

Your Pastor is not Your Therapist – Private Confession: the Ministry of Repentance and Faith

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"The prevailing theories in contemporary pastoral psychology are not in harmony with our confessional Lutheran understanding of the care of souls (Seelsorge)" writes Carl Braaten (Braaten, 155). Pastoral theology has become pastoral psychology. E. Brooks Holifield's fascinating study *A HISTORY OF PASTORAL CARE IN AMERICA: FROM SALVATION TO SELF-REALIZATION* traces the story of how theology gave way to psychology. Mainline liberal theology with its eagerness to be relevant made space for courses in the psychology of religion and counseling in seminary catalogues. Anton Boisen began to train a small group of seminarians in pastoral care at the Worcester State Hospital in the summer of 1925 and thus the modern Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) Movement was born. Educated at Union Seminary in New York, Boisen believed that theological seminaries needed a thorough revamping in order to incorporate the scientific study of religious experience.

No longer was theological education to be limited to literary texts. Boisen urged that seminarians engage in the study of "living human documents" in a clinical environment. Having himself been hospitalized for mental illness on two occasions, Boisen maintained that this experience served to equip him for pastoral work. While Boisen himself was committed to rather rigorous moral standards, those who came after him tended to place the blame for emotional distress at authoritarian religious preachments especially as they related to sexuality. "Understanding" was the watchword for the generation of clinical pastoral educators that followed Boisen. Understanding "connoted tolerance, an acceptance of feelings; of the body, the senses, and sexuality; and opposition to rigidity and to condemnation. Understanding implied an ethical attitude, a willingness to sympathize with people rather than idolize conventions and rules" (Holifield, 248).

The theological contours of pastoral care became increasingly hard to discern. Attempting to integrate psychological insights into Christian theology and pastoral practice resulted in a theology that was forced to fit into the categories of current psychological theories. The Gospel was reinterpreted in psychological terms. With the rise in popularity of Paul Tillich's theological method of correlation, it was held that Christian theology was compatible with depth psychology. Tillichian language of grace as unconditional acceptance and faith as "accepting that you are accepted" was thought to adequately convey the biblical message in psychological terms. Braaten summarizes the outcome of this approach: "Many of the new professionals thought of themselves as critics of an authoritarian church, opponents of repressive moralism, and enemies of dogmatism. Persons should be free-and freeing of others-from moral authoritarianism and institutional impositions. Carl Rogers' book, *COUNSELING AND PSYCHOTHERAPY*, became a standard text among clinical groups and in theological seminaries. One of the reasons for its popularity was that the counselor could satisfy the impulses of the client seeking self-acceptance and self-realization"(Braaten, 158-159).

While the CPE Movement had its genesis within liberal Protestantism, its influence eventually reached beyond these churches into churches that were noted for their theological conservatism. By the 1960's every major seminary regardless of theological stripe had incorporated courses in the psychology of religion, counseling, and programs of Clinical Pastoral Education into the curriculum. Within conservative evangelical denominations there emerged those such as Jay Adams and James Dobson who advocated "Christian counseling" hoping to avoid the secular humanism that dominated the social sciences. Nevertheless they like their liberal counterparts cast the Gospel in the mold of the therapeutic. While conservative doctrinal assertions are given ascent and traditional moral values are upheld, theology takes second place to psychology. Whether liberal or conservative, the minister is now given a place among the helping professions with all the rights and privileges that such an exalted station obtains.

The psychological domination of theology in the churches and the subsequent move to transform the pastor into a therapist has not gone unchallenged. One of the first to challenge pastors to attend to their calling as ministers of the Gospel was Paul Pruyser, a clinical psychologist associated with the Menninger Foundation. In 1976, Pruyser authored a book entitled *THE MINISTER AS DIAGNOSTICIAN* in which he argued that the Christian clergy "possess a body of theoretical and practical knowledge that is uniquely their own" (Pruyser, 10). While Pruyser maintains that pastors may benefit from the insights of the psychological sciences, these insights ought not overshadow or diminish the integrity of the theological knowledge that is the foundation for pastoral work. Pruyser worries that many clergy have become uncertain of their unique calling and have restlessly looked to psychology for guidance rather than utilizing the legacy of Christian theology. The language of the church is jettisoned for the language of the clinic. In striving to be like counselors, ministers are rendered incapable of providing genuine pastoral care, that is, the care of souls using the means that reside in the pastoral office.

