

PRIVATE CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION: A HIDDEN TREASURE

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## **Abstract**

The topic of this thesis is private confession and absolution. Looking around at WELS churches today, one can see that private confession and absolution has largely fallen out of practice. Is this good? Is this bad? Is private confession and absolution something the WELS would want to reinstitute? These are questions that I look at in the paper. The methodology of the paper is a simple three part study. 1) A scriptural study on private confession and absolution. 2) A church history study on private confession and absolution. 3) A practical study on private confession and absolution.

The results of the study were as follows: 1) While nowhere in Scripture is private confession and absolution commanded, Scripture clearly supports the practice. 2) Our Lutheran church fathers treasured the practice of private confession and absolution and stressed the importance of it in their writings and their practice. 3) As a synod, we need to do a better job of instructing our people about the practice and benefits of private confession and absolution. Not every church needs to practice private confession and absolution, but every church should know about the practice.

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## Introduction

During the mid 1990's, a trial took center stage in the United States. The infamous O.J. Simpson trial was labeled "the trial of the century". Whether he was guilty or not is debated by many people. However, for the sake of this illustration, let's pretend that O.J. Simpson was indeed guilty of murder. Put yourself in his shoes. You know what you have done. You know you slashed the throat of your ex-wife. You know you killed your children's mother. You know you ended the life of her friend as well. But the jury found you not guilty. You leave the courtroom a free man. What would be going on in your head? Relief? Excitement? Or maybe would it be guilt? Every time you look at your children, every time you see their faces, it reminds you of what you have done. It reminds you that you have brutally murdered their mother. While the court may have found you "not guilty", you know all too well in your heart you are guilty.<sup>1</sup> What was declared to you is not how you feel.

Transition now to people in our churches. Every week they are declared "not guilty" by God during the absolution. Every week the pastor stands up before his people and declares to them, "I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit."<sup>2</sup> This is a good and valid absolution. God does forgive sins through the general absolution. But does this fact hit home for everyone? Do they truly grasp the concept that Jesus has certainly paid for all their sins with his death on the cross? Or are there some in our churches who are like the O.J. Simpson in our illustration? Outwardly they are declared innocent, but inside they still feel guilty? They may know what God says to them but they just don't feel forgiven. They doubt if they are truly innocent.

As a result, people wrestle with their doubts. Am I really forgiven? Could God actually forgive me for all of my sins? The reason why they ask themselves this is because standing behind their guilt is sin. Real sin brings real guilt. And unfortunately, at times, nothing is done

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<sup>1</sup> Illustration given by Pastor Jerry Ewings of De Forest, WI.

<sup>2</sup> Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. *Christian Worship, A Lutheran Hymnal*. Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House. 1993. P.26

for these struggling sinners. What is done for people who struggle with their guilt, their sin? They are at times left to fend for themselves as they struggle with their guilt.

However, there are numerous things that can be done to help those members who struggle with their guilt. One simple thing that can be done is the reinstatement of private confession and absolution in our churches. Don't we already do this? Officially, yes we do. There is an order of private confession in our hymnal.<sup>3</sup> But I will maintain that this formal practice is rarely ever carried out. In an informal survey of Seminary students, as well as younger and older pastors, there was not one among them who could remember ever coming into contact with a church that formerly offered private confession and absolution.<sup>4</sup> And so while we officially agree with the teaching, we unofficially don't practice it.

Private confession and absolution can be the perfect solution to members in our churches who are struggling with their sin and guilt. It is in private confession and absolution that sin and guilt is dealt with directly on a very personal level. Most importantly, it is in private confession and absolution that a person may be fully and personally assured of what Jesus has done for them.

This thesis intends to show that the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the time to consider reinstating private confession and absolution in our churches. The thesis is divided up into three different sections. The first section is taking a scriptural look at private confession to see how God has blessed private confession throughout the Bible. The second section is a church history study of private confession to see how our Lutheran church fathers practiced this rite. And finally the third section is a practical study on private confession looking at the arguments against and the arguments for private confession.

### **Literature Review**

Private confession and absolution is a topic that has inquired the interest of many. But as Luther would advise, *ad fontes*. It was my intention to see what God had to say about confession and absolution in both the Old Testament as well as the New Testament before looking at other

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<sup>3</sup> CW Hymnal, pp. 154-155

<sup>4</sup> There was no real structure to this survey, but took place in casual conversations with classmates and Pastors

sources. What I came to understand was that God throughout the Scriptures commanded the practice of confession and absolution without prescribing a specific form in which this must take place.

After taking a thorough look at what God's Word had to say about private confession and absolution, I then turned predominantly to the time of Martin Luther and the reformers. There were some good historical books that I came across which helped to focus in on the stance of the reformers concerning private confession and absolution. Tim Wengert's book, *The Pastoral Luther*, helped especially to show what Luther thought about the practice of private confession and absolution. Ronald Rittgers' book, *The Reformation of the Keys*, gave insight about the topic from reformers such as Osiander, Melancthon, Karlstadt, and others.

Moving from the time of the Reformation, Professor Tiefel's essay, *A Comparative Study of the Principles of Confession and Absolution in the format of our Lutheran Liturgy*, gave some insight on the practice of private confession and absolution during the early stages of Lutheranism in America. This information was limited as his intention wasn't to focus on this period; however, the limited information gathered from this essay was beneficial in filling in the gap between the time of the Reformation until the current day.

The next step in researching this topic came by looking at sources who dealt with a more current view of private confession and absolution. Walther Koehler's book, *Counseling and Confession*, strove to show that there is a difference between private confession and pastoral counseling. He made the point that while there can be elements of private confession and absolution in counseling (and vice versa), it is smart and beneficial to keep the two of these practices distinct. In Professor Becker's essay, *The Doctrine and Confession and Its Application in the Work of a Christian Teacher*, he makes the case that today's version of pastoral counseling is essentially the same as private confession and absolution. Koehler would disagree with this fact as he made the point in his book that the form and intent of private confession and absolution is basically a confessional relationship and not a counseling relationship.

Finally, my research led me to questions and answers that are most certainly facing WELS pastors today. Howard Kaiser's essay, *How Can We Salvage Private Confession*, brought up two very important questions: 1) Do we want to retain a formal version of private confession

in our churches? 2) Can we? These are questions that some will disagree on.<sup>5</sup> Kaiser seemed to be of the opinion that it would be beneficial, but might be hard to implement. In his essay, *Private Confession and Sacred Absolution*, Mark Bartling makes a strong argument for reinstating private confession and absolution. He warns of the direction in which he sees churches in our country heading. One way in which the WELS can stay clear of this negative direction, in Bartling's opinion, is reinstating private confession and absolution.

The research conducted in this study was fairly limited, in view of the amount of material that is out there. But it was my intention to get a general overview of 3 different areas concerning private confession and absolution: 1) What does the Bible have to say? 2) What do our church fathers have to say? 3) What do those in the WELS have to say?

### **Scriptural Study of Private Confession and Absolution**

There is no place in Scripture God commands us to practice private confession and absolution. However, this doesn't mean that God is silent about private confession and absolution in his Word. There are numerous instances of private confession and absolution being performed throughout the Bible. In fact, God himself used this practice all the way back in the Garden of Eden.

God created a perfect world, a world free of sin. Yet, Adam and Eve brought sin into this world when they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. At this point God had every right to destroy them and cast them from his presence forever. But God showed them mercy. God sought them out. God gave Adam and Eve an opportunity to practice private confession. "Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, 'Where are you?'" (Genesis 3:8-9) God gave them a chance to repent of their sin. Yet, the first two people on this earth struggled with confessing their sins. Rather than repenting of their sins and begging for God's forgiveness, Adam and Eve played the blame game. They wanted to blame anyone but themselves for their sin. But in the end, their own answers ("and I ate it") knew their blame rested solely on themselves.

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, during Mission and Ministry at WLS, one pastor was quoted saying, "Some in our synod lament about private confession and absolution. However, it is my opinion that we still practice private confession and absolution...in our counseling."

In a sense, this was the very first time private confession and absolution took place. In a roundabout way, Adam and Eve both confessed to God what they had done. God, as their confessor, spoke to them the harsh truth of his law.

To the woman he said, “I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.” To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you,” ‘you must not eat of it’, “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.” (Genesis 3:16-19)

God spelled out to them the result of their sin. He enumerated the ways their lives would be affected. Ultimately, he told them that because they sinned against him, they would die.

