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Private Confession: A 20th-Century Issue Seen from a 16th-Century Perspective

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Every knowledgeable theologian today is aware of the resurging interest in the question of private confession, i. e., auricular confession, or more precisely, the individual nature of confession. From professional theological journals to professional journals of psychology and psychiatry, from popular *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines to well-documented monographs and religious encyclopedia articles the question is being raised and answered in a variety of ways. The following is an attempt to permit the results of a thorough discussion of the issue more than four centuries ago in the decade from 1530 to 1540 to be of service in the contemporary search for the enduring value of individual confession and the basic theological foundation that could lead to its recovery.

I

Evident in much of today's discussion of the question is the seriousness with which theologians view the fact of sin. Many of them believe that a renewed grasp of the power and the problem of sin will lead Christians to a new understanding and use of individual confession. By way of exam-

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ple we look at two representative paragraphs from contemporary authors. Writing as an Anglican clergyman, John R. W. Stott, a contributing editor to *Christianity Today*, confesses in his monograph on the subject:

We are not in the least ashamed of the fact that we think and talk a lot about sin. We do so for the simple reason that we are realists. Sin is an ugly fact. It is to be neither ignored nor ridiculed, but honestly faced. Indeed, Christianity is the only religion in the world which takes sin seriously and offers a satisfactory remedy for it. And the way to enjoy this remedy is not to deny the disease, but to confess it.¹

In a similar vein, Lutheran Marianka Fousek of Duke University writes:

Lutheran stress on justification tends to neglect the seriousness of sin, especially when we keep acknowledging our sinfulness only in vaguest generalities which cut no one to the quick and bring no shame on anyone. To be a "miserable sinner" is something a good Lutheran acknowledges quite cheerfully. To admit one's concrete sins to God alone, with only one's own slanted perspective on them is a much easier matter than owning up to the brother. . . . The discipline of hearing and making confession of specific sins on a reg-

¹ John R. W. Stott, *Confess Your Sins: The Way of Reconciliation* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1964), p. 9. Cf. my review in *Una Sancta*, XXIV, 2 (1967), 84 f.

ular basis is a wholesome medicine against taking the sinfulness of Christians, as well as grace, too glibly, and, on the other hand, medicine against forgetting what it means to be human.²

Contemporary commentators on the question of individual confession concern themselves with two basic problems.

1. What is the most appropriate form of confession?
2. What is the most appropriate form of absolution?

A gamut of possibilities is usually presented, but the discussions seem to center at two focal points corresponding to the problems just mentioned. These can be stated as follows:

1. The desirability of enumerating individual sins to a confessor.
2. The desirability of obtaining individualized absolution from an ordained clergyman.

This study endeavors to cast light on the present discussion by examining a decade in Reformation history when similar problems were discussed and finally resolved by Lutheran theologians and pastors.³

² Marianka Fousek, "Ecumenical Perspectives: Confession?" *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, V, 4 (1966), 296.

³ See also Paul H. D. Lang, "Private Confession in the Lutheran Church," *Una Sancta*, XXII, 1 (1965), 18—40; the well-documented study by Bernhard Klaus, *Veit Dietrich: Leben und Werk* (Nürnberg: Selbstverlag des Vereins für bayerische Kirchengeschichte, 1958), particularly the chapter entitled "Der Streit um die offene Schuld," pp. 147—68; and this writer's doctoral dissertation "Die Brandenburg-Nürnbergische Kirchenordnung von 1533 und ihre Auswirkung" (Erlangen, 1964), especially the chapter entitled "Die KO für die Mark-Brandenburg, 1540," subsection "Beichte und Absolution," pp. 29—33.

