

The Office of the Keys and Confession and its Relationship to the Brief Order of Confession and Forgiveness

A reappraisal of the Lutheran pre-service order for the Mass
toward a recovery of sacramental absolution

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ABSTRACT / THESIS

Corporate Confession and Forgiveness, although not a historic part of the ordo of the Mass, has after several centuries of use as a preparatory rite, come to be regarded by American Lutherans as an essential preparation for the Sunday liturgy. We need to consider the possibility that this post 16th century addition of another ordinary by which to lead the Sunday assembly to the Word of God is problematic in the celebration of the Gospel. Its use has eroded and supplanted the sacrament of Confession and Absolution, while it also presupposes the Mass, both the preaching of the Word and the celebration of the Eucharist. It advances the presumption that the human act of a general confession of sins and sinfulness can secure God's forgiveness, making the Mass virtually irrelevant.

INTRODUCTION AND THESIS

For those who wish to work at reintroducing Lutheran parishes to the practice of Private Confession and Absolution, there will be rough spots on the road. I vividly remember a somewhat typical incident from a former parish of mine, now more than a dozen years ago. A man was outraged when I posted a dedicated time when I would be available to hear confessions. So outraged was he that he couldn't keep it to himself; he proceeded to try to stir up the congregation. When I went to see him about this, he was red in the face with anger, adamant that Martin Luther had freed Lutherans from such "Catholic things," as he said. He argued, "It's in the 95 Theses!" He obviously hadn't recently read them, and I readily understood that a discussion would be hopeless. He shortly told me to get out of his house and not come back, where upon he left the room. His non-Lutheran, nonmember wife offered an embarrassed apology. He continued infrequently to come to church thereafter, but made an obvious point of never again coming to Communion during my remaining years as pastor, most certainly because he and everyone else was very conscious of the fact that I had introduced every-Sunday Communion. Given his confrontational stance, it would also have been hopeless to ask him about his new abstinence. Fortunately, he has by now resumed communion fellowship, but as of my visit in the parish this Summer, he remains politely unreconciled to me personally.

Hopefully you have had less painful issues with members of your parish if they thought you were perhaps out of step with the church for promoting the Office of the Keys and Confession. If it was

more generally known that the Rule of our Society promotes this sacramental practice, I suspect we might all the more be considered out of step.

As members of STS, we have considered with whom we wish to be in step. That is, not with the Evangelical Christian community which avoids pronouncements of absolution as part of their tent-meeting-revival strategy to keep followers in protracted need, fearing they might perhaps go in peace, seldom to return. Nor is it with the Roman Catholic Church which has seen its practice of confession self-destruct, perhaps for reason of its legalism. Furthermore, there are many in our own Lutheran family who would say, "What's your problem? Our Lutheran liturgy has for centuries begun Sunday worship with the Brief Order of Confession and Forgiveness. That's a better way for these days!" And then there is also the world, every ready to justify itself for spiritual abstinence, expressing in rebuttal a concern for the so called innocent who are thought to be enslaved anew by this old pastoral practice we seek to revive.

We I trust prefer to be in step with our Lord who instituted the sacrament of the Confession and Absolution in the Upper Room on the evening of Easter as reported by St. John. With the completion of the work of the redemption of humanity, Jesus appeared to his disciples to empower them to be his apostles to the world. He greeted them, and immediately gave them the keys of heaven: "'As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'" (John 20:21-23)

We understand that commissioning as fortifying the church's entire ministry of the Gospel — it's the very foundation of our pastoral ministry and the very words of our call as pastors. This call and authorization to forgive and to retain sin must be understood as well of individual pastoral applications of Law and Gospel, taking the format of Individual Confession and Absolution, or Individual Confession and Forgiveness, as its called in the LBW & ELW. It needs to be practiced as the primary element in pastoral care. *It is the heart of everything a pastor does and is.* I especially mean that it must often be included in hospital or bedside visits, because unconfessed sin often lies under the surface of much physical crisis; and in a specialized format, C&A needs, by all means, to be part of a pastoral ministry at a death bed. The church dare not fail to preach and teach the glory of being absolved from sin. As Jim Nestingen has recently powerfully pointed out, "The absolution is the present form of the resurrection of the dead."^[1]

However, the edge of my thesis is that any *general and public* confession of sins or sinfulness, is a different matter entirely. I'm referring to such pre-service rites as the LBW *Brief Order of Confession and Forgiveness*, or the new LSB page 151 counterpart, boldly called, *Confession and Absolution*. These I will hereafter refer to as Confession and Forgiveness (C&F). They are inconsistent with, and not an alternative to the Office of the Keys, or individual private confession and absolution, which I will hereafter refer to as Confession and Absolution (C&A).