Two United Methodists, William Willimon of Duke and Thomas Oden of Drew weight in with their critique of the church's uncritical embrace of the tools and techniques of the therapist. Willimon recognizes that counseling will be part of the pastoral task, but he laments the reduction of pastoral care to counseling. Observing that the "dialogue between psychology and theology has been a mostly unilateral affair, with psychology doing most of the talking" (Willimon, 39) identifies the CPE Movement as a form of "liberal pietism" that is individualistic and anti-intellectual. Above all, Willimon notes that CPE fails to recognize the churchly context for pastoral care. Pastors become indistinguishable from physicians, social workers, psychiatrists, and other clinicians.

In his book, *WORSHIP AS PASTORAL CARE*, Willimon echoes the reflection of the Jesuit liturgical scholar Josef Jungmann that "for centuries, the liturgy, actively celebrated, has been the most important form for pastoral care" (Willimon, 35). The pastoral care of the individual is done in the context of the congregation gathered around Word and Sacrament. Willimon is to be credited for calling pastors back to the liturgy as the primary and ordinary means of pastoral care.

Like Willimon, Thomas Oden was also deeply involved in the counseling movement of the '60's. In fact, Oden writes of his own pilgrimage through the client-centered therapy movement and Transactional Analysis as well as dabbling in parapsychology before coming to embrace what he describes as classical Christianity: "I have spent most of my career working span by span on a bridge between psychology and religion. Just how incessantly preoccupied I have been with this

theological bridge is clear if from nothing else, from the titles of my previous books: **KERYGMA AND COUNSELING, CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY AND PSYCHOTHERAPY, THE STRUCTURE OF AWARENESS, THE INTENSIVE GROUP EXPERIENCE, AFTER THERAPY WHAT?, GAME FREE, and TAG: THE TRANSACTIONAL AWARENESS GAME.** After two decades of bridge building, however, it is finally dawning on me that the traffic is moving on the bridge only one way: from psychological speculation to rapt religious attentiveness. The conversation has become completely one-sided. Theology's listening to psychology has been far more accurate, empathic, and attentive than has psychology's listening to theology. I do not cease to hope for a viable two-way dialogue, but there is as little evidence that theology is ready to speak out in such a dialogue as there is that psychology is ready to listen. The bridge will not be built by the complete acquiescence of theology to the reductionistic assumptions of psychology, or by relinquishing such key religious postulates as providence and resurrection" (Oden, 165).

Since writing those words in his 1979 book, **AGENDA FOR THEOLOGY: RECOVERING CHRISTIAN ROOTS,** Oden has gone on to write a pastoral theology as well as a multi-volume set entitled **CLASSICAL PASTORAL CARE** and a study of the pastoral theology of Gregory the Great, **CARE OF SOULS IN THE CLASSIC TRADITION.** In each of these works, Oden attempts to re-connect day to day pastoral work with classical Christian theology rather than psychological theories or managerial techniques.

Braaten, Pruyser, Willimon, and Oden write in light of the collapse of theology and practice in the so-called mainline, liberal churches. David Wells turns his attention to a similar failure within conservative or evangelical circles. In a series of three books: **NO PLACE FOR THE TRUTH OR WHATEVER HAPPENED TO EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY?** (1993), **GOD IN THE WASTELAND: THE REALITY OF TRUTH IN A WORLD OF FADING DREAMS** (1994), and **LOSING OUR VIRTUE: WHY THE CHURCH MUST RECOVER ITS MORAL VISION** (1998), Wells provides an analysis of the state of theology and church life among American Evangelicals. Wells notes that "many evangelicals believe in the innocence of modern culture and for that reason exploit it and are exploited by it that they are unable to believe in all the truth that once characterized this Protestant orthodoxy" (Wells, **NO PLACE FOR THE TRUTH,** 11).

