

FOR THE

LIFE OF THE WORLD

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The central question is, "Who is Jesus? Is He the son of Joseph the carpenter or the Messiah onto whom the Lord's spirit has been poured to proclaim release to the captives?" (Luke 4:16-22). Scribes, Pharisees and the crowds of Jesus' day and of all times are confronted with the proclamation—He is God incarnate and He brings the forgiveness of sins to earth.

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ONE PENITENT'S RESPONSE TO INDIVIDUAL CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION

Dr. Beverly Yahnke, Licensed Psychologist, Wauwatosa, Wis.



The forgiveness of sins earned by Christ's perfect life and suffering death is proclaimed each Lord's day by His called and ordained servants. The very same Word of our Lord's forgiving Gospel is distributed in His Holy Supper as we hear, "given for you for the forgiveness of sins." Penitents, by faith, receive His presence, His forgiveness, His holiness and His promise to live out His own life within them.

As a result, most Lutheran Christians have embraced the conviction that hearing God's forgiveness of sins proclaimed in the context of private confession is redundant. Perhaps a more candid appraisal is that while the benefits of private confession are almost entirely unknown to penitents, speculation regarding real and imagined deterrents to individual confession and absolution is prominent in Lutheran churchlore.

As a penitent new to the practice of individual confession and absolution, I've come to understand the magnitude of blessing conferred in this powerful rite. Hopefully readers will pardon any presumption of the observations which follow; I'm not a theologian. Nevertheless, even I have come to realize more fully the extravagance of our Lord's grace. For although we receive His forgiveness and life through Word and Sacrament, we are also given this rite, instituted by Christ. Herein a penitent, by faith, can take possession of Holy Absolution individually and personally, allowing a consolation of conscience and new life in Christ which is entirely transformational.

I've begun to understand that by the power of the Holy Spirit, a penitent can derive important spiritual insight and blessing as he prepares for, and then participates in, private confession and absolution. Significant blessings unfold in each facet of this process which includes self-examination, private confession before a confessor, admonition and Holy Absolution.

Self-examination

Some Lutheran Christians may believe that the only self-examination necessary is conducted during the nine seconds allotted by the pastor during the Divine Service. Most of us would agree that this is barely self-examination at all; for many, it is an interval of discomfiting silence before the service continues with the general confession. Sadly, those who recite the confession with an unthinking, shoulder-shrugging acknowledgment of character flaws; or those who admit to sin, with well-defended explanations, may believe mistakenly that the absolution being pronounced belongs to them as well.

Those of us, however, who earnestly recite the general confession of sin with contrition and repentance trust that within that rather weighty confessional paragraph we plead guilty to all charges. In faith we are absolved before God as the pastor pronounces the Holy Absolution. So, we reason, there is little purpose in troubling ourselves with a meticulous moral accounting or self-examination. I have come to suspect that the conscience atrophies progressively but imperceptibly. We comfort ourselves with the knowledge that our omniscient God already knows the details of our sin. We neglect the reality that our merciful Father is pleased and eager to have His children come before Him with contrition to confess their specific sins. One simply can't do that without benefit of self-examination.

Others, who practice self-examination more regularly, may have little reluctance to come into the presence of God rather nonchalantly, unprepared in their personal confession of the heart. I realized that I would need to make myself clear enough so that my confessor could understand the sins I would confess before God. This realization prompted me to disentangle and actually examine my awareness of sin with great care and precision. As a result, my preparation for this rite resulted in soul searching which exceeded the rigor of my customary practice. Simply knowing that I would speak before a human witness served to

enhance my deliberation and gravity considerably.

Admittedly, I was rather uncertain about undertaking a process of self-examination which would allow me to characterize the nature of my sin before God and man. The endeavor can seem formidable, particularly since penitents have rarely received sufficient guidance regarding the practice of self-examination. The penitent struggles to examine his failures in the mirror of the Law and deduces rightly that his sinful nature delights routinely in rebellion against God. As a penitent, with only the brief instructions from Luther's Small Catechism as a guide, one may well feel inadequately prepared to examine oneself on the occasion of one's first confessional experience.

Nevertheless, one discovers it is easy to become dangerously familiar with sin. Familiarity does not always breed contempt; it numbs our sensitivity to the pervasiveness of sin, defending and excusing it. In preparation for private confession, the sinner must accuse himself, not excuse himself. The blessing of self-examination is that the Holy Spirit restores our capacity to perceive genuine spiritual necessity, clarifying and deepening our inner conviction that we are sinful, stirring us to earnest contrition and hunger for the mercy of a just God who is entitled to holy wrath regarding our willful disobedience.

Penitents requesting this rite for the first time are likely to see an opportunity, as well as a need, to extend their self-examination back through history. Some may rewind their spiritual videos to address "unfinished confessional business." They may choose to soothe a conscience pained by distressing occasions of personal sin. Some penitents are uncertain that their pastor could pronounce Holy Absolution if he were to hear the undiluted truth regarding their sin. As a result, they have been unable to take possession, by faith, of God's Word of forgiveness. Often, it is the burden of such unfinished business which has prompted the penitent's desire to seek resolution in the rite of individual confession and absolution.