The sacrament of C&A, unlike C&F, explicitly calls on individual penitents to confess sin as specifically as possible for the assurance of an equally specific absolution. When Jesus in the Upper Room said, "If you forgive the sins of any...", by *any* he surely meant any specific believer, not to be confused with everyone in a public gathering. Consequently, this then also had in mind specific sins being confessed by that specific penitent sinner.

While it's useful, on certain penitential occasions, to include a rite of C&F in public worship, it's inappropriate to conclude such a rite with an absolution appropriated from the Office of the Keys, as current rites of C&F are bold to do. And, it would be far better to place such a rite in the context of the intercessions and the sharing of the Peace, that is, after the Word has been heard and preached. The Word with its law and gospel ought not to be superseded or anticipated by C&F in a preface to Sunday worship, but allowed to inspire confession of sin.

Furthermore, my thesis suggests that so long as we continue to offer C&F as a preface to the Sunday Eucharist, we will continue to undermine the recovery of the sacrament of C&A, especially so if the common inappropriate absolution is offered. This is the most formidable rough spot on the road to recovering the sacrament of C&A. Most Christians simply do not recognize that the relatively easy road of C&F is not a road to an effective divine assurance of forgiveness for sins that we "feel on our heart." Any such pronouncements of so called absolution will fail to satisfy.

MARTIN LUTHER ON CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION

Having mostly fleshed out my thesis, I prefer to begin with Martin Luther who did consider and encourage C&F, but not as though it were the sacrament of the Office of the Keys. Consider, first of all, Luther's 1529 *Large Catechism*, or the *German Catechism*, as Luther originally titled it. Specifically, in a revised edition of the same year, Luther added a section on confession, entitled, *A Brief Exhortation To Confess*. In it he writes,

Note, then, as I have often said, that confession consists of two parts. The first is my work and act, when I lament my sin and desire comfort and restoration for my soul. The second is a work which God does, when he absolves me of my sins through a word placed in the mouth of a man. This is the surpassingly grand and noble thing that makes confession so wonderful and comforting. In the past we placed all the emphasis on our work alone, and we were only concerned whether we had confessed purely [completely] enough. We neither noticed nor preached the very necessary second part; it was just as if our confession were simply a good work with which we could satisfy God. Where the confession was not made perfectly and in complete detail, we were told that the absolution was not valid and the sin was not forgiven. Thereby the people were driven to the point that everyone inevitably despaired of confessing so purely (which is impossible), and nobody could feel his conscience at peace or have confidence in his absolution. Thus the precious confession was not only made useless to us but it also became burdensome and bitter, to the manifest harm and destruction of souls.^[2]

Note two things. First, Luther has written that absolution is, "a word placed in the mouth of a man," when we might have expected the phrase, "in the mouth of a pastor." As we will again later need to note, Luther didn't restrict the practice of C&A to the province of the holy Ministry, although that would be its critical use, as he assumed in the *Small Catechism* explanation of the Office of the Keys. With this phrase he means to emphasize the sacramental character of confession in that there is a visible means for the word of absolution in the form of a speaking / concrete representative of Christ himself.

But our primary attention is drawn here to how Luther understands that our Lord's sacrament had come to be distorted. I say this not to cast stones at long dead erring bishops, but to consider how the Spirit would now lead us forward. Luther believed that Jesus had in mind the need of a Christian who has a guilty conscience, for which the assurance of forgiveness needs to be gained on the basis of faith and for peace. *The Christian's desire to be holy must not be compromised by a sin that is unresolved.* Jesus therefore sent his apostles and ministers to hear out troubled sinners, or to confront a professing Christian about a public sin, and then to either absolve, or bind that person for God's judgment, if necessary, in the face of impenitence.

Luther is here reforming the church which had come to demand that confession must include a recitation of all sin, even those for which guilt has been assuaged by progressive sanctification, and even those sins that refuse to come to mind. Luther had concern both for the tortured penitent, as well as the beleaguered or possibly even voyeuristic confessor.

