

How Can We Salvage Private Confession?

[Delivered to the Metro-North Pastoral Conference, January 21, 1985]

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The Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article VIII, Paragraphs 1 & 2, entitled "Of Confession", states: "Since Absolution or the Power of the Keys is also an aid and consolation against sin and a bad conscience, ordained by Christ in the Gospel, Confession or Absolution ought by no means to be abolished in the Church, especially on account of timid consciences and on account of the untrained young people, in order that they may be examined and instructed in the Christian doctrine.

"But the enumeration of sins ought to be free to every one, as to what he wishes to enumerate or not to enumerate. For as long as we are in the flesh, we shall not lie when we say: 'I am a poor man, full of sin.' Rom. 7,23: 'I see another law in my members,' etc. For since private absolution originates in the Office of the Keys, it should not be despised, but greatly and highly esteemed, as all other offices of the Christian Church."

The practice of private confession in the Roman Catholic Church at Luther's time and before was not only stressed but commanded as a necessary requirement for the faithful. In the 13th century, the canon on penance was issued, requiring private confession to a priest at least once a year on pain of excommunication. While Luther and his followers strongly disagreed with the unscriptural practices involved in the Roman Catholic sacrament of penance, they were just as strongly convinced that private confession ought not to be abolished but rather reformed and purified.

The subject of private confession in our Lutheran Church has on occasion been a topic of discussion among our pastors and laymen. However, the practice itself, while not having reached the stage of disuse in our congregations also apparently has not been emphasized and encouraged to the degree that it was by Luther and others. Today, in most of our churches, the opportunity for private confession prior to the celebration of the Lord's Supper has been waived in favor of a very brief announcement in person or via telephone or filling out a card pre or post Communion. In most cases the general confession in the service itself has replaced private confession.

I assume that some of these trends in many of our congregations prompted the assignment given me by the committee on conference papers to discuss the question: How Can We Salvage Private Confession? To aid us in our study of this question, let's consider two points: I. The reason for private confession II. Practical suggestions toward developing and encouraging it.

The Reason for Private Confession

It has been said that confession is good for the soul. This truth applies whether confession is made directly to God or indirectly through private confession. The principal reason for either mode of confession is the same, namely to receive the assurance of the Gospel promise: "Your sins are forgiven." There is no greater good for the soul, no greater blessing, than the absolution or forgiveness we receive from God Himself through the merits of Jesus Christ our Savior, as the apostle John says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9)

Since we are speaking about private confession in particular, let us hear once again the words of Luther: "Since Absolution or the Power of the Keys is also an aid and consolation against sin and a bad conscience, ordained by Christ in the Gospel, Confession or Absolution ought by no means to be abolished in the Church." Luther firmly believed that the principal reason for private confession was to personally assure and comfort the penitent sinner with God's forgiveness in Christ. Nor was he in favor of retaining the abuses of the Roman Catholic practices of penance such as the enumeration of all sins, the judgmental decision of the priest to remit or retain sins, the satisfaction payments or the viewing of the confession as a meritorious act. The *Small Catechism* clearly sums up his views regarding private confession:

What is Confession? Confession embraces two parts: the one is, that we confess our sins; the other, that we receive absolution, or forgiveness, from the confessor, as from God Himself, and in no wise doubt, but firmly believe, that our sins are thereby forgiven before God in heaven.

What sins should we confess? Before God we should plead guilty of all sins, even of those which we do not know, as we do in the Lord's Prayer. But before the confessor we should confess those sins alone which we know and feel in our hearts.

Luther also spoke of additional benefits relating to private confession. In his treatise *The Sacrament of the Body-and Blood of Christ - Against the Fanatics*, he wrote:

“Private confession is by no means to be rejected. The reason is this: there is much that is beneficial and precious in it. First of all, the absolution, in which your neighbor absolves you in God's stead, is just as if God Himself were speaking, and that should indeed be comforting to us. If I knew that God were in a certain place and would absolve me, I would not go to some other place but would receive absolution in that place as often as I could. Such absolution he has put into the mouth of man, hence it is most comforting, especially to burdened consciences, to receive it there.

Secondly, private confession serves a good purpose for the simple, childlike people ... Even if private confession did not serve any other purpose, it is at least useful because it gives opportunity to instruct the people and hear what they believe, teach them to pray, etc. Third, there is comfort in the fact that if anyone has an evil conscience or some other desire or need, and would like advice, he may ask for advice here. Therefore we cannot despise private confession. For God's Word is present, which comforts us and strengthens us in faith, and in addition instructs us and teaches us what we lack and also gives us advice in time of need. For this reason no one makes this confession properly either except devout Christians, because they must be the sort of people who feel that they really want advice and consolation.”