But this isn't all that God spoke. God, as their confessor, didn't just preach to them the law, but rather he also gave them the gospel. “So the LORD God said to the serpent, ‘And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.’” (Genesis 3:14a,15) God comforted Adam and Eve with his promise of sending a Savior, one who would take away all of their sins. What God did back in the Garden of Eden is what all private confession and absolution contains: application of law and gospel in a very personal way.

Looking at the Old Testament, God gave his people many moral, civil, and ceremonial laws they were supposed to keep. He expected his people to fully and perfectly obey them. Yet he they didn't. They fell short. But as he showed grace and mercy to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, so too God showed grace and mercy to his people in the Old Testament. God gave his people a very specific way in which they were to confess their sins. “When anyone is guilty in any of these ways, he must confess in what way he has sinned and, as a penalty for the sin he has committed, he must bring to the LORD a female lamb or goat from the flock as a sin offering.” (Leviticus 5:5,6) His people were to orally confess how they had sinned, and then they were to bring a sacrifice to the LORD. Then, whenever a person confessed their sin and brought

the guilt offering, “the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin.” (Leviticus 5:6) God set this up as a very simple and basic form of confession and absolution.

This however isn't the only form of confession and absolution God commanded in the Old Testament. God also commanded that when a person sinned against another person, they were to confess their sin to each other. “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Say to the Israelites: When a man or woman wrongs another in any way and so is unfaithful to the LORD, that person is guilty and must confess the sin he has committed. He must make full restitution for his wrong, add one fifth to it and give it all to the person he has wronged.’” (Numbers 5:5-7) Once again God set up a very specific way in which a person was to confess their sins.

However, neither of these cases are in effect today. When we sin, God doesn't require that we bring a sin offering to the priest. When we confess our sin to the one we have wronged God doesn't require that we add a fifth to make full restitution. But we would be missing the point if think that these two cases don't apply to us today. God certainly commands us to make confession for our sins. Confession of sins is prescribed in the Bible.

How a person confesses his sins though is a matter of adiaphora. There are many different accounts in Scripture describing how a person confessed their sin. Maybe the most famous case of private confession and absolution is the account of King David and the prophet Nathan. One day, King David lustfully saw a woman named Bathsheba bathing on a rooftop. He saw her and he wanted to sleep with her. To make a long story short, David eventually committed adultery with Bathsheba and had her husband killed to cover his sin. (2 Samuel 11)

After these events happened, David knew what he had done. He knew his sin. He lusted. He committed adultery. He had Bathsheba's husband killed. But, he didn't repent of his sin. He kept his sins to himself. And all of these sins weighed heavily on David's heart. David said in one of his psalms, “When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.” (Psalm 32:3-4) This is exactly how he felt when he kept his sin and his guilt to himself. He felt pain. He felt sorrow. He felt guilt.

God saw the pain and anguish David was in, so he sent his prophet Nathan to David to preach God's Word to him. Nathan first showed David his sin. He told David the story of a rich and a poor man. The rich man stole the poor man's ewe lamb instead of using one of his many

animals to feed his traveler. David got upset at this story and said that rich man deserved to die. Immediately Nathan tells David, “You are the man! You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own.” (2 Samuel 12:7,9) Nathan showed David that he had sinned against the LORD.

David saw his sin. He knew what the prophet Nathan said was true; it was from the LORD. Therefore David confessed his sin. “I have sinned against the LORD.” (2 Samuel 12:13) There it is, private confession. All that private confession consists of is an acknowledgment of a person’s sin against God. David did just that.

After David confessed his sin, Nathan gave him the perfect response. He simply spoke God’s absolution to David. “The LORD has taken away your sin.” (2 Samuel 12:13) There it is, private absolution. All that private absolution contains is the pronouncement of God’s forgiveness for a person’s sin. Nathan did just that.

What a weight was then lifted off David’s shoulders. He was weighed down by his sin. His strength was sapped like in the heat of the summer. But then the sweet refreshing gospel was given to David. Nathan, God’s mouthpiece privately spoke to him this wonderful news. Notice then how David’s mood changed. David gave another insight into his heart when he said, “Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD’—and you forgave the guilt of my sin.” (Psalm 32:5) David was beyond joy when the LORD forgave him his sin. That is the benefit of private confession and absolution. David experienced that first hand.

Looking at Jesus’ ministry, we see he also practiced a form of private confession. It maybe wasn’t the sort of private confession that we think of, but that’s not the point. The point is that Jesus dealt personally with a person’s sin and the absolution he for their sins that he freely gives. Look at John 4 for example. Jesus entered enemy territory. He entered Samaria where he was not readily welcomed. Nevertheless, Jesus, in the town of Sychar, went to a well to get a drink during the middle of the day. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus saw an opportunity to tell this woman about the living water he offers. Jesus told her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” (John 4:10) This was a strange concept to the woman and she wondered what this living water was. Jesus told her, “Whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst.

Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” (John 4:13-14) This woman was excited to hear about such water. She was so excited that she asked Jesus to give her this water.

Jesus was getting this woman’s heart ready to receive this living water. However, before she could receive this spiritual water her Savior gives, she must first realize her need for that water. Jesus showed her that need. “He told her, ‘Go, call your husband and come back.’” (John 4:16) She responded to Jesus, “I have no husband.” (John 4:17) She spoke the truth to Jesus, but he could see right past that and straight into her heart. “Jesus said to her, ‘You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have said is quite true.’” (John 4:17) Jesus pointed out her gross sin of adultery and enforced the fact that she is a sinner. He showed her that she needed this living water.

It is my opinion that the Samaritan woman now realized that Jesus was not talking about just physical water. She now understood this was a spiritual conversation. Instead of arguing with Jesus about her sin, she acknowledged Jesus as a prophet and then asked him a spiritual question that was on her mind: “where are we to worship?” (John 4:20) Now this isn’t a confession of sins in a way we think of. She doesn’t acknowledge the fact that she is a sinner, at least in the words we have been given. But the fact that she understands this is a spiritual conversation in which the prophet Jesus pointed out her sin, coupled with the confession of faith she puts together in verse 25, (“I know that Messiah (called Christ) is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”) leads me to think there is much more going on here than just a simple conversation. Jesus was personally dealing with this woman’s sin and told her that he is the Messiah, the one who will explain everything to her. Jesus told her I can give you living water to take away your sin. Jesus personally pointed out her sin and then gave her the remedy for her sin. Private confession is nothing more than just that, applying the law and gospel in a very personal way.

What comfort this Samaritan woman must have felt. She was face to face with the promised Messiah, the Christ who gave her living water. Notice what she does when he Jesus tells her who he is. “Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people , ‘Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?’”

(John 4:28-29) She couldn't keep this message to herself. She had to share with others the good news that she had been told by Jesus.

This instance from John 4 does not indicate that formal private confession is a command by God. But it is an example of Jesus personally dealing with people and their problem of sin. And more than anything, Jesus' ministry was one of offering personal forgiveness and assurance of his forgiveness to individuals. In Luke 7, Jesus was anointed by a sinful woman, a woman whom the Pharisees believed should not even be touching Jesus. However, this fact did not deter Jesus from ministering to her. "Then Jesus said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven.'" (Luke 7:48) He gave her the most precious gift he could, the forgiveness of sins.

Or look at Matthew 9. Friends of a paralyzed man heard that Jesus was in their town. They had knowledge of the power Jesus had. So they hoped that Jesus could heal their friend. What they got was even more than they could have hoped for. Jesus told their friend, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven." (Matthew 9:2) Jesus healed the soul of the paralyzed man and gave him personal assurance that his sins were forgiven.

But maybe the greatest example of Jesus personally offering someone the forgiveness of sins can be taken from the exchange he had with the thief on the cross. Jesus hung between two condemned criminals. These were the worst of the worst. They were so sinful, that even as they were being crucified on the cross, one of the criminals couldn't help but insult the Son of God. "One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: 'Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!'" (Luke 23:39) If it was anyone else on the cross besides Jesus, he would have shouted insults right back. Yet Jesus remained silent while the other criminal defended Jesus. "Don't you fear God, since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly for we are getting what our sins deserve." (Luke 23:40,41) This criminal understood the law. He saw that he was a sinner, one who deserved God's punishment. But as he hung there next to Jesus, he saw his Savior as well. He confessed his faith, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." (Luke 23:42) Jesus responded, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." (Luke 23:42) Jesus personally assured this criminal that his sin was paid for and that his eternal home is a paradise awaiting him.