In the opening paragraph of the same article, Luther had written:

Concerning confession, we have always taught that it should be voluntary and purged of the pope's tyranny. We have been set free from his coercion and from the intolerable burden he imposed upon the Christian church. Up to now, as we all know from experience, there has been no law quite so oppressive as that which forced everyone to make confession on pain of the gravest mortal sin. Moreover, it so greatly burdened and tortured consciences with the enumeration of all kinds of sin that no one was able to confess purely enough. Worst of all, no one taught or understood what confession is and how useful and comforting it is. Instead, it was made sheer anguish and a hellish torture since people had to make confession even though nothing was more hateful to them."[\[3\]](#)

We are relieved by this strong emphasis on confession needing to remain voluntary and restricted to those sins for which one questions God's promise of forgiveness, even as one tries to take refuge in Jesus Christ.

It had always been correctly perceived by the church that guilt for a specific sin needed to be specifically addressed. But such guilt is not confronted and relieved by a general admission of sinfulness. Until a sin comes readily to mind and produces spiritual incapacitation, there is no guilt that as yet can or needs to be managed.

At the same time, Luther did see the value of making also a general confession of sins. This is a matter of finding and practicing an appropriate humility over against God. His grace isn't wonderful and glorious until we recognize ourselves to be the hopeless sinners we in fact still are. Consequently, Luther wrote an aside in this same article:

To begin with, I have said that in addition to the confession which we are discussing here there are two other kinds, which have an even greater right to be called the Christian's common confession. I refer to the practice of confessing to God alone or to our neighbor alone, begging for forgiveness. These two kinds are expressed in the Lord's Prayer when we say, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors," etc. Indeed, the whole Lord's Prayer is nothing else than such a confession. For what is our prayer but a confession that we neither have nor do what we ought and a plea for grace and a happy conscience? This kind of confession should and must take place incessantly as long as we live.[\[4\]](#)

Speaking here of two other kinds of confession which are to be encouraged along side of C&A., the first kind he noted is that of confessing our sin to God alone. Here we bring to mind the familiar words from the *Small Catechism*: "Before God we should plead guilty of all sins, even of those we do not know, *as we do in the Lord's Prayer*." This prayer, prayed in the plural, is recognized by Luther as a corporate general confession. Rather than envisioning a corporate general confession at the opening of every Sunday's Eucharist — as it's commonly practiced among Lutherans today — Luther recognized the utility of the Lord's Prayer to confess our sins and sinfulness to God as a regular routine.

Carefully consider that Luther surely understood that the Lord's Prayer had its special place in the Mass immediately prior to the Communion. While the Lord's Prayer is certainly prayed at other times, even several times per day, its celebrated place in the primary liturgy of God's people is as the final petition of the Eucharistic Prayer. There it has the role of a grand collect, gathering all the Kyries of the church and its members for the mercy we hunger to receive in the Communion. It is a unique confession of sin which waits on the absolution offered under the forms of bread and wine. Having by then heard the words of God's Law and Gospel in the Scripture lessons, and their explication in the sermon, worshipers are then Christians who are consciously responding to this Word with a confession of sinfulness and an appeal for grace. That confession is therefore an inspiration of God, as opposed to a *human* act in a liturgy spoken before there has been any hearing and conditioning by God's Word. This latter confession can for that reason be classified as a sacrificial effort, a human initiative in the interest of making peace with God to win his favor for whatever personal benefit — a purification rite, forestalling and disarming his law.

The second of the two kinds of confessions of sin which Luther considered here, aside from formal C&A, is to confess our sin to "our neighbor alone." And since his context for this is also the Lord's Prayer which is prayed prior to Communion, it's assumed that this confession to the neighbor has been made and is now being laid before the Father. In the following paragraph he writes:

Similarly the second confession, which each Christian makes toward his neighbor, is included in the Lord's Prayer. We are to confess our guilt before one another and forgive one another before we come into God's presence to beg for forgiveness.^[5]

However, we might note in passing that ordinarily C&F, as a pre-service rite, is primarily a begging for forgiveness from God without any direct relationship or communication with our neighbor in whose debt we may be.

Luther obviously has in mind the teaching of Jesus, recorded in Matthew 5:23-24: "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift."