For our purposes here it is worthwhile to note Well's criticism of the understanding of ministry within contemporary evangelicalism as it is shaped by therapeutic and or managerial categories. Within evangelicalism as within liberalism, the training of pastors has become biased against theology and oriented toward the imparting of professional skills. Witness the claims of the Pastoral Leadership Institute in our own circles! Wells writes "It is not hard to see why clergy should have embarked on their on movement toward professionalization. After all, that is how other professionals acquired their standing in society. It was by gaining control over their specialized fields that medical doctors, lawyers, architects, accountants, and engineers secured their own space and social standing for themselves. Professionalization, however, is itself a culture, and the values by which it operates are not always friendly to pastoral calling and character. For the most part, American clergy have not understood this. They grabbed at professionalization like a drowning man might grab at a life jacket, but having been thus saved, they must now live by its limitations and dictates" (Wells, 246).

My colleague at Fort Wayne, Dr. Pittelko says that the Missouri Synod has become the garbage collector of American Christianity. As fads run their course in other denominations, we seem to pick them up in the LCMS. The critiques of Oden and Willimon of the CPE Movement are not that new; they were written over twenty years ago. Yet this model seems to have gained prominence in the LCMS only recently. Likewise, the professionalization of the ministry denounced by David Wells, a theologian at Gordon Conwell-a leading evangelical seminary is eagerly embraced as innovative, creative, and "cutting edge" by some within our Synod. In collecting the theological "hand-me-downs" from other denominations we are apt to clutter our churches with junk that others have already discovered not to be that useful anyway. In doing so we also run the risk of displacing or loosing altogether the gifts that we are called to set before the world.

I have devoted a substantial section of this paper to an overview of the critiques that others have offered of current, mostly clinically-based models of pastoral care and ministerial practice. My point in providing this survey is to contrast the therapeutic model with the understanding of pastoral theology that under girds the ongoing practice of confession and absolution in the Evangelical-Lutheran congregation. To put it another way, you can't patch old cloth with new; you can't pour new wine into old wine skins. The therapeutic model of pastoral ministry is incapable of sustaining the practice of confession and absolution evangelically understood. In the remainder of this presentation, how the practice of confession and absolution might be utilized in the Lutheran parish not as a therapeutic tool but as the locus of genuine pastoral care.

Our practice of confession/absolution must grow out of Evangelical-Lutheran theology. "It is taught among us that private absolution should be retained and not allowed to fall into disuse" says Article XI of the Augsburg Confession. Martin Luther was no less adamant in the Large Catechism: "If you are a Christian, you should be glad to run more than a hundred miles for confession, not under compulsion but rather coming and compelling us to offer it...Therefore, when I urge you to go to confession, I am simply urging you to be a Christian" (LC: "A Brief Exhortation to Confession, 30,32, Tappert). In spite of these and other clear statements in the Lutheran Confessions, the practice of private confession and absolution is regarded by many as an archaic relic left behind by the Reformation and replaced by more relevant and psychologically sound methods of pastoral care.

A recovery of private confession/absolution entails a rediscovery of the Evangelical-Lutheran doctrine of repentance. In the Augustana, the practice of confession/absolution (Article XI) is joined to the doctrine of repentance (Article XII). The Lutheran Reformation has been characterized as a struggle over the doctrine of repentance. Already in the first of his Ninety-Five Theses, Luther writes "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said 'Repent' (Matt. 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance" (AE 31:25). Reacting against Rome's doctrine of repentance as an occasional activity that Christians were required to engage in, and the subsequent practice of selling indulgences, Luther taught that repentance is the natural rhythm of the Christian life set in motion at Baptism and continuing until Baptism's completion in the resurrection of the body.

Luther's insight is reflected in Article XII of the Augsburg Confession where true repentance is defined as "nothing else than to have contrition and sorrow or terror on account of sin, and yet at the same time to believe the Gospel or absolution." Repentance is not the self-contrived sorrow of the penitent, but "the true sorrow of the heart, suffering, and pain of death" (SA III:iii,

Tappert, 304) produced by the hammer of God's law along with "faith, which is born of the Gospel."