II

Article XI of the Augsburg Confession serves as our *terminus a quo*. It reads:

It is taught among us that private absolution should be retained and not allowed to fall into disuse. However, in confession it is not necessary to enumerate all trespasses and sins, for this is impossible. Ps. 19:12, "Who can discern his errors?"⁴

This article states clearly that the validity of absolution is not dependent upon an enumeration of sins. However, the Church Order for Brandenburg-Nürnberg of 1533 (written by Andreas Osiander and Johann Brenz under the influence of Luther⁵) reflects the need for further clarification. Its authors reckon with the person who remains anxious after his confession because of some forgotten sin. Therefore it states:

People ought not to make their confession placing their confidence in their confession. For the priest can just as easily forgive a sin which is hidden from him as one that is revealed to him. . . . A person should merely mention to the priest his anxiety, his transgression, and his wish to whatever extent he desires and as his conscience instructs him. . . .⁶

Thus the teaching of the Augsburg Confession is confirmed, but it is also evident that the Church Order for Brandenburg-Nürnberg assumes that the penitent will indeed enumerate his sins according to the dictates of his conscience.

⁴ *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 34.

⁵ Evidence for the "Lutheran" character of this church order is presented in this writer's dissertation, pp. 1—8 (see footnote 3).

⁶ Cf. Emil Sehling, *Die evangelische Kirchenordnungen des XVI. Jahrhunderts*, XI/1, 186 b (translation by author). A similar concern is already voiced in Article XI of the Apology in *The Book of Concord*, p. 181, 6.

The freedom granted the penitent regarding the question of enumeration of sins is taken up once again by the Church Order for Mark Brandenburg of 1540.⁷ It now appears that evangelical freedom has been abused to the point where salvation is being imperiled. The church order charges that "some rowdy people" now use what was originally intended as comfort for delicate consciences as a pillow for an evil conscience. They "confess to the pastor that they are, to be sure, sinners in some general sense, but they remain silent as to those very weaknesses regarding which they could very well use advice, for the very reason that then the necessary advice cannot be given them." In order to put a halt to this abuse, the Church Order for Mark Brandenburg asserts:

These people are to be admonished not to be ashamed of revealing to their pastor their wretched frailties and weaknesses in accordance with the example of the saints such as Daniel, Paul, and others, who openly acknowledged and confessed also in particular by name their weaknesses and sins; for to withhold confession of such weaknesses till the point of death is very dangerous, since the devil is accustomed to confront a person with such unconfessed sins at one's death, and should a person then be unable to compose himself with sound instruction and comfort, Satan leads him into despair followed by eternal death, as is attested to by many examples of the ancient fathers.⁸

⁷ For the relationship existing between the Church Order for Brandenburg-Nürnberg and that of Mark Brandenburg, see the author's dissertation, pp. 21 ff. Again the Lutheran character of this church order is established.

⁸ Sehling, III, 61 b (translation by author). The death-hour emphasis may not be a reflection of 16th-century credulity; its absence today

So what began in the Augsburg Confession (1530) with the notice that it is un-

may reflect a 20th-century self-delusion, which is not entirely different from the delusion of the sophisticated "Greeks" when compared with the superstitious "barbarians" (cf. 1 Cor. 1 and 2). Helmut Thielicke, in his study entitled *Tod und Leben: Studien zur christlichen Anthropologie* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1946), soon to appear in English translation by Edward H. Schroeder of Valparaiso University, has done us a service in summarizing in an excursus Luther's theology of death drawn especially from his commentaries on Ps. 90 and Gen. 3 (cf. Thielicke, pp. 150—61). With references also to 1 Cor. 1 and 2 and 15:26, Thielicke represents Luther's thought in sum as follows:

1. Human death is qualitatively other than animal death, since the latter is merely part of the natural order whereas the former is also part of the natural disorder resulting from sin before God.

2. Inasmuch as death is God's judgment upon our lives, it characterizes not only the terminus of our life but much rather the entirety of our life, as Luther sings in his hymn, "In the midst of earthly life, Snares of death surround us." Consequently, life is lived in truth only when I, in the full realization of my dying, relate my entire existence to God's revelatory dealing with me in death.

3. Therefore one dare not despise death either by spiting it or by remaining in the safety provided by ignorance. Both methods are an affront to God, the creator and destroyer of life. Only when we recognize in God the one who also destroys life can we discover in Him the Creator of the new.