Furthermore, in this same article, Luther discussed the private meeting or reconciliation a Christian may need to have with any other Christian:

Besides this public, daily, and necessary confession, there is also the secret confession which takes place privately before a single brother. When some problem or quarrel sets us at one another's throats and we cannot settle it, and yet we do not find ourselves

sufficiently strong in faith, we may at any time and as often as we wish lay our complaint before a brother, seeking his advice, comfort, and strength. This type of confession is not included in the commandment like the other two but is left to everyone to use whenever he needs it. Thus by divine ordinance Christ himself has entrusted absolution to his church and commanded us to absolve one another from sins. So if there is a heart that feels its sin and desires consolation, it has here a sure refuge when it hears in God's Word that through a man God looses and absolves him from his sins. "[6]

Thus we see that Luther understands the Office of the Keys as being broader than the ministry of the organized church with her ordained clergy. Here we have an expression of the so called "priesthood of all believers." Luther wants this to be operating all week and then brought to God for ratification or review prior to the Communion as the Lord's Prayer concludes our prayers for the great weekly absolution in the upper room.

A Christian is therefore pictured by Luther in the *Large Catechism*, not as standing just inside the door of the church, defensively making a general confession of sin, supposedly preparing the heart and mind for Sunday worship, but as being at the portal of Communion, calling to mind the necessary reconciliation concerning specific sins with any neighbor, which either has been done or neglected. This is to be a daily practice which Christians can't relegate to Sunday, or accomplish via a general confession with others.

Luther's rationale in this entire matter of confession is that of restoring a good conscience for the sake of peace and fruitfulness. We hear this in his virtual rhapsody about the blessings derived from confession for its divine absolution. He essentially envisions Christians, not as having the consciousness of being a miserable sinner, nor for the church to self-righteously and persistently view them as such, but as dedicated disciples of Christ who are frequently in need of having their blessedness reaffirmed by a personal word from God. Only so can they bear any cross that comes in partnership with Christ, or any personal struggle with faith-suffocating temptations to evil, as opposed to perceiving and fearing a cross as a penalty for sin.

Such is Luther's 1529 *Large Catechism* understanding of the place and role of individual or private C&A before a pastor as Christ's representative, as well as the usage of corporate general confession of sins and sinfulness. In the following year of 1530, in his article *The Keys*, he wrote at greater length on C&A while not again discussing C&F. Let's briefly consider the additional substance of that article to understand the uniqueness of C&A over against C&F.

The Keys is a 60 page article of which the first 30 pages is a rant concerning four abuses of the Keys: 1) misinterpretation of *bind* in Matt. 16:19 to mean that Peter and the popes may command or make laws; 2) that the absolution in confession is uncertain by reason of a possibly insufficient repentance; 3) that the Keys give the pope power over every other ruler as well as knowledge to judge all laws, doctrines, business and questions, both secular and divine; 4) and finally, that for the sake of exercising power, the church has overlooked its real work of binding and loosing real sins, being particularly more interested in binding than loosing.

Thereafter, Luther writes about the real basis and true nature of the keys. He teaches that Christ binds himself to our work of exercising the keys. Note this delightful illustration of his point:

He who does not accept what the keys give receives, of course, nothing. But this is not the key's fault. Many do not believe the gospel, but this does not mean that the gospel is not true or effective. A king gives you a castle. If you do not accept it, then it's not the king's fault, nor is he guilty of a lie. But you have deceived yourself and the fault is yours. The king certainly gave it.^[7]

Of interest to us who must exercise the keys, Luther argues that the pastor who hears a confession is as bound to believe the effectiveness of the absolution as is the penitent.

For he who binds and looses without faith, and doubts whether he succeeds in binding and loosing rightly, or thinks to himself quite unconcernedly, well, if the key hits the mark, it hits the mark, that man blasphemes God and denies Christ, tramples the keys underfoot, and is worse than a heathen, Turk or Jew.^[8]

Furthermore, Luther retrieves for the congregation the authority of excommunication since the congregation reasonably must itself judge and protect its own membership. The pastor by virtue of his call and its authority is to advise the congregation, as St. Paul (1 Cor. 5:1) advised the Corinthians, but the congregation, and certainly not the pope, must be the one to take such action to put any member under the ban. Presumably, this is what the Corinthian congregation did as urged by St. Paul.

In addition, Luther teaches the essential need of C&A, making the point that "no human being can console a truly frightened sinful conscience;" it's like having a "severe illness;" it calls for forcefully stressing faith in the judgment of the keys.