This Lutheran doctrine of repentance re-focuses the practice of confession/absolution. Gone is the insistence that all sins be enumerated. Freed from coercion and fear, confession was retained for the sake of the absolution. Thus the Large Catechism: "We urge you, however, to confess and express your needs, not for the purpose of performing a work but to hear what God wishes to say to you. The Word or absolution, I say, is what you should concentrate on, magnifying and cherishing it as a great and wonderful treasure to be accepted with all praise and gratitude" (Tappert, 459).

Article XII rejoices in the absolution. All that diminishes absolution is rejected. All that diminishes absolution is rejected. Perfectionists who claim that real Christians cannot fall into sin are rejected. The Novatians who denied absolution to those who sin after Baptism are condemned for their false teaching undermines the forgiveness of sins won by Christ and bestowed in His Word. Finally Article XII rejects the opinion that remission of sins is obtained by human satisfaction rather than through faith in Christ.

Absolution is nothing less than the very voice of God Himself. Article XXV expands upon Article XII: "We also teach that God requires us to believe this absolution as much as if we heard God's voice from heaven, that we should joyfully comfort ourselves with absolution, and that we should know that through such faith we obtain forgiveness of sins" (Tappert, 62). Spoken from the human lips of a pastor, the absolution is the very Word of the Lord Himself. More than a mere "assurance," absolution is "the true voice of the Gospel" (AP XII). It is on account of the absolution that the Augsburg Confession holds private confession in such high esteem and insists that it "not be allowed to fall into disuse."

The fact of the matter is that private confession has fallen into disuse in our churches. It is beyond the parameters of this paper to review and analysis the causes of this displacement. The studies of others such as Paul Lang and Fred Precht trace the history of the loss. A survey of the treatment of private confession or lack thereof in the textbooks of pastoral theology in the Missouri Synod might also prove revealing. The same could be said for the catechesis for the Fifth Chief Part in the various synodical expositions of the Small Catechism. But that, too, will need to wait for another time. Rather this morning I would like to reflect on how we might work toward the recovery of private confession in our parishes on account of the treasure of holy absolution.

A salutary restoration of private confession will be anchored in preaching and catechesis. Marsha Witten's study of sermons on the parable of the prodigal son preached in Presbyterian and Southern Baptism pulpits demonstrates how the language of secularity has overcome such biblical motifs of atonement, repentance, and faith. Fulfillment of self is substituted for the forgiveness of sins. Sin is spoken of only in a most general sense with preachers carefully crafting their language to cushion the blow of judgment. Secular categories such as victimization and alienation replace biblical categories of depravity, death, hell, and wrath. With such a muted preaching of the law it comes as no surprise that the Gospel is likewise reduced to a generic message of divine love that opens the way for self-acceptance. Preaching itself becomes therapeutic in its aims as it seeks either to soothe psychological hurts or give wise counsel for sanctified living. Against such a homiletical backdrop, private confession will seen at best as one

of many helpful techniques to relieve guilt and at worse it will be seen as irrelevant and perhaps harmful to a well-balanced, integrated spiritual life that can be achieved by following prescribed principles.

Over against the kind of preaching observed and described by Witten, Evangelical-Lutheranism understands preaching as that dual work of God by which He both kills and enlivens. God's words are performative. The words of God's law bring the death to the sinner, stripping him of all excuses and taking away every idol that he would use for self-justification. The words of the Gospel actually bestow deliverance from sin, death, and hell. Law preaching not only condemns the evil deeds of the flesh; it brings our good works under divine judgment as Luther made clear in his Heidelberg Theses. Gospel preaching moves beyond assurance and encouragement to actually deliver the benefits of Christ's atonement to those who live under the law's death sentence. Such preaching is never merely descriptive. It is not that preachers preach about law and Gospel but rather that they preach law and Gospel.