This is what private confession and absolution is all about. It is about assuring a person that their sins are forgiven. It is personal, leaving no room for doubt. Jesus practiced this all

throughout his ministry. He left no doubt for people. Over and over he told them, your sins are forgiven; you will be with me in paradise. This is the message Jesus proclaimed. This also is the message he wanted his mouthpieces to proclaim to the world.

Jesus would not physically be on this earth forever. He understood that. That is why he equipped his followers with the tools to carry out his mission when he left this earth. He started with his disciples. After Jesus questioned them about who they thought he was, Peter gave an awesome confession: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” (Matthew 16:16) Jesus commended Peter and then told his disciples that on this confession the foundation of the church will be laid. Then notice what comes right after that. “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” (Matthew 16:19) Jesus has just told his disciples what his church would be founded on, and then he gave them the tools to carry it out. Jesus gave to his disciples the keys and authority to announce or withhold the forgiveness of sins.

As we see throughout the remainder of the New Testament, the early Christian church understood their mission with the keys. On Pentecost, Peter declared to the crowd, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts. 2:38) Peter preached confession and absolution. He told the crowd to repent of their sins, and then receive the wonderful blessings the gospel offers. Peter, along with the first century Christians, understood the power and responsibility of the keys.

But Jesus did not just give the keys to just these first century Christians; Rather he has given it to all Christians of all times. In what is known as the forgiveness chapter of the Bible, Jesus spoke to his disciples and to us when he said, “I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” (Matthew 18:18) Think about that privilege Jesus is giving to his people. We have the blessing of telling someone the good news that Jesus has paid for their every sin. Think about that responsibility Jesus is giving to his people. We have authority to withhold forgiveness from someone if they are unrepentant of their sin. Jesus has given us the keys. This is our mission: to

proclaim law and gospel. Or as David Peters put in his paper, “The administration of the keys of the kingdom of heaven is the Church’s mission.”<sup>6</sup>

And this mission is such an important mission that Jesus reminds us of it again after his death. “Jesus said, ‘Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.’ And with that he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.’” (John 20:21-23) Repeatedly Jesus gave his church the task of using the keys. He expects us to use them. He expects us to be faithful with them.

One way in which we can do this is through private confession and absolution in our churches. Scripture is clear that confession and absolution played a prominent role in Jesus’ ministry. Scripture is clear that confession and absolution is to play a prominent role in a believers’ life. Scripture is clear about the benefits of confession and absolution. And there are some who would argue that private confession and absolution is the most effective means of carrying out confession and absolution. “Private absolution was the believer’s most effective defense against the great storm winds of Satan. It was for this reason that Christ had instituted the keys.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Church History Study of Private Confession and Absolution**

A historical study on any topic can be difficult. What always must be taken into account is the legitimacy of the source as well as the bias the source brings with it. This being said, it was my intention to make this study as well rounded and unbiased as possible.

The first historical example to consider is Tertullian (160-225 AD). He was a prolific author, who has often been touted as the Father of Latin Christianity. A study of Tertullian shows that he practiced the rite of private confession already back in his day. Unfortunately, his practice was flawed. Tertullian is the man who introduced the idea of “penance” into private confession and absolution. He introduced the idea that after a person confessed their sin, in order to receive absolution, they must do some sort of outward work to pay for their sin. Following Tertullian’s

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<sup>6</sup> David Peters. “Augustana XXV.” Paper presented to the SE Wisconsin District. 8 (April, 1997): P. 2

<sup>7</sup> Ronald Rittgers. *The Reformation of the Keys*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. 2004.

lead, Pope Callistus (217-222 AD) made penance into a universal application of private confession.<sup>8</sup>

Jump ahead a hundred years or so and Augustine of Hippo, a Latin philosopher and theologian, is also recorded as one who practiced private confession and absolution in his ministry. During the Middle Ages, the Celtic monks even had developed their own penitential system. Their system was entirely private. There was absolute confidentiality. The person confessing was required to confess both mortal and venial sins, and the person was able to go as frequently as they liked.

As history moved to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, it is recorded that private confession was the norm in the Western Church. Christians had universally accepted this as a legitimate practice in the church. But following the 12<sup>th</sup> century, a major problem occurred with the rite of private confession and absolution. It is in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century that private confession is demanded of everyone in the church. It was declared during the Fourth Lateran Council, “all the faithful of both sexes shall after they have reached the age of discretion faithfully confess all their sins at least once a year to their own (parish) priest and perform to the best of their ability the penance imposed.”<sup>9</sup> After this decree from the council, Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas more fully developed the doctrine of confession and penance. He developed the Catholic theology into saying, “If a sin is to be forgiven, it must first of all be confessed. Before it can be confessed, it must be remembered; and before it can be remembered, it must be recognized as sin.”<sup>10</sup>

Private confession has a long history in the early church. Unfortunately, much of the practice was corrupted by false teachers such as Tertullian, Pope Callistus, the Celtic monks, Thomas Aquinas, along with others.

Enter the Reformation age, and many things began to change. Martin Luther specifically saw a major problem with the Roman sacrament of penance. Theses number one out of ninety five dealt directly with confession. Luther said, “When Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said,

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<sup>8</sup> Much of the historical info was found in Prof. Tiefel’s essay

<sup>9</sup> Peters, 7

<sup>10</sup> Peters, 9

“Repent”, he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”<sup>11</sup> Luther wanted to enforce the point that confession was to be the focus of a Christian’s life. He wanted the people to know this was something Jesus commanded.

Luther saw the Roman Church abusing the sacrament of penance. As noted above during the Fourth Lateran Council it was required of all Catholics to go to confession once a year. Luther completely disagreed with this. He said that making private confession to your parish priest was not required or commanded by God in the Bible. He said that there is only one person who we are required to confess to, and that is God himself. Any other requirement was wrong.

The Fourth Lateran Council also declared it was necessary for a person to confess all their sins to their priest. Personally, Luther struggled with this concept. For a period in his life, he tried to obey it. But his conscience was so sensitive that he would spend countless hours trying to recall all his sins so he could confess them to a priest. He would realize his inability to recall all his sins and would fear God’s punishment for his failure. But as he studied Scripture, he saw that God did not command the enumeration of all sins to a priest. Instead, what Luther told people was to first confess all their sins to God. Then because it was impossible to remember all of your sins, confess your sins that are burdening your conscience to the priest. Melancthon agreed with Martin Luther on this teaching and wrote in the Augsburg Confession, “Lutherans teach that private absolution ought to be retained in the churches, although in confession an enumeration of all sins is not necessary. For it is impossible to do so according to the Psalm (19:12): “Who can discern his error?”<sup>12</sup> And so, while Luther agreed with the concept of private confession, he didn’t agree with the teaching that a person is required to confess all of their sins to a priest.

Luther also disagreed that a person must make an oral confession to a priest. Catholic teaching had once again erred when they stated a person must orally confess their sins to a priest. Luther said this is not true. He made the point that you can confess your sins to an ordinary Christian who is not a priest. “Indeed where there is no priest, each individual Christian – even a

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<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther. *Luther’s Works: The Career of the Reformer*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press. 1957. Vol. 31:25, P. 80

<sup>12</sup> Robert Kolb. Timothy Wengert. *The Book of Concord*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press. 2000. P. 44

woman or child – does as much. For any Christian can say to you, “God forgives you your sins, in the name, “ etc., and if you can accept that word with a confident faith, as though God were saying it to you, then in that same faith you are surely absolved.”<sup>13</sup> Luther said you don’t have to go to a priest to privately confess your sins. He realized that if oral confession was mandatory, the priest would be set up to be a judge. It would be as if the power of the absolution depended on the power of the priest. Luther correctly disagreed with this and made the point that the confessor is just the ear and mouthpiece of Christ. For a person confesses to Christ and is absolved by Christ.

Another problem Luther saw with the Roman sacrament of penance is the demand for heartfelt contrition. Catholics demanded that before a person can be fully absolved of their sin, there must be heartfelt contrition. The problem that Luther saw with this was who can look into another person’s heart and see if they are truly sorry or not. Luther knew this was impossible and taught that heartfelt contrition is between God and the person confessing.