In this regard, hear this pure Luther quote

In times of deep distress, with our conscience accusing us, we may say: Well then! I have been absolved of my sins, however many and great they may be, by means of the key, on which I may rely. Let no one remind me of my sins any longer. All are gone, forgiven, forgotten. He who promises me, 'Whatever you loose shall be loosed,' does not lie; this I know. If my repentance is not sufficient, his Word is; if I am not worthy, his keys are: He is faithful and true. My sins shall not make a liar of him.^[9]

Finally, Luther stresses once more that the keys demand no works from Christians either before or after C&A. He again attacks the papal teaching that Christians should catalogue and recall sins out of fear of hell so as to create contrition, which supposedly would then earn grace and the right for the Keys. Repentance, Luther writes, should arise from joy and love based on the promise on God's Word. God is truly pleased when we have joyful fear and trembling.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

With this foundation from Luther, allow me to shift gears.

In my parish experience, and I dare say in your, the most quintessential community worship occurs on Christmass Eve and Easter Sunday. Therefore I always tried to enhance especially these

occasions with the most gracious time honored shape possible, given the parish context. Even in parishes that had a limited experience with a formal entrance rite with processions, I ordinarily introduced the festival Eucharist with whatever of such ritual that I could get away with. My studied conviction was that it's good to take advantage of the church's evolution of the most effective way to open hearts to listen to God. In particular, it seemed to me that an introspective element, such as C&F — a relatively modern and non-catholic innovation — was out of step with the essential task to symbolize and celebrate the arriving special presence of God. No last minute time-out for repentance would appease God; he would not be present or revealing for such reason, nor in fact because of any human words or effort. His coming is always one of unilateral grace in the face of human need. When God comes according to promise, the only appropriate response is praise and joy, and excitement to be hearing his Word. Such is the better form of repentance — faith in grace, and a willingness to be further graced with help to amend life by the Spirit.

My discomfort with the use of C&F at a festival Eucharist, where it seemed to be so blatantly at odds with the essential tone of the Eucharist as a whole, and the mood and flow of the entrance rite in particular, led me to reevaluate its worth and appropriateness at any Eucharist. Over the years, I then chafed more and more at leading C&F because I came to sense that the confession of the congregation was commonly a perfunctory act, or worse yet, that its absolution was possibly on occasion actually received as a genuine absolution. It became uncomfortable to speak an absolution that couldn't really be an absolution because of its general broadcast. It seemed to put me into Luther's category of speaking an absolution "unconcernedly, well, if the key hits the mark, it hits the mark." I didn't want to trample the keys and be regarded as worse than a heathen or Turk. I wanted no company with ancient or modern false prophets who simply assured God's people that everything was OK.

From comfortably reasoning and eventually dispensing with C&F in the whole of the Easter and Christmass season, I soon found whatever excuse I could to skip C&F. I was further encouraged with this because of the struggle to successfully invite my people to come to C&A. This suggested that C&F was thought by them to already be quite sufficient.

I was considerably reaffirmed in such sensibilities by providentially discovering a counter intentional quotation from an early 20th century liturgical scholar. Pius Parsch, an Augustinian of Klosterneuburg had noted that in the early Christian centuries nothing was done to provide a rite of contrition as he thought had been suggested by the *Didache* prior to celebrating the Eucharist. He then observed: "[T]he primitive Church considered themselves 'a holy people,' nor did it possess the clearly defined consciousness of sin of medieval and modern times. It did not, therefore, see the need for a special rite of purification."^[10] That led me more seriously to consider the biblical words, especially of St. John and St. Paul, that God's people *should* regard themselves as his holy people, as opposed to still or repeatedly being in fundamental need of conversion and confession of basic sinfulness.

I ask, is this "consciousness of sin," which Pius Parsch dates to medieval times, a reasonable, biblical, or possibly a debilitating force? Reviewing the worship of the OT people of God, especially as we have it in the Psalms, allows us to point to relatively few penitential Psalm, but to ever so many Psalms which stress the operative righteousness of those who by faith believe they are God's chosen people. The epistles of John, notably I John 3, challenges Christians to live righteously by accepting as a working principle that they are saints who do not sin — meaning that they do not sin

intentionally, thus living under grace. St. Paul was making the same point in Rom. 7-8 where he speaks of Christians "who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit." (8:4) His Corinthian congregation was at the time of his epistles to them his noted exception: not "spiritual people," not ready for solid food, needing milk, i.e., law to inspire confession of specific sins (1 Cor. 3:1-3). So also writes the author of Hebrews (5:12—6:3) wishing Christians would "go on to perfection," not being infants feeding on milk, but concerned with solid food. This author of Scripture would, it seems to me, not have approved of beginning every worship by revisiting conversion via a general confession of sin. Rather he encouraged: "not laying again the foundation: repentance from dead works and faith towards God." The NT is quite consistent in this, and in summary, we point to St. Peter's celebrated words: "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people...." (1 Peter 2)

