

Confession and Absolution

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Justification is both a problem and solution. Oswald Bayer has described human existence as forensically structured. That is to say, life demands justification. Listen to the way people respond when confronted with a failure. It is the language of self-defense, rationalization, or blaming. No human being wants to be wrong. Or listen to the eulogies delivered at the memorial rites for unbelievers. More often than not, they are attempts to vocalize why the deceased person's life was worthwhile. They seek to justify his or her existence. If one is not justified by faith in Christ, one will seek justification elsewhere in attitude or action.

To confess your sin is to cease the futile attempt to self-justify. Rather, it is to join with David in saying to God, "Against you, you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you might be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment" (Psalm 51:4). In confession, the sinner acknowledges that God is right. It is to agree with God's verdict. You are guilty.

But to speak of guilt requires some clarification today for another word has come to attach itself to guilt. Now we speak of guilt feelings. Guilt is seen as the subjective reaction of the doer to the deed, (i.e., how I feel about what I have done). But this is not the case with the Scriptures' use of the word *guilt*. In the Bible, guilt has not so much to do with emotions as it does with what happens in a courtroom when a judge declares the defendant guilty. The criminal may or may not have reactions of remorse, regret, or shame. It doesn't matter. The verdict of the judge establishes the reality. God's Word of Law unerringly establishes His judgment. There is no appeal.

John says that to deny the verdict means that the truth is not in us. But denial can never bring release. Only God's Absolution can release from the accusation of the Law and unlock the sinner from his sins. Lutheran theology is nothing if it is not realistic! Like the Scriptures, Lutheran theology does not start with notions about human freedom and the potential (great or small) that human beings have. Theologies that start with assumptions about human freedom end up in bondage. Lutheran

theology begins with man's bondage in sin and ends up with the glorious liberty of the Gospel. The bondage to sin is not a slight defect that can be corrected by appropriate self-discipline. Neither is it a sickness that can be cured by the appropriation of the medication of regular doses of God's grace. Sin is enmity with the Creator that carries with it God's verdict of guilt and a divinely-imposed death sentence. To be a sinner is to be held captive in death and condemnation. The distance between God and humanity is not the gap between infinity and the finite but between a holy God who is judge and man who is the guilty defendant.

Confession is the acknowledgment of this reality. In the rite of individual Confession and Absolution, we pray, "I, a poor sinner, plead guilty before God of all my sins. I have lived as if God did not matter and as if I mattered most" (*LSB* 292). The sin is named not in an effort to get it off one's chest but to acknowledge it before the Lord to whom no secrets are hid. Where sin is not confessed, it remains festering and corrosive, addicting the sinner to yet another go at self-justification. Confession admits defeat, and so leaves the penitent open for a word that declares righteousness, a verdict that justifies. That word is absolution. It is absolution alone, says Gerhard Forde, that is the answer to absolute claim of God who is inescapably present to the sinner.

The focus in the rite of Confession and Absolution is not on the actual confession per se but on the absolution. Disconnected from absolution, confession turns into just another effort to save ourselves. Then the old Adam begins to reckon that he is right with God because his confession was so completely sincere or deeply heartfelt, or that he has been so pious and courageous to make individual confession a part of his regular spiritual discipline. In the Medieval Church, the requirement of no less than an annual trip to the confessional booth and the enumeration of specific sins had transformed Confession into a spiritual torture chamber rather than an occasion for broken bones to be made glad in the Word from the Lord: "I forgive you all your sins."

It is at this point that Luther filters the old practice of private confession through the sieve of the Gospel so that it could be reclaimed for the sake of terrified consciences. In this new version of an ancient rite, the pastor is not there as an ecclesiastical detective to flush out hidden transgressions or an inspector who must assure that standards of quality control are indiscriminately applied to penitential acts. Neither is the pastor a therapist trafficking in slogans of affirmation, a ministry of presence (whatever that frightening term might mean!), or a coach to get you enabled for a sanctified life. No, the pastor is here as the ear and the voice of the Good Shepherd. His words of forgiveness are not his own, but the Lord who has sent him (John 20:21–23).

The ear of the pastor becomes the grave that forever conceals the corpse of sin. It is buried there never to be disinterred. In fact, the pastor's ordination vow puts him under orders never to divulge the sins confessed to him. Never means never. Pastors learn to practice God's own forgetfulness of sins (Psalm 103:9–14). Sins confessed to

the pastor are sealed away in silence.

But the pastor's lips are not sealed. He has a verdict to announce on the basis of the death of the Righteous One for the unrighteous. Your sin is not loaded on your own shoulders. It is carried by the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He takes it to Calvary. There it was answered for in His own blood. His verdict is absolution: "I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit." That is justification in faith in action. "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1).

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