Only in the context of law/Gospel preaching will the value of private confession be appreciated and the gift of holy absolution be treasured. The practice of private confession is actually an extension of such preaching. Genuine evangelical preaching proclaims a "located God." God is for us where He puts Himself for us- in the water of Baptism, in the body and blood present and distributed in the Supper, and in the words proclaimed in sermon and spoken in absolution. It is not that the forgiving words proclaimed in the sermon are somehow less than the words of absolution spoken to the individual penitent. The gifts of Christ are never piecemeal. Forgiveness of sins does not come in bits and pieces. There are no levels of forgiveness. Rather the Smalcald Articles confess that the Gospel "offers counsel and help against sin in more than one way, for God is surpassingly rich in his grace" (SA III:IV, Tappert, 310). The forgiveness of sins proclaimed in the sermon is not to be played off against the forgiveness of sins proclaimed in absolution to the individual penitent. In the abundance of His merciful will to save sinners, God has given us both sermon and absolution. The great value of individual absolution is that in these words God would give to the penitent the certainty that this forgiveness is indeed "for you."

Following the example of Luther's "A Brief Exhortation to Confession" in the Large Catechism, pastors will extol confession in their preaching: "Thus we teach what a wonderful, precious, and comforting thing confession is, and we urge that such a precious blessing should not be despised, especially when we consider our great need" (Tappert, 460). Very practically this means that pastors ought to look for those places in the lectionary, where the text invites (and yes even compels) that we give exposition to the benefits of confession for the sake of the absolution. For starters pay special attention to the Sundays in Advent and Lent. The penitential seasons especially afford bountiful opportunities for the preacher to set before the congregation the blessings of confession/absolution. A midweek Lenten series on the penitential psalms or a series devoted to Psalm 51 alone would provide another opportunity to proclaim confession/absolution as the concrete expression of the life of repentance and faith.

Careful and continuous catechesis of confession/absolution is essential. Fortunately the 1986 translation of the Small Catechism restores Luther's "A Short Form of Confession" to the Fifth Chief Part. Here the catechist will follow the path of the Catechism itself in teaching both what confession is and how confession is to be made. This catechization ought to continue in other contexts within the congregation as well such as youth retreats, adult Bible classes, study sessions built into regularly scheduled meetings of the board of elders and/or the church council.

Peter Bender's LUTHERAN CATECHESIS and Harold Senkbeil's DYING TO LIVE: THE POWER OF FORGIVENESS provide excellent and accessible material for such teaching. Jobst Schoene's short monograph, THE CHRISTOLOGICAL CHARACTER OF THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTRY AND THE ROYAL PRIESTHOOD lends itself well for use as a study document with the board of elders or other lay leaders in the congregation in helping them to understand God's ordering of the office of the ministry and the function of that office in delivering Christ's forgiveness.

In catechizing his people the pastor will need to make it clear that confession/absolution is the ordinary means of pastoral care in the church. It need not be reserved only for extraordinary circumstances or situations. Therefore it is salutary to establish and announce set times at which the pastor will be available for confession/absolution. Setting aside a period of time each week for confession/absolution has several advantages. First, it says to the congregation that confession/absolution is indeed is a natural part of the church's life and the ordinary means of pastoral care. Confession/absolution is not reserved for desperate cases or extraordinary expressions of sinfulness. Second, it provides an avenue for those who have never taken advantage of this gift to approach their pastor without awkwardness. Third, it reminds our people that confession/absolution is there for them. The weekly announcement in the church bulletin or on the sign in front of the building gently reminds parishioners of this gift. Knowing that confession/absolution is regularly offered often prompts people who do not come at the scheduled time to seek out confession/absolution at other times when they are pressed hard by their sin and tormented by Satan.

One of the issues that the pastor must face is the question of which rite to use. At this point there are basically two choices. First, there is Luther's "Short Form of Confession" in the Small Catechism. The advantages of this form are its brevity and evangelical clarity. It quickly moves the penitent to the point of confessing his or her sins and receiving absolution. A disadvantage of this form is that Luther provides something of a sample confession that is helpful for teaching but cumbersome for the penitent who attempts to put it in his or her own words. Second, there is the order for individual confession and absolution in LUTHERAN WORSHIP. Much longer than Luther's simple form, the LW rite is wordy and ends up with three confessions of sin. Somewhat problematic also is the placement of rubric 5 after the naming of the sins but before the absolution. This rubric states that "the pastor may then offer admonition and comfort from Holy Scripture." A more fitting place for such pastoral speaking would be after the Absolution so as to catechize the penitent on how to embrace the word of forgiveness and so use that word against the assaults of the devil. Peter Bender offers an order of private confession and absolution adapted from the Small Catechism and LUTHERAN WORSHIP (see LUTHERAN CATECHESIS, 217-220) that avoids the wordiness of the LW rite while providing a structure that is easily followed by the penitent.