Of interest here also is Bonhoeffer's sharp critique of Tillich's analysis of death in terms of "boundary," whereas Bonhoeffer deplores the *deus ex machina* exploitation of human weakness on the boundaries of human existence. He writes (cf. *Letters and Papers from Prison* [London: Collins Fontana edition, 1953], p. 93): "God is the 'beyond' in the midst of our life. The Church stands not where human powers give out, on the borders, but in the centre of the village. That is the way it is in the Old Testament, and in this sense we still read the New Testament far too little on the basis of the Old." It would appear to me that Bonhoeffer's critique may fit Tillich, but it does not touch

necessary to enumerate one's sins was taken up by the Church Order for Brandenburg-Nürnberg (1533) with the implication that an unforced enumeration is nevertheless made; and finally in the Church Order for Mark Brandenburg (1540) this implication is put in the form of a strong admonition. The admonition is not meant to be a burden to the penitent, but its intention arises from pastoral experience in the care of souls on the part of the framers of these orders, namely the experience that the devil is quick to take advantage of the Christian's experience of death by causing him to doubt the certainty of his salvation. This he does by bringing to the Christian's remembrance some unconfessed sin.

But immediately the question arises: Does not the absolution forgive also those sins which are not enumerated? This question the Church Order for Brandenburg-Nürnberg answered in the affirmative (see above). Then how can the devil cause uncertainty in the Christian who has not openly confessed a sin? Is a Christian to doubt the word of absolution? Certainly not, since God does not make His promise dependent on the quality or quantity of man's repentance. This insight is what lay at the very heart of Luther's contention

Luther. In fact it substantiates Luther's view, which also discovers man's gravest weakness at the point of his greatest self-confidence—"in the midst of earthly life." But at one's deathbed the devil is prone to parade one's life before one and to point out the transposition of strength and weakness, of self-confidence and guilt. (A helpful analysis of Bonhoeffer's critique of a "boundary situation theology" is to be found in Regin Prenter's "Bonhoeffer and the Young Luther," *World Come of Age*, ed. R. Gregor Smith [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967], esp. pp. 170—75.)

with Rome.⁹ He would not permit anyone to rob him of the certainty of God's promise by making it conditional upon man's work of repentance. Would Luther then not be forced to condemn the Church Order for Mark Brandenburg since it strongly suggests that the Christian might doubt his salvation if he has not by name confessed his sin?

The fact of the matter is that Luther approved this church order, although he had reservations regarding the communion of the sick and the vigils for Easter and Pentecost.¹⁰ Yet he never questioned the advice regarding the enumeration of sins. Can this be harmonized, then, with his statement regarding repentance? It can, if we realize that Luther's word regarding repentance is directed against placing one's *trust* in one's repentance rather than in the unconditional promise of God. However, Luther never looked upon absolution as being salutary *ex opere operato*, i. e., merely by being pronounced, and therefore the unconditional promise of God is in this respect nevertheless conditioned by its faithful reception, and that would include repentance.¹¹

⁹ In the Bull *Exsurge Domine* Leo X condemned Luther's thesis: *Nulla modo confides absolvi propter tuam contritionem, sed propter verbum Christi: Quodcunque solveris* etc. ("Never trust that you are absolved on account of your contrition, but rather on account of the word of Christ: 'Whosoever sins you remit. . . .'" Cf. Erich Roth, *Die Privatbeichte und die Schlüsselgewalt in der Theologie der Reformatoren* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsman Verlag, 1952), p. 50.

¹⁰ Cf. WA Br 8, 620—26, and author's dissertation, p. 22.

¹¹ Cf. Klaus, pp. 154 f., 160. Here Klaus quotes both Luther and Melancthon to the effect that faith and repentance are demanded

Thus the Church Order for Mark Brandenburg gives evidence of a high degree of pastoral concern.¹² Its pastoral premise is that Satan can be prevented from making inroads into the Christian's faith by taking from Satan the opportunity to question the sincerity of the Christian's faith or his repentance. This satanic opportunity will not exist because the Christian has enumerated his sins to the pastor betimes and heard the absolution spoken in reference to those very sins whereby Satan would tear down his ability to trust fully and completely the "unconditional" promise of God. The church order, in other words, does not attempt to turn the Christian's trust away from God's promise and in upon himself, but it does attempt to prepare the Christian to meet Satan at the very point at which Satan will attack—the point of faith and its corollary, repentance. This is the Christian's vulnerable spot if his faith is not founded on God's Word. For this reason the Christian is to confess his particular sins and unbelief and cling to the forgiving word of God.