At the close of self-examination, I had an eager dread for God's called servant to hear the unmitigated truth of my sin and respond to it with God's Word. Penitents yearn for divine healing when a soul is oppressed with uncertainty from the past and laden with sins of the moment, as well.

Private Confession Before a Confessor

In the rite of individual confession and absolution, the confessor is the embodiment of the Real Presence of Christ. Luther observed, "It is Christ who sits there, Christ who hears, Christ who answers and not a man." I was moved profoundly by the understanding that Christ is present, in the person of my pastor, to hear every syllable of sin being uttered. The confessor's presence is comforting at a time when the human soul staggers with its burden of guilt. The confessor is there with the love of Christ; and in that moment the penitent is no longer alone with his sin.

I was keenly aware, however, that my confessor is also just a man. In fact, he is an individual for whom I have great respect and with whom I enjoy a valued relationship. I struggled with the distinctly threatening realization that my pastor would learn the depth, habits and nature of my sin. Anticipating the naked vulnerability of this moment may be the single greatest deterrent to private confession. I suspect that many Lutheran Christians have come to fear the judgment of the confessor more acutely than they fear the judgment of Almighty God (indeed highlighting another concern which invites self-examination). The penitent is astonished that the Holy Spirit could overcome the strenuous objections of one's pride regarding such fears. Even as one contemplates private confession, one is likely to ruminate, "how can I possibly tell him that?"

We have marinated in our culture long enough to be seasoned by its endorsement of self-esteem, privacy and the quality of our public reputation above all things. Contemporary norms would have us regard pride as a desirable attribute to which we should all aspire. Pride would have us mask or diminish any reporting of the truth regarding our sin. Appearances, we have been taught, are everything. If that is the case, we must sacrifice everything to kneel with our confessor beneath the cross in private confession.

For most penitents, the shame of these moments can be wrenching. Confident voices become hesitant, perhaps even whispering an account of sin. Eyes are covered or cast down and one's head bends low with the weight of pride-depleting disclosures. There is certainly no spiritual merit in this practice. Yet, one cannot come to the cross of Christ with pride; one comes with heart broken and heavy with shame. And as Christ was not ashamed to bear our sins publicly on His atoning cross, no sin is too shameful to confess and no sin is too trivial to be forgiven completely and eternally by Christ's sacrificial love. Private confession inevitably leads us to a disconsolate reflection: how is it possible that we could confess in the privacy of our hearts before God with so little shame? One can only conclude that we haven't taken the magnitude of our sin nearly seriously enough, or we have not believed the righteousness and reality of God's wrath.

In the liturgy of private confession God opens our lips and we speak to Him in the presence of our pastor. There is consolation in being known by another without deceit. There is freedom in relinquishing the need to be a moral impostor as one speaks aloud the most damnable sins of the heart. Such truth about the desperateness of our condition humbles us and we're compelled by conscience to abandon the excuse and pretense which precludes healing. We stand before God and our brother in faith, with nothing but contrition and emptiness. We may, in this moment, come to an almost visceral understanding of St. Paul's despair and self-indictment, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:24).

I realize that the ultimate objective of personal confession and absolution is neither the penitent's statement of confession, nor his perception or calibration of contrition. Contrition, after all, is a gift of the Spirit, not a by-product of self-flagellation. Having said that, I will still make the observation that in private confession the Holy Spirit may enrich deeply one's response of genuine sorrow regarding sin. And contrition unfailingly directs us towards God's grace, which we are to accept in joyful faith so that we, with St. Paul, look with hope to our Divine Rescue, "Thanks be to God — through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7: 25).

Admonition

I've come to believe that unique among the blessings and privileges of private confession is the opportunity to hear God's Word spoken in response to the specific spiritual needs which are disclosed during the rite. My pastor speaks the names of my specific sins without judgment or disdain, but with what I believe to be heartfelt compassion. He affirms that I am right to confess such sins. My pastor's admonition serves as personal warning and counsel which is solemn, formal and candid. Moments of shame and hope ensue; the despairing soul seizes each word as it is spoken. In faith, one trusts that God has put His own Word in the mouth of the confessor so that the penitent can hear precisely what Christ would have him know in these moments.

Admonition is a starkly drawn picture of the requisite judgment which a pure, just and powerful God must make in response to sin. The confessor affirms the holy nature of God, who abhors sin and has directed His wrath towards His perfect and obedient Son. The penitent is reminded that he cannot escape the encumbering reality of sin until death, nor can his sin ever exceed Christ's justifying atonement. The words of admonition sear into spiritual memory for all time. The confessor speaks faithfully God's Word of judgment and mercy in precisely the measures one's soul requires.

Personal Absolution

Holy Absolution is the divine miracle of God's grace given to a soul parched for mercy and pardon. Private absolution results in firm spiritual reassurance for the troubled conscience; sins confessed and absolved are never again to cause doubt, fear, guilt or separation from God.

With ears of faith I listened to Christ, speaking in the voice of my pastor, as Holy Absolution is proclaimed. My pastor spoke with the authority of Christ his forgiveness was Christ's forgiveness. Holy Absolution in this private setting engenders the uncompromising belief that the message of forgiveness is intended for me. I had the sacred privilege of receiving Christ's personal acquittal from my sin.