From these words we see that Luther considered the chief reason for private confession to be the absolution given by another (priest, pastor, neighbor) in God's stead. Accordingly he wrote in his Small Catechism, that after the confession of sins:

Then let him say: As thou believest, so be it done unto thee. And by the command of our Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive thee thy sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen. Depart in peace.

The additional benefits could be summed up in Luther's own words: "1.) It gives opportunity to instruct the people and hear what they believe, teach them to pray, etc; and 2.) God's Word is present, which comforts us and strengthens us in faith, and in addition instructs us and teaches us what we lack and also gives us advice in time of need."

Luther denounced the compulsory Roman Catholic sacrament of penance as “making a torture of confession.” On the other hand, as one commentator states: “He retained private confession as a salutary and blessed ordinance, particularly on account of the special consolation brought the individual Christian by the private absolution connected intimately with confession.”

Let it be emphasized once again, that whether it be private confession or general, public confession in the service, whether direct to God or indirectly through the confessor, the principal reason for either mode of confession is to receive absolution or forgiveness from our merciful God through the merits of Jesus Christ our Savior. In paper delivered several years ago on confession and absolution, Dr. Siegbert Becker wrote: “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 a 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 always the same absolution that is pronounced.”

Luther did not advocate private confession as a command from God. His primary interest lay in the repentant sinner going to God, seeking His mercy and receiving His forgiveness in Christ his Savior. But he did advocate private confession as one means of seeking God’s forgiveness. Luther was appalled by the abuses of private confession in the Roman Catholic Church just as he would be today in reading this recent newspaper article which states:

“Pope John Paul, depicting a world shattered to its very foundations and threatened by social evils, told Roman Catholics to seek forgiveness through the church and not directly from God. In a major document on the need for confession of sin, the pontiff laid down guidelines for the world’s nearly 800 million Roman Catholics on the purpose of confessing sins to priests. The document, titled “Reconciliation and Penance” is aimed at reinforcing the importance of the sacrament of penance, also referred to as the sacrament of reconciliation or simply confession. The document is officially known as an apostolic exhortation, meaning an authoritative papal statement.”

“The restoration of a proper sense of sin is the first way of facing the grave spiritual crisis looming over man today... There are good grounds for hoping that a healthy sense of sin will once again flourish, especially in the Christian world and in the church,” the pope wrote. “The document stresses individual accountability for wrongdoing and tells Catholics to seek forgiveness through the church rather than directly from God.”

It appears that nothing has changed in regard to private confession in the Roman Catholic Church. The abuses remain. Private confession is made mandatory by papal authority. “Seek forgiveness through the church, rather than directly from God.” Luther fought against such commandments of men. He wanted people to see private confession not as a torture but as an intimate, personal assurance of God’s forgiveness in Christ.

How can we salvage private confession in the same manner in which Luther viewed it? What are some

Practical Suggestions Toward Developing and Encouraging Confession

If you recall, Luther’s reasons for encouraging private confession were given by him in this order: 1. The absolution or forgiveness given by another (priest, pastor, neighbor) in God’s stead. This was Luther’s chief point. 2. Private confession gives opportunity to instruct the people and hear what they believe, teach them to pray, etc. 3. God’s Word is present to comfort and strengthen us in faith and give us advice in time of need. All of his reasons are sound and are based on the scriptural principle of using God’s Word to comfort, instruct, train, and strengthen faith. Luther believed that private confession, in particular preceding the reception of the Lord’s Supper, offered the opportunity to use the Word in these ways.

However, it is apparent that the form of private confession Luther urged be retained, has, for the most part been lost. In most of our churches, private confession has been replaced by the general confession in the Sunday morning service. Even “The Order of the Confessional Service” pages 46-49 in *The Lutheran Hymnal*,

is rarely used. A number of reasons have been offered for the demise of private confession. Pastor Mark Jeske, in his paper "The Practice of Private Confession and Absolution in the Lutheran Church", wrote:

“Why did the practice of private confession disappear? There is probably no single overwhelming reason; some guesses would include the changes undergone in American Lutheranism—German to English, rural to urban, multiple parishes to single parish, small parish to larger parish. The pastor is no longer the authority figure in the community that he used to be, and can no longer count on his word as law. As America’s materialism and material possessions increased, there was an accompanying increase in a feeling of individualism, doing it my way. There also seems a greater willingness these days on the part of the pastor to give the members the benefit of the doubt in the question of worthiness in receiving the Supper; the *examinatio* is a thing of the past.”