By the above we hope to have shown from a page of Reformation history the reason why many 16th-century Lutheran Christians felt it most advisable that a Christian name individual sins to his confessor. The reader will, of course, make

if the absolution is to be received in salutary fashion. Cf. WA Br 6, 454 f.; C[orpus] R[eformatorum] 3, 173 f.

¹² The pastoral concern displayed by this church order is most likely traceable to Georg III of Anhalt, who played a major role in its conception and who was renowned as a "Seelsorger." Cf. my dissertation, pp. 21 f., and Franz Lau, "Georg III. von Anhalt, erster evangelischer Bischof," *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Karl-Marx-Universität*, III (1953/54), 149.

his own applications to the contemporary situation. This writer is firmly convinced of the pastoral wisdom which this section of the church order reflects. We turn now to a discussion of the advisability of obtaining individualized absolution from an ordained clergyman.

III

Again we appeal to *The Book of Concord* and particularly this time to the Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article IV, as our *terminus a quo*. It reads:

We shall now return to the Gospel, which offers counsel [perhaps better translated as "resources"] and help against sin in more than one way, for God is surpassingly rich in his grace: First, through the spoken word, by which the forgiveness of sin (the peculiar function of the Gospel) is preached to the whole world; second, through Baptism; third, through the holy Sacrament of the Altar; fourth, through the power of the keys; and finally, through the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren. Matt. 18:20, "Where two or three are gathered," etc.¹³

Since Luther wrote these words in the year 1537, it seems probable that he had the so-called Nürnberg Absolution Controversy in mind.¹⁴ This controversy spanned the years from 1533 to 1541, but by 1537 Luther had already been called upon to take a stand, and the words just

¹³ *The Book of Concord*, p. 310.

¹⁴ The most thorough and recent treatments of this controversy are those by Klaus, pp. 147 to 168, and Dietrich Stollberg, "Osiander und der Nürnberger Absolutionsstreit," *Lutherische Blätter*, 86 (1965), 153—68. Klaus emphasizes the "Lutheran" defeat of Osiandrian extremes, whereas Stollberg points up the positive contribution made by Osiander toward a theology of the care of souls and a systematic Lutheran treatment of absolution.

quoted reflect his position. Reduced to its simplest doctrinal terms, the controversy could be summed up in two fundamental questions:

1. Does private absolution convey forgiveness unconditionally — in contrast to the sermon or general absolution, which can convey it only conditionally?
2. What is the *proprium* of private absolution?

Luther was forced to face these questions squarely because of the insistence by Osiander in Nürnberg that individual confession followed by individual absolution be made a prerequisite for the reception of the Lord's Supper. The Church Order for Brandenburg-Nürnberg of 1533, written for the most part by Osiander, apparently represents a compromise reached between Osiander and the Nürnberg City Council. Whereas Osiander demanded individual confession and individual absolution as a prerequisite to the reception of the Lord's Supper and in this way hoped to maintain church discipline, the city council rejected the entire notion of "pastoral jurisdiction."¹⁵ The church order itself "solved" the dispute by requiring personal announcement to the pastor of the desire to receive the Lord's Supper but leaving the matter of private confession and private absolution optional though highly recommended.¹⁶

Although this solution reflects Luther's influence, it should be noted immediately that Osiander could really never be satisfied with it since his concept of church discipline differed fundamentally from that of

Luther, the former insisting on a *potestas jurisdictionis* in the sense of pastoral disciplinary *authority*, the latter understanding Melancthon's retention of this phrase (see *The Book of Concord*, p. 283, 12—14) as indicating a pastoral disciplinary *duty and ministry*.¹⁷ One could say that Osiander had visions of a "pure church" ruled by the pastor's authority, whereas Luther, consistently Biblical and evangelical, reckoned with a "forgiven church" ruled by the Gospel, of which the pastor was a steward.