The final, and maybe the most grotesque of the errors of Catholic theology on private confession that upset Luther, was the demand for satisfactory compensation done for a person’s sins. Catholics taught that before a person can be absolved, they must do penance for their sins. Luther saw this as an abomination of the gospel. The absolution was turning into good works. This upset Luther because he saw the Roman way of doing penance as a way of invading lay consciences with a false gospel of human achievement.

All of these misuses of private confession and absolution worried Luther. He saw what the doctrine of penance had done, and so he knew he had to properly instruct people about the true nature of confession.

However, even as he disagreed with Rome’s teaching and execution of private confession and absolution, Martin Luther still saw the benefit of practicing it. Mentioned above was Luther’s struggle as a monk to remember all of his sins to confess. But not all of his experiences

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<sup>13</sup>Edwin Lehman. “The Absolution in the Theology and Practice of the Reformation.” Paper presented to the South Central District. 25 (April, 1988): P. 5

with private confession as a monk were negative. Especially when Johann von Staupitz was his confessor, Luther enjoyed private confession.

Luther had struggled mightily in confession as a monk, but his experience had not been completely negative. His strong support for a reformed version of confession grew out of the deep consolation he had received from the sacrament of penance, especially while Staupitz was his confessor. Behind the reformer's well-known disdain for the sacrament of penance lay a desire to redeem what he took to be the greatest boon God had provided to the troubled conscience: private confession. It alone enabled the gospel to be applied directly to the individual. Better than any other medium, it conveyed the vitally important *pro me* aspect of the gospel.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, it is often noted that part of Luther's "discovery" of justification was due to private confession and absolution. Luther often wanted to find a remedy for his struggles of conscience. He wanted to find a way to ease the burden the sacrament of penance had laid on him. This drove him to the Scripture. This drove him to God's Word where he found rest and peace, not from penance a person performs, but from the grace and love of Christ.

While Luther found grace and peace from the gospel alone, he didn't throw away the concept of private confession and absolution. He completely disagreed with Rome's practice of it, but still believed that private confession and absolution was an effective way of providing a person with the personal assurance of the gospel message. Therefore, Luther decided to reform the Catholic teaching of penance. Gone was the requirement that everyone must go to private confession at least once a year. Gone was the demand that a person must enumerate all their sins. Gone was the stipulation that private confession must be an oral confession made to a priest. Gone was the false teaching of earning your forgiveness by performing penance. In its place, Luther placed his reformed version of private confession and absolution.

His reformed version of private confession and absolution stressed the simplicity of a person's relationship with God. Luther often would have an examination of faith, which included knowledge of the catechism. However, Luther noted that this wouldn't be required of everyone, maybe just once in a person's life. He also included an examination of a person's outward moral

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<sup>14</sup> Rittgers, 81

conduct in his private confession and absolution. There was an acknowledgement of one's depravity before God. There was a voluntary confession of private sins. Most importantly, there was free and full absolution. This is where Luther saw the benefit of retaining private confession and absolution. "For we also keep confession, especially because of the absolution, which is the Word of God that the power of the keys proclaims to individuals by divine authority. It would therefore be wicked to remove private absolution from the church. And those who despise private absolution understand neither the forgiveness of sins nor the power of the keys."<sup>15</sup>

Luther instituted this form of private confession and absolution for all Christians to use whenever they wished. However, one way in which he envisioned it being carried out was as a sort of pre-communion announcement. A person would have the opportunity to come and talk with the pastor and would have the chance to confess any of their sins that was bothering their consciences. But Luther made sure not to bind anyone's conscience on the regularity of this meeting. He made it a point to assure the people that it was permissible to attend communion without first meeting with the pastor and confessing your sins. This reformed version of private confession that Luther set up was practiced up until the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

This form of private confession and absolution was a personal way of preaching law and gospel to a person. "To bind and loose is clearly nothing else than to proclaim and apply the law and gospel. For what is it to loose, if not to announce the forgiveness of sins before God? What is it to bind, except to withdraw the gospel and to declare the retention of sins?"<sup>16</sup> This form of private confession and absolution was also a personal way to apply the keys Christ gave us. "He has given us this remedy, the key which binds, so that we might not remain too confident in our sins, arrogant, barbarous, without God, and the key which looses, that we should not despair in our sins. Thus aided we should stay on a middle road, between arrogance and faintheartedness, in genuine humility and confidence."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Walter Koehler. *Counseling and Confession*. St Louis: Concordia Publishing House. 1982. P. 43

<sup>16</sup> Siegbert Becker. "The Doctrine of Confession and Its Application in the Work of a Christian Teacher." A paper presented to the Winnebago teachers conference. 9 (February, 1979): P. 4

<sup>17</sup> Becker, 4

Luther's main reason for private confession was for the personal assurance a person received of the forgiveness of their sins in the absolution. "We must have much absolution, so that we may strengthen our fearful consciences and despondent hearts against the devil. Therefore no one should forbid confession."<sup>18</sup> Luther saw this form of absolution as a way to help timid consciences. When someone struggled with forgiveness, when they wondered if they were truly forgiven, private confession and absolution would be there to guarantee that person of the objective truth of what Jesus has done for them. This form of absolution certainly provided pastoral care to those who needed it. It had proved to be a cure without equal for distressed consciences; it was good for the soul, and personally assured a person with God's forgiveness in Christ. For these reasons, our church fathers agreed with Luther that private confession and absolution ought to be retained. "Confession or Absolution ought by no means to be abolished in the Church, especially on account of (tender and) timid consciences."<sup>19</sup>

Luther also wanted private confession and absolution to be retained so that he may continue to make use of it and enjoy its blessings. Luther admitted he couldn't live without private confession and absolution. "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. No one knows what it can give unless he has struggled much and frequently with the devil. I would have been strangled by the devil long ago if confession had not sustained me."<sup>20</sup> Luther knew the harm the Catholic Church had done to this form of confession, but for him, the benefits of retaining private confession and absolution far outweighed the stigma that this form of confession had attached to it.

In fact, a number of Christian theologians during the Reformation Age preferred private confession and absolution over general confession and absolution. Along with Luther,

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<sup>18</sup> Rittgers, 82

<sup>19</sup> Peters, 12

<sup>20</sup> Katherine Lualdi. Anne Thayer. *Penitence in the Age of the Reformations*. London: Ashgate Publishing, 2000. P. 51

Melanchthon agreed that people would benefit far greater from a personal pronouncement of forgiveness over against a general pronouncement of forgiveness. It was Luther's opinion that those with strong faith can receive absolution directly from heaven. However, Luther thought few people, including himself, possessed this kind of faith. Rather, what Luther and others drew strength from were the personal words of absolution spoken by the priest. With all this being said, it is good to note that Luther also did say that both forms of confession, private and general, ought to be retained in the church. For much absolution is needed. But he also has said that in view of a human's great need for God's mercy, anyone who abandoned private confession and absolution could not be considered a Christian.<sup>21</sup>

Therefore Luther encouraged his fellow colleagues to continue to teach private confession and absolution, and he continued to encourage his followers to practice it. "If you are a Christian, you should be glad to run more than 100 miles for confession."<sup>22</sup> One way in which Luther taught about private confession and absolution was by adding a liturgical form of confession to the catechism. He did this to make confession part of the liturgy to help guide lay people in making their confession to the church. A couple of examples of Luther's confession are:

I, a poor human being, confess and lament to you before God my Lord that I am a sinful and vulnerable person. I do not keep God's commands. I do not believe the gospel fully. I do nothing good. I cannot endure adversity. In particular I have committed this or that particular sin which weighs down my conscience. Therefore I ask that you would speak forgiveness to me on behalf of God and console me with God's Word.<sup>23</sup>

I confess before God and you that I am a poor sinner and that I am full of all the sins of unbelief and blasphemy against God. I sense also that God's Word is not bringing forth fruit in me. I hear it and do not receive it earnestly. I do not show my neighbor the works of love. I am angry, hateful, and jealous toward him. I am impatient, greedy, and

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<sup>21</sup> Koehler, 43

<sup>22</sup> James Tiefel, "A Comparative Study of the Principles of Confession and Absolution in the format of our Lutheran Liturgy." Paper presented to the Michigan District. 10 (June, 1987): P. 5

<sup>23</sup> Rittgers, 111

disposed to all manner of spite. For this reason my heart and conscience are heavy-laden. I want very much to be set free from my sins. I ask you would strengthen my small faith and console my weak conscience through the divine Word and promise.<sup>24</sup>

What would Luther say today if he saw our practice of private confession and absolution? Judging by the high regard he and others gave to this practice, I'm guessing he would not be all that pleased. He treasured private confession and absolution because of the benefits and the assurance that God gives in the absolution. He and other theologians during the Reformation were of the opinion that private confession and absolution ought to be retained among God's people for all times.

