practice what has earlier been begun.”²² With the connection between baptism and exercising, or living, the Christian life, it is no surprise that Bonhoeffer describes confession in terms of discipleship, because in confession the hold that sin has on people is continually broken, and enacting that life with Jesus has begun.²³ Stephen Verkow explains this further by stating that in confession and absolution “we concretely anticipate the communion with God and one another that is ours for Jesus’ sake, without falling victim to the delusions of self-justification on the one hand, or to the graceless judgement of sinful communities of others.”²⁴

¹⁹ Lang, “Private Confession and Absolution,” 245.

²⁰ In a poignant letter Luther asks Georg Spalatin (who is with Philip Melanchthon at the Diet of Augsburg right after the *Augsburg Confession* was presented) to remind Philip to “not become like God, but to fight that innate ambition to be like God, which was planted in us in paradise by the devil This [ambition] doesn’t do us any good. It drove Adam from paradise, and it alone also drives us away, and drives peace away from us. In summary, we are to be humans and not God; it will not be otherwise.” Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works: American Edition*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut Lehmann, and Christopher Boyd Brown, 79 Vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, and St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–), Vol. 49, 337 (hereafter cited LW). This same point is made in Luther’s explanation to the First Commandment in the *Large Catechism*.

²¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, tr. John W. Doberstein (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1954), 115.

²² LC, Baptism, 74–79; BC 465–66.

²³ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 115.

²⁴ Stephen P. Verkow, “The Confessing Pastor,” *Dialog* 32 no. 1 (1993), 18.

As with all other aspects of Lutheran theology, including the theology of the two sacraments, the understanding of confession and absolution always comes back to Article Four of the *Augsburg Confession*, the article on justification by grace alone through faith alone. As Leif Grane states it “Luther has succeeded in interpreting Penance along the same line as Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, making justification by faith its content as well.”²⁵ In absolution we are justified by grace through faith: confession is not about following a law, or meeting certain requirements, nor is getting satisfaction for our sins up to us and our works. It is all a gift from God, a wonderful, or “precious treasure.”²⁶ Confession is “not a law, it is an offer of divine help for the sinner.”²⁷ It is not us, but the Holy Spirit who “creates faith when and where it pleases him in those who hear the Gospel . . . Absolution today is one of these means through which justification by grace through faith is kept pure and operative in the Church.”²⁸

Conclusion

In a typical Lutheran Church, on a typical Sunday, the congregation comes together for a typical worship service. And in that worship service, the typical congregants follow the typical liturgy, including reciting the typical words of the Confession, and the pastor says the typical words of the absolution. But the words of the absolution are anything but typical. They are powerful. They are radical. They are loving. They are a treasure. They are a gift. They are life.

The words of absolution are not just words. They are God, declaring, re-stating, and making a new reality of life for us, as God re-declares to us the promise that was made in our baptism: that in the words of promise spoken, God declares and shows us that God loves us, that God declares and makes real the forgives of our sins, and that God promises to be with us, acting for us to make life, in its fullness, possible. God takes us through death, drowning the old self and all sin, and brings us alive in Christ, to a new reality – the reality of an absolved life – created by God. The words of absolution remind, tell us, and make real for us that “human beings cannot be justified before God by their own powers, merits, or works. But they are justified *as a gift*, on account of Christ through faith when they believe that they are received into grace and that their sins are forgiven *on account of Christ*, who by death made satisfaction for our sins. God reckons this faith as righteousness.”²⁹ Whether you call it absolution, justification, or living in God’s baptismal promises, the truth remains: the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation is an action and gift of God. There can be no way around that.

²⁵ Grane, *The Augsburg Confession*, 140.

²⁶ LC, Brief Exhortation to Confession, 20, BC 478.

²⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 117.

²⁸ Kuhlman, “Holy Absolution,” 33.

²⁹ *Augsburg Confession*, IV; BC 38-41.