The upshot of the compromise was, predictably enough, confusion, since neither Osiander nor the Nürnberg City Council was genuinely happy with it. Evidence for this is to be found in a practice insisted upon by the city council, namely, the retention of the so-called *offene Schuld*, a type of general confession and general absolution which, rightly or wrongly, had the effect of making the church order's required Communion registration appear superfluous. Osiander thereupon took to his pulpit to denounce general absolution as godless and ungrounded in God's Word and therefore a fool's absolution since it absolved thieves and rogues whose sins ought rather to have been retained.¹⁸ At this juncture the city was poised for protest and riot and so Luther, together with the Wittenberg theologians, was called upon to arbitrate a settlement.

The result was two official position papers (dated respectively April 18, 1533, and Oct. 8, 1533), each signed by Luther and other Wittenberg theologians. But that the opinions here rendered should find general reception in Nürnberg was too much to hope for since actually they only

¹⁵ Klaus, pp. 150 f.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 151, and my dissertation, pp. 3 f.

¹⁷ Roth, pp. 153 f.

¹⁸ Klaus, pp. 150 f.

reinforced the position of the Church Order for Brandenburg-Nürnberg, which was the original "Lutheran" compromise and in practice unacceptable to both Osiander and the Nürnberg City Council. But by means of these two papers it became still more evident where Luther stood in this issue and why this position could not be relinquished by him. In his opinion the unrestricted power of the Gospel to comfort anxious consciences was at stake.

Both position papers mentioned above concentrate on making three points incontrovertible:

1. In their essential nature both the sermon and the general absolution¹⁹ are truly *absolution*.

2. Absolution in any form — sermon, general absolution, private absolution — demands repentance and faith as conditions for a salutary reception, though not in the sense that such conditions constitute a worthiness in man upon which faith can build, but only in the sense that repentance and faith constitute the condition under which the absolution is received salvifically.

3. Private absolution should be retained and urgently recommended as a means of bringing peace to the troubled conscience.²⁰

The Nürnbergers were prevented from rioting then and there by Luther's influ-

ence, but the truce was temporary. Controversy flared again in 1536 and 1539 and ended symbolically when in 1541 Osiander was depicted as burning in hell in one of the floats of the carnival parade.²¹ The outcome, one might say, was that misused Christian liberty had succeeded in vanquishing Osiander's attempt to establish a holy church.

Of further interest to us here, however, is the fact that Luther and the authors of the church orders who followed his lead made no attempt to distinguish between an absolution which is "only announced" and one that is really "administered."²² This distinction has long been considered the means of establishing the *proprium* of individual absolution, but it appears to me to be contrary to the intention of Luther, the Lutheran church orders, and the Lutheran Confessions.²³ This supposed distinction is merely a variation on the theme of conditional or unconditional absolution, and we hope to have shown above that Luther clearly teaches an absolution always

²¹ Klaus, pp. 166 f.

²² See Lang, p. 31. At this point Lang appears to me to have opted against Luther and for Osiander with certain reservations that he claims represent the thinking of Brenz.

²³ Pertinent German commentary on this question can be found in Peter Brunner's "Die Wormser deutsche Messe," *Kosmos und Ekklesia. Festschrift für Wilhelm Stäblin* (Kassel, 1953), esp. pp. 134 and 139, and Ernst Sommerlath's "Der sakramentale Charakter der Absolution," *Die Leibhaftigkeit des Wortes. Festgabe für Adolf Köberle zum sechzigsten Geburtstag* (Hamburg, 1958), esp. p. 215. Brunner appears to have interpreted Luther in the sense preferred by us, whereas Sommerlath seems to undergird the interpretation of Lang. It is of historical interest to note that Löhe, following the Nürnberg tradition, was influenced by Osiander. Cf. my dissertation, fn. 36, p. 81.