What about after Luther? What was the sentiment on private confession and absolution in the Lutheran church? Well, the 100 years or so after Luther are pretty quiet on the topic of private confession and absolution. But there was an event that had a devastating effect on religion during the early to mid 1600's. For thirty years, from 1618-1648, a war broke out in Europe doing much damage to the religion in these lands. For pastors who were not killed during this war, they were driven into exile and poverty. Basically, a whole generation of people grew up without religious instruction. This had a major impact on private confession and absolution in Lutheran churches during this time. Prior to the Thirty Years War, virtually all Lutherans attended private confession and absolution. After the Thirty Years War, the practice was basically dead in Europe.

If we move across the Atlantic and a couple of hundred years later, we see that the practice of private confession and absolution was not popular among Lutherans in America either. During the early stages of Lutheranism in America, most lay people failed to practice private confession and absolution in their churches. But this doesn't mean there weren't advocates for private confession and absolution. In fact, it is quite the opposite. We see three prominent pastors among Lutherans in America who supported the practice of private confession and absolution.

The first of these pastors is Henry Melchior Muehlenberg (1711-1787). Muehlenberg was integral in founding the first Lutheran church body in North America. He was sent to America as

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<sup>24</sup> Rittgers, 111

a missionary for colonists in Pennsylvania who requested a pastor. When Muehlenberg got to America he noticed a very undisciplined land. As a result, he was determined to restore order to a land without discipline. His means of doing that was private confession. He began to implement the teaching of private confession and absolution in his churches and also shaped the practice for churches in America. “Henry Melchior Muehlenberg arrived in Philadelphia in 1742. More than any other man Muehlenberg shaped the course which confession/absolution has had—and still has—in our churches.”<sup>25</sup>

The second big name pastor who supported the practice of private confession and absolution was William Loehe (1808-1872). Now, while Loehe did not become a pastor in America, he did a great amount for the churches in America. He was instrumental in sending pastors from Germany over to America to serve the people there. To sum up William Loehe’s opinion of private confession, he says, “the worst private confession is better than the best general confession.”<sup>26</sup> It was important to Loehe that the churches in America retained the practice of private confession and absolution.

The third pastor who was an advocate of private confession and absolution was C.F.W. Walther (1811-1887). Walther is regarded as the greatest theologian in the Missouri Synod. Walther often struggled for the retention of private confession and absolution in the church. “Walther’s 1856 Kirchen-Agende has neither a general confession nor an exhortation and in the first Saxon constitution we find this clause: Where private confession is not in use, the pastor is to strive through teaching and instruction to introduce it.”<sup>27</sup> For Walther and other founding fathers of the Missouri Synod, private confession and absolution was to always be retained in the Lutheran church. “The fathers of the Missouri Synod were the sons of German pastors who scorned everything but the private confessional.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Tiefel, 7

<sup>26</sup> Tiefel, 7

<sup>27</sup> Tiefel, 8

<sup>28</sup> Tiefel, 8

However, in the decades and century that followed Walther, the practice began to fade away. One reason why the practice began to stop was the introduction of general confession and absolution into the church. Looking at the ministry of Friedrich Lochner, we see this playing a significant role.

Three times in Lochner's ministry at Trinity Milwaukee replacing private confession with public confession became an issue. As far as Lochner was concerned, general confession had replaced private confession in many Lutheran churches as a result of Rationalism. However, in 1866 Lochner did permit the introduction of general confession on practical grounds, that with the growing number of communicant members, the exclusive use of private confession made more and more demands upon the time and strength of the pastor. Thus the general confession soon took its place alongside of, but not replacing private confession.<sup>29</sup>

It was for the practical sake of not having enough time or energy to hear the confessions of growing church that Lochner allowed the public confession to become a part of the service. However, notice it was never his intention to replace private confession with general confession. Yet his intention wasn't what came to be. Many people began to abandon private confession nonetheless.

A second reason why people stopped coming to private confession was that pastoral counseling had replaced private confession and absolution. "Some felt that despite the strong and consistent witness of the Lutheran Confessions, individual confession and absolution was retained in name only. For all practical purposes the church had substituted pastoral counseling for individual confession and the reception of Holy Communion for absolution."<sup>30</sup> As for the relationship between private confession and counseling, we will discuss it more in detail in the third part of the thesis.

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<sup>29</sup> Bartling, 6

<sup>30</sup> Koehler, 52

Overall, looking at theologians with Lutheran backgrounds, it is clear to see that many of them supported the practice of private confession and absolution. It was of their opinion that this practice ought to be retained and practiced not only in their day, but also in the future as well.

### **Practical Study on Private Confession and Absolution**

I believe WELS today can do a better job instructing our lay people about private confession and absolution. Our leaders can help point God's people to private confession and absolution and show them the benefits and blessings that come from this practice. I believe that now is the time for our churches to once again seriously consider instituting formal private confession and absolution in our churches.

Yet, this is not everyone's opinion. There are arguments that some make against reinstating private confession and absolution in our churches. One argument is that the teaching of private confession and absolution remains too ambiguous. You ask a lay person, "what do you think about private confession?", and what is the answer you will get? "That's what the Catholics do." However, the blame for the teaching of private confession being too ambiguous doesn't rest with our lay people, but rather with our leaders who have failed to adequately instruct them about private confession and absolution. Therefore, this is not a legitimate excuse.

Another argument against reinstating private confession and absolution comes from Dr. Siegbert Becker. Dr. Becker is of the opinion that private confession is a good thing, but since it is a matter of adiaphora, it is something that we are to form our own opinions and withhold from imposing our opinions on others. Becker says, "It is also rather obvious that the confession spoken of here was the formal, private confession to the pastor, which has in large measure disappeared, at least in any fixed liturgical form, from our section of the Lutheran Church. Whether this is good or bad must be a matter of private opinion since it is not commanded by God."<sup>31</sup> I understand what Dr. Becker is saying, but I don't necessarily agree with him. I do believe that a formal institution of private confession and absolution is a matter of adiaphora. I don't by any means think that WELS should mandate its churches to practice this formal rite. What I disagree with is his statement that we should keep this matter to private opinion. I believe this is exactly why the practice of private confession and absolution has almost been lost in our

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<sup>31</sup> Becker, 2

churches. Few people know about it. Few people truly understand the purpose and blessing of it. And so while this practice should never be commanded nor forbidden, this practice is nothing to keep silent about.

Another argument against the institution of private confession and absolution is that informal private confession and absolution is just as effective. “While the formal use of private confession as a part of our liturgical practice is very rare in our church and perhaps non-existent, yet there is and there ought to be a great deal of informal private confession and absolution.”<sup>32</sup> I couldn’t agree more with the notion that informal private confession ought to be practiced and is effective when it is practiced. But I don’t understand why we have to limit ourselves to one or the other. We can have both formal and informal private confession. Both are effective and bring forth good blessings.

Maybe one of the biggest reasons today that a formal private confession and absolution is basically absent from our churches is because not all of our pastors are on board. I’ve heard it said that after a while, the congregation begins to take on the pastor’s personality. If this is true, trying to implement formal private confession and absolution without the pastor on board will be almost impossible. It is up to the pastor to enlighten his congregation to the blessings of private confession and absolution. It is up to him to let his congregation know that he is interested in a ministry of pastoral care which includes private confession and absolution. “Generally the congregation can do little to maintain or introduce the practice of private confession if the pastor opposes it. On the other hand, if the pastor wants to use private confession in the care of souls he will usually succeed to a certain extent. With the Lutheran teaching on private confession as a basis, he is free to give unopposed instruction concerning it. Thus a positive attitude of the pastor toward private confession is essential in the practice of it.”<sup>33</sup> We will take a look at how a pastor can implement private confession in his church later in the paper.