The rite itself ought to take place in the chancel when possible. If the pastor is engaged in pastoral conversation or counseling with someone in his study and that conversation leads to a request for confession/absolution, I suggest that the pastor and penitent move from the study to the chancel. This along with the fact that the pastor is vested in surplice or alb with stole serves to indicate the churchly nature of confession/absolution.

A few things need to be said about the actual hearing of confession. The pastor best learns how to listen to confession by himself being a penitent under the care of a father confessor. Often-

especially in the case of a first time penitent-the pastor will need to gently guide the penitent in making confession. Here the Small Catechism provides direction:

What sins should we confess?

Before God we should plead guilty of all sins, even those we are not aware of, as we do in the Lord's Prayer; but before the pastor we should confess only those sins which we know and feel in our hearts.

Which are these?

Consider your place in life according to the Ten Commandments: Are you a father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, or worker? Have you been disobedient, unfaithful, or lazy? Have you been hot-tempered, rude, or quarrelsome? Have you hurt someone by your words or deeds? Have you stolen, been negligent, wasted anything, or done any harm?

The diagnostic key is self-examination in view of one's vocation or place in life according to the Ten Commandments. Here the pastor does not unduly probe or coerce; he is not a moral detective. Rather he bids the penitent to stand before the mirror of God's law so that the inbred sin is brought to light to paraphrase the words of the hymn. Here the pastor will need to be attentive to the words of the penitent guiding the penitent away from complaining about his or her sins to actually confessing them, naming them. When there is confusion or lack of clarity here, the pastor may need to press the penitent to identify which commandment of God he or she has sinned against. Likewise the pastor will be on guard lest the penitent slip into the adamic mode of confessing the sins of another: "The woman you put here with me-she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it" (Genesis 3:12).

The pastoral care of the penitent includes training the penitent to draw his or her life from God's merciful and gracious words of absolution. Absolution is God's verdict. In this word He declares sinners righteous, and gives life to the dead. I think that it was Gerhard Forde who described absolution as the verdict of the last day spoken ahead of time. In the face of satan's hellish accusations and his demonic invitation to doubt, the pastor teaches the penitent to cling to that word of absolution when confronted by the father of lies.

The pastor will also help his people understand what absolution does and does not accomplish. Absolution is that word of the crucified and living Lord in the mouth of His pastors that "is just and valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself." Because it is the Word of the Lord it is truth. Heaven and earth may pass away, but this Word from the mouth of the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life endures forever.

Absolution delivers an eschatological reality. It is not a quick fix for psychological disorders or difficulties. It does not follow that one will "feel better" after confession and absolution. The opposite may be true. The penitent may still need psychological counseling from those whose calling it is to provide this service in the kingdom of the left hand. The pastor will want to shepherd the penitent in such a way as to guard against false expectations regarding the effects of absolution so that he or she learns to hold fast to this Word even under the crosses and afflictions which still must be borne in this life.

In the Large Catechism, Luther writes "Further we believe in this Christian church we have the forgiveness of sins, which is granted through the holy sacraments and absolution as well as through all the comforting words of the entire Gospel. Toward forgiveness is directed everything that is to be preached concerning the sacraments and, in short, the entire Gospel and all the duties of Christianity. Forgiveness is needed constantly, for although God's grace has been won by Christ, and holiness has been wrought by the Holy Spirit through God's Word in the unity of the Christian church, yet because we are encumbered with our flesh we are never without sin. Therefore everything in the Christian church is so ordered that we may daily obtain full forgiveness of sins through the Word and through signs appointed to comfort and revive our consciences as long as we live" (LC II:54-55, Tappert, 418). Do we really believe these words of the Large Catechism? Or do we, in fact, believe that everything in the Christian church is so ordered that other goals-numerical growth, healthy families, self-esteem, deepened spirituality, or whatever may be achieved? How pastors and congregations view confession/absolution will, in large part, reveal what they understand about not only the church but also about the very heart of the Gospel-the forgiveness of sins.

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