¹⁹ In his *Formula Missae* of 1523 Luther had already interpreted the *Pax Domini* as "a public absolution of the sins of the communicants, the true voice of the Gospel announcing remission of sins" (see *Luther's Works*, American Edition [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965], 53, 28 f.), and in his *Deutsche Messe* of 1526 he used an admonition for those about to partake of the Sacrament, of which he said: "But the admonition itself has since become a public confession" (*ibid.*, p. 80).

²⁰ Cf. Klaus, pp. 154 f.; WA Br 6, 454 f., 527 ff.; CR 2, 648 ff., 670.

conditional upon repentance and faith as we have defined them.

What then is the *proprium* of private absolution? Up to this point it would seem that all that can be said is that private absolution applies to the individual in person what is applied to all in general through the sermon or general absolution. As a result, the Lutheran Church has had difficulty maintaining the practice since few people could become interested in going to the trouble of obtaining individually what they could so easily and effortlessly get generally. Some Lutheran theologians have therefore attempted to prove that our Lord instituted individual absolution as a sacrament, and for this reason it dare not be neglected,²⁴ while others similarly give individual absolution the *proprium* of "administering" forgiveness in contrast to other forms of absolution that can merely "announce" forgiveness.²⁵ These attempts, however, shatter before the united witness of the New Testament, the Lutheran Confessions, the Lutheran church orders, and Luther's private writings. Individual absolution cannot be saved by forced, atomistic, and legalistic interpretations of the Lu-

theran Confessions. If it is to be saved at all, it will have to be saved by the evangelical conviction that the forgiveness offered in individual absolution is desirable even though it can be had elsewhere as well.

IV

What urgency is there, then, that one obtain individualized absolution from an ordained clergyman? We feel that the urgency is determined by the consideration presented in Part II of this study. If it is acknowledged that the enumeration of particular sins to a confessor can be of great value in the Christian's daily battle against Satan, especially as that battle reaches its climax in the *Anfechtungen* surrounding the deathbed, then it becomes self-evident that the absolution of such sins by a public steward of the mysteries of God, a man commissioned by Christ Himself to stand in His place and to administer the keys, is to be treasured most highly. In short, the *proprium* of private absolution is best discovered when it is seen in conjunction with the Christian's inherent need for an enumeration of sins before a confessor.²⁶

²⁴ See Hellmut Lieberg, "Die Lehre der Kirche von der Heiligen Absolution," *Lutherische Blätter*, No. 43/44 (1955), pp. 76 f. This otherwise excellent study claims too much for individual absolution, namely, its institution as individual absolution by Christ. Cf. my dissertation, fn. 14, pp. 56 ff., for a refutation of this argument. In his extensive study entitled *Kirchliches Amt und geistliche Vollmacht in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1953), p. 152, Hans Frhr. v. Campenhausen maintains that Jesus, according to John, simply instituted the ministry of the keys as the original authority of the Christian church as such and as the constant source of the life of the entire church.

²⁵ See footnote 23 above.

²⁶ A burning issue at present is the distinction between the absolution spoken by an ordained clergyman and that spoken by any other baptized Christian. Without becoming involved in a full-blown discussion of the question we think it helpful to refer to Hellmut Lieberg's treatment in his monograph, *Amt und Ordination bei Luther und Melanchthon* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962), esp. pp. 50 to 62, 71 ff., 134 ff. Lieberg concludes that Luther acknowledges that every Christian has both the ability, the right, and the duty to administer the absolution. However, he shows that Luther also distinguishes between the public and the private ministry and that he does not wish the unauthorized lay Christian to function in the former, the chief reason being the consequent breakdown of congregational discipline. Accordingly, the

To frighten a congregation into seeking individual absolution by claiming more for such absolution than can be claimed for the sermon or general absolution (or

lay Christian should see to it that he does not by his practice contribute to such a breakdown.