Looking at another reason against reinstating private confession and absolution in our churches is the fact that general confession and absolution has by and large replaced private

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<sup>32</sup> Becker, 7

<sup>33</sup> Koehler, 53

confession and absolution. How can we attract people to private confession and absolution when general confession and absolution is offered? This is the key question. It was a question that was also on the mind of the Reformers as well. Ronald Rittgers gives us this insight from the Reformers when he says, “Given that most believed the individual encounter between pastor and confessant was to be preferred, how could one expect attendance at private confession if forgiveness could also be obtained through general absolution?”<sup>34</sup> General confession and absolution played a large role in diminishing the practice of private confession and absolution. Does this mean we should get rid of general confession and absolution so that our people will come to private confession and absolution? Absolutely not. That would be a tragic error, an error Osiander fell into back in Nuremburg during the Reformation.<sup>35</sup>

What this is identifying is the truth that many people won’t come to private confession and absolution if it is offered because they went to general confession and absolution. This isn’t wrong. It’s perfectly acceptable to not go to private confession if you have already confessed your sins in the general confession and absolution at church. General confession and absolution certainly convicts people of sin and then assures them of forgiveness. But does general confession and absolution always accomplish the purpose for which it is designed? Is every single person sitting in the pews on Sunday morning completely convicted of their sins and then assured of their forgiveness? Walter Koehler doesn’t seem to think so. He says, “Often, acknowledging your sins in vague terms does not cut to the heart and may be relatively painless.”<sup>36</sup> But it isn’t just the confession part which might get overlooked, but it may also be the absolution which isn’t received with the heart of faith. There may be some who sit in the pews on Sunday morning who are struggling with their sin, they confess their sin, and then as the pastor announces to them the forgiveness won by Jesus, they close their ears because their guilt

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<sup>34</sup> Rittgers, 217

<sup>35</sup> Much of the information about the Nuremburg controversy was found in “The Reformation of the Keys”. Two of Osiander’s biggest errors were: 1) He didn’t believe the practice of general confession and absolution in a church service was biblical. 2) He believed that absolution was a sacrament because it had to be done with the laying on of hands.

<sup>36</sup> Koehler, 45

still weighs on them.<sup>37</sup> A perfect solution to help them with their guilt could be private confession and absolution where a pastor can apply specific law and gospel to their hearts.

Another reason why private confession and absolution might not be practiced in our church is the stigma that “it is too Catholic.”<sup>38</sup> “What often happened among Lutherans, however, is that private confession became a thing of the past—so much so that some Lutherans think of it as exclusively Roman Catholic.”<sup>39</sup> For many people when they are asked about private confession, their immediate knee jerk reaction is, “that’s what Catholics do”. They are right, this is what many Catholics do. Unfortunately, as we have studied, they don’t do it well. They make demands of confession that are not scriptural and set up the priests as judges of a person’s heart.

This may be a fear of some today. They may fear the potential fact that the pastor will be set up to be a judge of people’s hearts. But maybe on the minds of more people is the thought that they don’t want the pastor to know their innermost secrets. They don’t want to unveil their darkest moments to “just a man”. They feel as if those sins are between God and themselves. Well, they are right. Those sins are just between them and God. “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.” (Psalm 51:4) If a person wants to keep those sins private between God and themselves, there is nothing wrong with that. On the other hand, if a person is struggling with the guilt of those sins, private confession and absolution would be the perfect solution to assure them of their forgiveness won by Jesus. In private confession and absolution the pastor would have the opportunity to specifically apply law and gospel as medicine for an aching soul.

So, while on one hand we want to inform our people that private confession and absolution is not merely “what the Catholics do”, we also want to stay away from the Catholic error of making this a legalistic ritual. Private confession is never to be forced upon anyone.

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<sup>37</sup> You will never be able to tell if this is true of a specific person unless you talk with them. I know that this can be the true because of personal experience.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Pastor Strey from Citrus Heights, California.

<sup>39</sup> Timothy Wengert. *Martin Luther’s Catechisms, Forming the Faith*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. 2009. P. 128

Neither is it to be required to confess all of your sins. This being said, we must make it clear to our people that private confession and absolution is scriptural and is part of our Lutheran heritage, and not merely “what the Catholics do.”

Another argument against reinstating private confession and absolution in our churches is the notion that it is already being done; it’s called counseling. Dr. Becker is of the opinion that today’s pastoral counseling is essentially the same thing as private confession.<sup>40</sup> I tend to disagree. I understand that at times, pastoral counseling and private confession go hand in hand, but this is not always the case. “Counseling can deal with sin and guilt, and often does, but does not always have this problem to deal with primarily. Confession is a form of counseling, and counseling is a form of confession, but there is a difference between them. Counseling deals with symptoms as well as their causes. Confession deals directly with the causes, sin and guilt.”<sup>41</sup>

Pastoral counseling certainly goes hand in hand with the means of grace, yet it is important to keep private confession and pastoral counseling distinct. Simply put, pastoral counseling focuses on the giving of counsel, or as Prof. John Schuetze put it in one of his counseling classes, “one of the goals of counseling is having people develop life skills.”<sup>42</sup> Pastoral counseling can deal with a variety of subjects: sickness, marriage, health, jobs, etc... On the other hand, private confession and absolution focuses simply on sin and the declaration of forgiveness. Private confession and absolution is a simple law and gospel matter. Now, there can certainly be elements of each of these mixed in the other. There will be counseling sessions where private confession and absolution happen. But there will also be counseling sessions where private confession and absolution does not happen.

Maybe the biggest argument against equating private confession and absolution with pastoral counseling is the fact that only a small percentage of congregational members are actually formally counseled by the pastor. What about the rest of the people? There are still others out in our churches who are hurting spiritually and aren’t in counseling. These Christians

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<sup>40</sup> Becker, 7

<sup>41</sup> Koehler, 56

<sup>42</sup> John Schuetze, WLS Counseling Professor

maybe have their life in order. They don't really need any counsel from their pastor, but what they do need from their spiritual leader is some personal law and gospel application.

It is for this reason that we should seriously think about reinstating private confession and absolution to help supplement pastoral counseling. For we don't want the pastor's office to seem only as a place where counseling happens. "The pastoral office is not that of some counselor or psychotherapist. The office of the ministry is that of a pastor, a shepherd. Seelsorger our fathers called it—to care for souls. And at no better place is this seen than in the confessional. Let us not turn the Lutheran confessional booth into some counseling couch like that of the modern Protestant churches."<sup>43</sup>

Moving along, there still may be some among us who would argue that we don't preach against private confession and absolution. There is an order of private confession in our hymnal. The lesson is still taught in catechism classes. I'd agree with the fact that we don't preach against private confession and absolution. But I don't think that we necessarily preach for private confession. I don't think our lay people necessarily understand the concept of this practice. "Today the Doctrine of the Keys, Confession and Absolution, is a doctrine seldom known, and never used."<sup>44</sup> I maintain that in most cases, private confession and absolution is a short 5 minute lesson that is taught our 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders and after that is done away with. It is an order of service in the front of our hymnal in which many people don't know exists. Therefore, while private confession and absolution may be taught, it is not reinforced to the extent of it being a regular part of our Christian lives.

As a result of this, one can make the comparison between WELS today and the imperial city of Nuremburg during and after the Reformation. "Over the next several years the Nuremburg magistrates continued to support private confession, at least officially, but did little to encourage its actual implementation."<sup>45</sup> WELS supports private confession on paper. Article XI of the Augsburg Confession states, "Of Confession they teach that Private Absolution ought

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<sup>43</sup> Bartling, 4

<sup>44</sup> Bartling, 8

<sup>45</sup> Lualdi, Thayer, 67

to be retained in the churches.”<sup>46</sup> But do we actually put this into practice? I’ll once again refer to that informal survey of Seminary students and younger and older pastors who have never been part of a church where private confession and absolution has been formally offered. It is my opinion that most in WELS agree with the teaching of private confession and absolution, but fall short of carrying it out to its fullest potential.

