

Confession and Absolution: Justification by Faith in Action

Justification is both a problem and solution. Oswald Bayer has described human existence as forensically structured¹. That is to say, that 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. They are, more often, than not 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: Guilty.

But to speak of guilt requires some clarification today for another word has come to attach itself to guilt. So 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 done². 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 unerring establishes His judgment. There is no appeal.

To deny the verdict means that the truth is not in us says the Apostle John. 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 bondage³. 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.

¹ See Oswald Bayer, *Living by Faith: Justification and Sanctification*, trans. G. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 1-9.

² On this point see the discussion of Werner Elert, *The Christian Ethos*, trans. Carl Schindler (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 163-173. Elert traces the subjective understanding of guilt to F. Schleiermacher.

³ On this point see Gerhard Forde, *The Captivation of the Will* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 21.

Confession is the acknowledgment of this reality. So in 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 my 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 which justifies. That word is called absolution. It is absolution alone, says Gerhard Forde that is the answer to absolute claim of God who is inescapably present to the sinner.⁴

The focus in confession and absolution is not on the confession per se, but on the absolution. Disconnected from the 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. Thus Luther develops five major points in his “A Brief Exhortation to Confession” included in the *Large Catechism*:

- Confession should be voluntary and free of papal tyranny.
- The practice of confession ought to be free of the unreasonable and tortuous demand that the penitent be able to enumerate his sins.
- People should be taught how to use confession evangelically for the comfort of terrified consciences.
- Christian liberty ought not be used as an excuse for setting private confession aside.
- Private confession stands with other forms of confession in the church (fifth petition of the Lord’s Prayer where we confess to God and the neighbor).⁵

These pastoral themes are reflected in Luther’s short order of confession included in the *Small Catechism*.⁶ The insertion of a short order of confession between Holy Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar was intended by Luther to catechize people in the evangelical use of confession and absolution. "Luther’s discussion of confession, along with the

⁴ Gerhard Forde, “Absolution: Systematic Considerations” in *The Preached God: Proclamation in Word and Sacrament*, edited by Mark C. Mattes and Steven Paulson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 153.

⁵ *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 476-480.

⁶ *The Book of Concord*, 360-362.

shape of his liturgical rite, shows how he redefines its essence and practice so that it ceases to be a burden and instead becomes an instrument by which the Gospel is conveyed personally to an individual”⁷

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 (see 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 (see 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 the 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)

Appendix: Theses on the Seal of Confession

1. The pastor hears confession by virtue of his office as Christ’s servant. Thus the pastor is both the ear and mouth of Christ for the penitent. It is Christ who hears the sins that are confessed to the pastor and it is Christ who absolves sinners through the word spoken by the pastor (Luke 10:16, *Small Catechism* V)
2. Ordination places the pastor under orders to forgive and retain sins (John 20:19-23). This is the work of the office. He is not set in office as a servant of the state but of the church. In this office, the pastor must render unto God, the things that belong to God (Matthew 22:15-21). That is the pastor is obligated to render faithfulness to God in the stewardship of the means of grace.
3. In the ordination vow, the candidate solemnly promises to perform the duties of the office in accordance with the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. The candidate explicitly promises “never to divulge the sins confessed to you” (**Lutheran Service Book Agenda**, 166) Men should make this vow only after careful and prayerful study of the Sacred Scriptures and the *Book of Concord*. This vow is made *coram Deo* with the knowledge that such vows are promises made to God Himself (see Numbers 30:1-2; Ecclesiastes 5:1-7).

⁷ Charles Arand, *That I May Be His Own: An Overview of Luther’s Catechisms* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), 169.

4. This vow obligates the pastor to complete and utter secrecy in respect to the sins that are confessed to him for God Himself removes these sins from the penitent and remembers them no more (see Psalm 103:8-12). “For the sake of timid consciences and to preserve the integrity of confessional conversations, the pastor promises in his ordination vows ‘never to divulge the sins confessed to him’”. (LSB-A, 39).
5. For a pastor to reveal sins that have been confessed to him contradicts the forgiveness bestowed by Christ. This renders the pastor a hireling who is no longer capable of the trust of Christ’s Church and, therefore, must be removed from office (Ezekiel 34:1-11). When a shepherd exhumes that which Christ has buried in the forgiveness of sins, he exposes the sheep entrusted to his care to a variety of dangers, not the least of which is the temptation to unbelief and despair. A pastor who is unable to keep the promises of the ordination is not above reproach (I Timothy 3:2) and is untrustworthy (Proverbs 11:13).
6. The silence that the pastor must keep may inflict upon the pastor severe pangs of conscience and possible legal action. Nevertheless, the pastor is not authorized to break the silence imposed upon him by the office. He may not forsake his sheep when threatened (John 10:11-13). This is a cross that is laid upon the pastoral office. If civil authorities seek to force the pastor to speak of sins that have been confessed to him, he must resist rendering unto Caesar that which belongs to God alone (Matthew 22:15-21).
7. In his teaching and preaching, the pastor will need to catechize his people regarding the seal of the confession so that they have the confidence to confess their sins and receive absolution without the fear of betrayal.
8. The confessional seal does not mean that the pastor has no legal or moral obligation to report or give testimony to immoral or illegal activity that may be reported to him or discovered by him in contexts outside of confession. A distinction is made between what is confessed to the pastor by a penitent and what is revealed to the pastor by one seeking protection from abuse or harm.

For Further Reading

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