It is my opinion that Lutheran Orthodoxy's familiar, though in many quarters and for various reasons unpopular, distinction between the formal and material principles of the Reformation can nevertheless be of service here. These principles are misunderstood when not seen in their proper relation, nor ought either ever stand alone. The formal principle apart from the material principle results in legalistic biblicism and fundamentalism, whereas the material principle apart from the formal leads to *Schwärmerei* and a gospel that has no foundation in history. (Cf. Ernst Kinder, "The Confession as Gift and as Task," *The Unity of the Church: A Symposium* [Rock Island: Augustana Press, 1957], p. 108, and my dissertation, pp. 4—8 of the footnotes.) The material principle expresses the "power" of the Gospel itself (Rom. 1:16), while the formal principle gives expression to the Gospel's rootedness in history (2 Peter 1:16-21). (For a discussion of the relationship between "Gospel" and "Apostle" cf. Gerhard Krodel, "The Gospel according to Paul," *Dialog*, VI [1967], esp. 106 f.)

Osiander applies the same distinction when in his *Katechismuspredigten* he emphasizes regarding the absolution that not only *what* is spoken is important (material principle) but also at *whose behest* it is spoken (formal principle). Cf. Sehling, XI/I, 246 a, 273 b.) Accordingly, I would understand the "I, by virtue of my office, as a called and ordained servant of the Word" of "The Order of the Holy Communion," *The Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941), p. 16, not only as a mode of distinguishing the public ministry from the private ministry but also as a strong reminder that the Gospel of forgiveness is not a mere idea, not even a divine idea, but rather a word made possible by a historical event, an event which had its appointed witnesses, whose witness others are still being "called and ordained" to repeat today. Yet it is properly understood only when seen in relation to the content of the absolution itself. Apart from this "material" content the "formal" appeal to authority becomes legalistic authori-

"lay" absolution!) is detrimental to the Gospel and unnecessary. Individual absolution from an ordained clergyman will be sought naturally (when the opportunity is given and is accompanied by pastoral instruction) by those who like Luther have experienced the *terrores conscientiae* because of their sins. Thus we have come full circle—the question of individual confession is not to be divorced from a renewed sense of the seriousness of sin.

V

Does the 20th century have such a deep sense of the seriousness of sin? We began this study by reference to two representa-

tarianism and detracts from the Gospel, which alone is the power of God unto salvation.

It is also worth noting that church history can be read from the viewpoint of the success or failure of the church to maintain the proper tension and relation between the material and formal principles. Compare, for instance, the overemphasis on the formal (authority) principle evident in the rise of the papacy with the pivotal action of Luther as he restores the proper relation between Gospel (material principle) and Scripture (formal principle); then again the growing imbalanced emphasis on the formal principle in Lutheran Orthodoxy, and finally, a contemporary reaction that tends to slight Scripture as a formal principle since it divorces the Gospel from any real concern for history as witnessed to in Scripture, as is evident in the spirit/persons-history/offices dichotomy of the Lutheran church historian, Rudolf Sohm, and in his followers in respect to "charismatic authority," Rudolf Bultmann and Emil Brunner. (Cf. Gerhard Ebeling, "Introductory Lectures on the Study of Theology," *Word and Faith* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963], p. 431, Thesis 4, and Gustaf Wingren, "Kritische Erwägungen zum Begriff der Lehrautorität in der lutherischen Kirche," *Kerygma und Dogma*, X [1964], esp. 252.) Thus the question of the relation between the material (content) principle and the formal (source of authority) principle is vital to the discussion of clerical and lay absolution.

tives of contemporary Christianity. But the question of the nature of man's sin requires further investigation. Luther's experience of sin as *terrores conscientiae* must be subjected to contemporary analysis arising both out of renewed Biblical studies²⁷ and the new insights emerging from the thought of Freud and Marx in the

personality and social sciences.²⁸ If Luther's *coram deo* understanding of sin can stand in the face of this scrutiny, it would seem to this author that the Lutheran Reformation's understanding and practice of individual confession and absolution can and must be recovered.

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²⁷ E. g., Krister Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," *Ecumenical Dialogue at Harvard: The Roman Catholic-Protestant Colloquium*, ed. Samuel H. Miller and G. Ernest Wright (Cambridge: Belknap Press/Harvard, 1964), pp. 236—56.

²⁸ E. g., Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1962); H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1956); and for the application of these insights to individual confession, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955).