There are a few things that can be done to help reinstitute formal private confession and absolution in our churches. But before we get to those, let’s look at why we want to bring this practice back. One of the goals of a pastor is to take care of the souls God has entrusted to him. The pastor wants to preach God’s law to his people, to show them their sin. But once the law has done its work, it is the pastor’s responsibility to assure his people of their forgiveness. This is the essential and special feature of private confession and absolution. It centers on comforting the broken hearted, giving rest to the weary, personally assuring and consoling those who may feel weighed down by their sins. Private confession and absolution is proclaiming law and gospel. And that is our calling as God’s ministers. “Our assignment as pastors, to whom the public administration of the keys has been committed by the call of the church, is to proclaim both law and gospel as clearly and as forcefully as we possibly can.”<sup>47</sup>

There are other ways of proclaiming law and gospel other than private confession and absolution. But is there a better and more personal way of assuring someone their sins are forgiven? That is a different question in which there can be multiple answers. Yet, it would be hard to argue against the fact that private confession and absolution is a very comforting and personal way of assuring someone of their forgiveness. “The practice of individual confession and absolution stands as one of the most clear and concrete applications of justification by grace.”<sup>48</sup>

One reason we should seriously consider reinstituting the practice of private confession and absolution is that we don’t want to leave people to spiritually fend for themselves. Imagine

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<sup>46</sup> Kolb, Wengert. 44

<sup>47</sup> Becker, 5

<sup>48</sup> Koehler, 38

you are a prisoner on death row. You are awaiting your execution. Then all of a sudden, you hear rumors that you have been found innocent. You hear rumors that you are going to be allowed to go free. But these are only rumors. No one has told you officially. As you wait for the jailor to open your cell door, you aren't sure if he's coming to execute you or to set you free. What a terrible and unsettling feeling that would be. Does this describe some Christians in our churches? They've heard God's Word proclaimed to them that they are innocent, but they still aren't sure if this good news is really meant for them. They are confused spiritually wondering if their sins are truly forgiven. Where can they turn to find out the truth? "But for the most part, Christians are left to fend for themselves, thirsty, sick beggars that they are, driven by guilt or shame or simply fear and uncertain where to go."<sup>49</sup> Now, I don't want to go as far as Timothy Wengert went here because I do believe that most people in our churches know they can turn to their pastor. But Wengert's point should make us think. There may be some in our congregation who are struggling with guilt and sin. There may be some who don't know where to turn. Having a time for formal private confession and absolution would be the perfect solution for these members. Through private confession and absolution, a pastor can be certain that his flock truly understands the good news of the gospel and that none of his members need to deal with uncertainty regarding the forgiveness of their sins.

The reinstatement of private confession and absolution is a matter that needs to be looked at seriously. "Individual confession and absolution, then, is not some kind of fringe matter, but it strikes at the very heart and existence of the church. Churches and pastors which do not provide opportunity for individual confession and absolution need to take a careful look at what is happening in the pastoral care of their people. Have they allowed a portion of the ministry of reconciliation entrusted to them by Christ to lie fallow and neglected?"<sup>50</sup> What does such a weak practice of private confession and absolution suggest about our ministry? Are other areas of our ministry affected by our failures to practice it? "All to be sure, would agree that the devotional life of pastors, teachers, professors, and lay people alike is sadly lacking. But can we expect it to

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<sup>49</sup> Wengert, 128. One possible answer for why Wengert has such a negative view is because he is ELCA and is afraid of where his church body is heading.

<sup>50</sup> Koehler, 46

be any different when we have allowed private confession and individual absolution to fall into disuse, when we have neglected the very heart of pastoral practice. We are the church which confesses, “It is taught among us that private absolution should be retained and not allowed to fall into disuse.”<sup>51</sup> These are questions worth pondering and considering.

If private confession and absolution is to be reinstated in WELS, there are a couple of things we need to be reminded of. First, the pastor is not a judge of someone’s soul, but rather he is God’s mouthpiece. The confessor or the pastor can only go by what the person confessing speaks. The pastor or confessor can’t look into the confessant’s heart to see if they are truly sorry or not. There is no way for us to judge a person’s heart and conscience. In the words of Veit Dietrich, a religious leader in Nuremburg during the Reformation, “The human conscience is God’s turf.”<sup>52</sup> The ideal human confessor is to be a person who has great reverence for a person’s soul and conscience. “The model evangelical confessor was to free consciences from their innate belief (*opinio legis*) that they had to merit absolution through works of the law. His central task was to assure troubled consciences that forgiveness was a gift.”<sup>53</sup> The human conscience is a very sensitive creature and is often thought of as being the most important human faculty. Because of this, the confessor or pastor will want to take extreme caution that they don’t damage a person’s conscience through private confession and absolution. For you don’t want to bind someone’s sin if they are truly repentant, and on the contrary you don’t want to loose someone’s sin if they aren’t repentant. With this all being said, it is also important to remind the people who come to private confession and absolution that their forgiveness doesn’t depend on their subjective feelings, but on God’s objective declaration of forgiveness won through Jesus Christ.

There are a few other things to be cautious of when administering private confession and absolution. One of them is the possibility of minimizing sin. Simply telling someone that their sin is “ok” is not the proper way to go about private confession and absolution. Rather it is better to tell them what they have done is a sin and then tell them Jesus has died for that sin. Absolution

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<sup>51</sup> Tiefel, 1

<sup>52</sup> Rittgers, 206

<sup>53</sup> Rittgers, 206

definitely needs to take center stage. It is important to let that member know that their sin has been taken care of by Jesus. But it is important to remember that the law still needs to be preached.

This leads to another warning when administering private confession and absolution. That warning is not to pronounce the absolution too quickly. Having someone confess their sin to you has the possibility of making both parties feel uncomfortable. Just watch one young child attempt to apologize to another young child. They both have sheepish looks on their face. Neither one makes eye contact with each other. All that either of them wants to happen is to be removed from the situation. So what happens? The one who is being apologized to quickly says “that’s ok” and then they walk away. This isn’t how private confession and absolution is to be administered. People will be bringing feelings to you that maybe they’ve kept bundled up for years. It is important for you to let them voice these feelings of regret, despair, and repentance. Let them recognize the severity of their sin. Because a pastor doesn’t want to apply the soothing message of the gospel until the truth of God’s law has done its work.<sup>54</sup>

My opinion has been made clear in this thesis on whether or not we want to reinstitute a formal version of private confession and absolution in our churches. But to be clear, I don’t think every church and every pastor needs to institute a formal order of private confession and absolution in their churches. I don’t believe that WELS should mandate this practice to happen in every church. What I do believe is that WELS and our pastors can do a much better job of informing our people about the benefits and blessings of practicing private confession and absolution. I believe that too many of our members are uninformed about this blessed practice. Therefore, we ought to at the very least inform our people about this practice, and if a set order of private confession and absolution happens in a church, rejoice.

There are different ways in which we can inform our members about private confession and absolution. Pastor Johnold Strey believes it begins with preaching. “Preach so that they see law and gospel. Preach them back to the font. Preach them up to the communion rail. Preach them toward a high value of confession. And then remember that it’s going to take some time

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<sup>54</sup> However, each situation is to be taken case by case. There are some who need to hear the gospel message immediately because the severity of God’s law has already taken place.

before those thoughts fully sink into our people's hearts and minds."<sup>55</sup> Maybe it would be possible to develop a two or three week sermon series on the practice of private confession and absolution. Maybe it means highlighting in our sermons instances where the Bible talks about confession. Whatever way a pastor wants to preach on it is just fine. The point is that it's up to the pastor to bring this to the attention of his hearers.

Another possible way to inform our people about this treasured practice is with our teaching. In regards to this approach, Pastor Strey says,

A formal Bible study might also be beneficial. Including a lesson in Bible Information Class and Catechism Class (especially when covering the keys) will help new and prospective members to realize that this is a normal and beneficial practice. Whatever study approach we use, it would be good for people to actually see the rite we would use (CW or otherwise) in advance, and to talk through or explain the rite in advance so that people know exactly what to expect.<sup>56</sup>

Take a month out of the year to teach it to your Sunday morning Bible class. Show them the order of service in the hymnal. Maybe carry out a private confession and absolution session during Bible class to help them visualize what actually happens during private confession and absolution. Teach it to the kids. Teach it in catechism class. Make sure the kids truly understand that this is a real thing; one that Lutherans hold dearly and accept.

Preach about the benefits of private confession and absolution. Teach about its heritage and use in the Lutheran Church. Spend some time on private confession and absolution. But finally, before a pastor can reasonably expect his people to begin to understand this practice, he must earn his people's trust. He needs to insure them that what is talked about in private confession and absolution is just between the confessant, the pastor, and God. What is confessed will not be held against them. It will not have a negative impact on the relationship between the pastor and the confessant. A pastor must prove his trustworthiness before he can expect his people to confide in him.