From the articles I researched, the general consensus was that private confession in the form Luther viewed and practiced it is a thing of the past. This does not mean that the substance of the private confessional has been lost. In 1928, Pastor George Luecke wrote in the *Theological Monthly*: “Private confession and absolution has, in the course of time, fallen largely into disuse also in our Lutheran Church, and public, or general confession has taken its place.” However, he goes on to say: “But I believe that, while the form has been lost, the substance of the private confessional ... has been largely retained in our Lutheran congregations. Our pastors are still, in a large measure, looked upon as spiritual fathers and advisers by their members and are freely consulted as such in questions of conscience and other spiritual difficulties. And this certainly is a form of “confessional.” Whether or not his words are equally true in our ministry today is a question for which each of us may have differing answers and opinions.

In fact, that may also be true in regard to the second part of this paper and the questions: How can we salvage private confession? What are some practical suggestions toward developing and encouraging it? When this topic was assigned to me, one of my first reactions was: Do we want to salvage private confession? Do we want to develop and encourage it in the same form in which Luther viewed and practiced it? And then, still another question: Can we salvage private confession?

I am not sure we can, not in Luther’s form. Down through the years it has become increasingly difficult due to the many changes that have taken place, some of which were mentioned before. But one thing has not changed and that is the Word. It is the Word that leads the sinner to confess his sins. It is the Word that forgives sins, comforts, instructs, trains, and strengthens faith.

As we use the Word, what different forms and ways might be suggested toward developing and encouraging private confession? High on the list, I believe, is gaining the trust and confidence of members to seek spiritual counsel and advice from their pastors, to be assured that what is confessed in private will remain private and confidential. Our people should be made aware of this in the sermon, Bible class, confirmation class, Sunday School and day school. They should know that we care, that we bear their burdens in love, that we desire to bring them the healing balm of God’s Word.

In a sermon on private confession, one pastor put it in these words:

“Maybe you have a special problem. Perhaps you have done something that weighs very heavily on your conscience. Some nights you can’t sleep, worrying about the skeletons in your closet. It could be that right now you are living in a relationship that bothers you. You wonder whether you’re doing right, or you’re sure that you aren’t, and you’re sick inside because you’re afraid that God might not ever forgive you. Maybe you think that you’ve committed the sin against the Holy Ghost, because you don’t feel the faith you should feel, because you do things you know you should not do.

Don’t go on like this. Come and talk to me. Confess to what’s troubling you. You don’t have to, but I think it would be good to get it off your chest. I promise to listen until you finish your story. I won’t laugh at you, and I won’t rant and rave at you. I’ll tell you the truth, because I love you. If you’ve

done something wrong, I'll tell you. I'll tell you just how bad it is. You'd expect me to, wouldn't you? You wouldn't want me to kid you, would you? At the same time I'll also tell you that there is no wrong, no sin, too big for Jesus to wash away. I'll tell you that He hung on the accursed tree for the smallest or the biggest mistake you've ever made. I'll tell you what He expects of you after He has forgiven you. Won't you come and see me? It's not that my ears are itching to hear about the dirt in your life. It's that this private confession may help to make you surer of your forgiveness through Christ and can bring relief to your troubled heart. Remember that what you tell me stays with me. It won't go out of my office. It's your business and mine, because it is God's business. It's nobody else's business. When you need me, the door is open for your private confession." (*The Concordia Pulpit*, 1958, Pages 509-510)

While I am not suggesting that we develop and encourage sickness to promote private confession, many a private confession has emerged from the sickbed. When members become ill or face a serious operation they sometimes express the feeling that God is punishing them for their sins, that He has withdrawn His love from them. In visiting members under such circumstances we have no idea that in some cases the visit would turn out to be a private confession. What a wonderful opportunity to give that person the comforting assurance of God's great love and forgiveness in Christ!

How can we salvage private confession? What are some practical suggestions toward developing and encouraging it? A few suggestions have been given. I am sure there are others we may add. As far as salvaging private confession in the form in which Luther viewed and practiced it, I believe this would be difficult to attain. However, the important thing to remember, as Luther did, that in whatever form or manner in which private confession is practiced, the penitent sinner be given the comforting assurance of his Savior, "Your sins are forgiven.