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<sup>55</sup> Pastor Strey interview

<sup>56</sup> Pastor Strey interview

## Conclusion

In the introduction, we looked at the trial of O.J. Simpson and we imagined that he was guilty. Now let's imagine that he was innocent. Imagine him walking out of the courtroom, just after being declared "not guilty" by the judge in front of the whole world. He knows he is innocent, but many in the world believe that he should be guilty. They ridicule him, harass him up until the point that he starts to wonder if he is truly innocent or not. He struggles with the fact that although he has been declared innocent, he feels guilty. How can he cope with these feelings? One thing he can do is to go back to the source, watch the footage from the courtroom and see over and over the judge declaring him "not guilty". He can be confident of the fact that he is innocent no matter what anyone else, including himself, says about him.

Members in our churches struggle with this same concept. They are declared "not guilty" by God, but yet the world, the devil, even their own sinful nature constantly ridicule and harass them. They torture consciences and lead people to wonder if they are truly innocent in God's eyes. In private confession and absolution, a pastor has the joy to take these struggling souls back to God's courtroom and once again show them God's declaration of "not guilty". In private confession and absolution, a person may be confident of the fact that he is innocent in God's eyes, no matter what the world, the devil, or even his own sinful nature says about him.

"Of Confession they teach that Private Absolution ought to be retained in the churches."<sup>57</sup> Our church fathers were correct when then put this into the Augsburg Confession. They understood the responsibility God had given to all Christians when he gave us the keys to the kingdom of heaven. They understood that confession and absolution were commanded by God in the Bible. They saw private confession and absolution as a way in which they could carry out God's command.

We too have God's Word. We also have been given the keys to the kingdom of heaven. We even have the benefit of looking back in history and seeing how our church fathers carried out God's command. We are to faithfully administer the keys we have been given. We are to learn from our church fathers and how they carried out confession and absolution. We are to strive to do whatever is necessary to care for the souls God has entrusted to us. One of the

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<sup>57</sup> Kolb, Wengert, XI, p. 45

simplest and best ways to care for the souls of 21<sup>st</sup> century Christian, is to consider reinstating formal private confession and absolution in our churches.

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## Appendix

I conducted two interviews to help supplement my research. The first interview was with Pastor Johnold Strey. The second interview was with Pastor Jerry Ewings.

### Pastor Strey

1) Do you use private confession and absolution in your ministry? If yes, how?

I did formally in my previous parish (Gloria Dei; Belmont, CA). There was a set time on the first Saturday of the month. Only once did someone come, so I discontinued it after some time. However, I still include it in pastoral counseling if the situation suggests its use. I've used the rite for private confession in CW a couple of times in counseling settings. Personally, I found its use at the end of counseling to be the most natural way to go about it.

2) In your opinion, is the WELS making the best use of private confession and absolution in our churches? Explain your answer.

I'd be uncomfortable giving a hard and fast "yes" or "no" to that questions because exactly *how* we practice confession and absolution is a matter of adiaphora. In our "low context" Western culture, where ceremony, symbolism, and ritual aren't utilized as much as in other cultures, a private rite for confession and absolution may seem unusual to a good number of people. For that reason, a slightly more informal approach, such as concluding a counseling session in the pastor's office with the rite in the hymnal, might be a good way for WELS pastors to put the benefits of private absolution to use in a context that will seem more natural to many of the people we serve. When you see the burden lifted from souls who have been weighed down by guilt, you can't help but sense that there is something psychologically powerful in the personal, direct, "formal" (in the sense of a specific absolution "text" that is spoken to someone else) absolution that comes in that setting. And if the Word works both supernaturally and psychologically, then the direct and personal nature of private absolution will be a very powerful proclamation of forgiveness to a hurting soul who needs very powerful assurance!

3) Do you see any benefit in reinstating "formal" private confession and absolution in the WELS? Explain your answer. (By formal I mean a set time and place where any member can come in and privately confess and be absolved of their sins)

One benefit of such a practice may be the idea that this is a normal part of the Christian's life. Just as worship, communion, and Bible study have set times, so a set time for absolution says that this is what Christians do (confess; e.g. Luther's first of the 95 Theses) and this is what the Church does (absolve). Another benefit may be that a person can come without an appointment and without the informal "chit-chat" that would probably precede most other conversations they have with their pastor.

4) What do you see as impediments or hindrances in implementing a more formal version of private confession and absolution in our churches?

- Cultural – Westerners are not accustomed to this kind of personal ritual as other cultures might be
- False Impressions – “Confession? Isn't that what [Roman] Catholics do?” -or- “If you need to go to the pastor for private forgiveness then you must have done something really bad!”
- Trust – A parishioner needs to fully trust his/her pastor if they are going to lay out their guilt in such a direct and plain manner. He/she has to know that once the matter is confessed and absolved, it's done.

5) How can we make lay people more aware to the benefits of private confession and absolution?

The answer to these kinds of questions (making lay people appreciate something more) is almost always going to be found in preaching. Preach so that they see law and gospel. Preach them back to the font. Preach them up to the communion rail. Preach them toward a high value of confession. And then remember that it's going to take some time before those thoughts fully sink into our people's hearts and minds!

A formal Bible study might also be beneficial. Including a lesson in Bible Information Class and Catechism Class (especially when covering the keys) will help new and prospective members to realize that this is a normal and beneficial practice. Whatever study approach we use, it would be good for people to actually see the rite we would use (CW or otherwise) in advance, and to talk through or explain the rite in advance so that people know exactly what to expect.

### **Pastor Ewings**

1) Do you use private confession and absolution in your ministry? If yes, how?

Yes, but not much. In general, it was in my role as Circuit Pastor for other pastors. A few times for lay people.

2) In your opinion, is the WELS making the best use of private confession and absolution in our churches? Explain your answer.

In my opinion, we're hardly using private absolution (the name the Lutheran Confessions use) at all. We say in the Augsburg Confession that we retain Private Absolution, but while that is our theology, it is, in fact, not our practice. In my life, I have *never* been invited to participate in Private Absolution before Holy Communion.

3) Do you see any benefit in reinstating "formal" private confession and absolution in the WELS? Explain your answer. (By formal I mean a set time and place where any member can come in and privately confess and be absolved of their sins)

Yes. Whether it will be Saturday at the church (or parsonage, if that's the way the parsonage was constructed) or whether it is before Communion services on Sunday morning, or whether it is just an hour during the day a few times a week, let it be restored.

The reason for restoration is that our people think they are guilty, rather than absolved and justified before God. I think you are old enough to remember the OJ Simpson trial. Even if you aren't a few words will explain my point. He was found "not guilty" of double homicide. Most (white) people believe he was guilty. For purpose of this discussion, assume he did it – this is only an illustration. The point I want to make is that if he did it, he is in fact guilty of homicide and he knows it, even though the court found him not guilty. He walks around every day knowing he did it. He can relive the knife slashing their throats. He can see the carnage. He looks at his children and knows he murdered their mother. He is "not guilty," but every day he knows he's *guilty*.

A lot of our people are like OJ Simpson. They know theology – I'm justified, not guilty because of the atoning work of Jesus – but they still think, "but I'm guilty of the crime, even if the court found me not guilty."

You've conducted services enough to know that people are fussing with the kids, reading the bulletin, staring off blankly while you are saying the sacred absolution "by the authority of Jesus Christ, I forgive you your sins." Congregational absolution is good, but it is a poor permanent replacement for private absolution. People need an opportunity to sit with a pastor who loves them and pour out their hearts to God. To confess the sins they know and feel in their hearts, and to hear the personal, private absolution.

4) What do you see as impediments or hindrances in implementing a more formal version of private confession and absolution in our churches?

The wording in the hymnal is stilted. I'm attaching a form that is a work in progress. I would be happy to hear your thoughts on it, too. It may be a step on the way to restoring private absolution.

Our people think private absolution is "Catholic." It will take a while to convince them otherwise.

We have lost our entire history of this. Your dad and I were taught to use Luther's "Christian Questions" before Communion, at least. Now even they are largely lost.

5) How can we make lay people more aware to the benefits of private confession and absolution?

Your good, scholarly, winsome paper.