Personally, I do at times have a troubled conscience in need of C&A, but treasuring my baptismal call and power, I have never been altogether comfortable with the rite of C&F and its wanting me to say that I'm in "bondage" to sin, which may be true enough in a certain sense. However, it runs counter to the boast of St. Paul, which is also precious to me, of being a slave of Jesus Christ. But I altogether refuse to speak the new form to confess that I'm "captive" to sin, virtually suggesting demonic possession — that's simply going too far as a contradiction of the holiness the Spirit is working out in me. Give me rather a rite which challenges me to be sanctified, helping me to daily drown my old Adam, deliciously claiming that I am baptized by my gracious God.

MEDIEVAL DEVELOPMENT

By the late medieval age, the separation of society into secular and religious — the natural result of the growth and introspective spirit of the monastic movement — had seriously eroded the consciousness of Christians that they were a holy people. Christians were being taught to live perpetually on the "anxious bench." This included religious persons who came to dominate the life of the church. And to the ordinary Christian, these appeared intimidatingly pious. Consequently, the common people then began to think less of themselves in comparison, and surely began to excuse themselves of much inappropriate behavior. It was assumed by them that they, not having been called to a "religious" life, nor having been given the gifts for it, were fated regularly to become spiritually soiled by the need to live and work in an evil and fallen world. The church came to be understood as providing a coping mechanism by its offering of C&A and the Mass. These were the ways for periodic spiritual cleansing, the unburdening of conscience for unburdening life. That was indeed operative if Confession was not a mechanical practice and if Absolution was evangelically dispensed. However, it seems that no determined redirection to a holier life was seriously expected.

Luther did and said much to restore the sacredness of a secular calling,^[11] even seeing the monastic movement as unwise, particularly for many who had been trapped into it out of an innocent and laudatory hunger for holiness.^[12] But at the same time, he apparently never outgrew the fear of his own unworthiness. Institutionalized holiness seems to have understood even venial sin as a nullification of spiritual life. Luther did raise the worth of a secular or parish priest above that of the cloistered priests by becoming one himself, but saw himself as a holy sinner. Yet if forced to place an accent on one or the other, he would have, I believe, placed the accent on holy rather than sinner.

LUTHERAN ORDERS

We need not necessarily concern ourselves today with all the details of the post-reformation liturgical evolution whereby C&F became the ordinary preface to the Sunday worship in Lutheran churches in Europe and America. Orthodoxy is, after all, not established by precedent, however long the term. But we should note that Luther had not provided the like in his *Formula Missae* or the *Deutsche Messe*, and also did not later suggest this. The other Lutheran reformers who initiated this practice had all risen from the soil of the times. It was an age greatly affected by a consciousness of sin, and they apparently, at best, nervously served God believing only in their provisional worthiness — that, for all the Lutheran emphasis on justification by faith. In particular, they were experienced with the public rite of C&F as a part of the Church's prayer offices practiced in the cloister, where it was useful in maintaining communal life. And this had by then resulted in the practice of the parish priest and his assistants of preparing themselves for the Sunday celebration by mutual C&F at the foot of the altar. The reformers added this to the service because it was thought to be useful also for parishioners. Perhaps, they thought them not sufficiently aware of sin, and that this would be a remedy for any forgetting of the expected preparation for Sunday worship. If people had overlooked the spiritual principle underlying such practices as the Saturday night bath, hadn't reviewed the Catechism, or hadn't recently gone to confession, this corporate rite was thought to generate something of the required penitence.

In subsequent times, this new practice of C&F was seen as all the more useful when Lutherans suffered the rise of Pietism, which could at first suggest a people newly devoted to holiness. But it was piety based all too much on the avoidance of sin, moralism that failed to inspire vigorous holiness — a piety founded on the law; and C&F was its natural expression. Inevitably the law will always fail to produce a regeneration toward holiness, as St. Paul had written to the Galatians: "For if a law had been given that could make alive...." (Gal. 3:21)

The Enlightenment, as well as the Great Awakening, brought with it nothing to restore the early Christian church's concept that grace produces holiness. Paul Tillich observed that "the concept of grace is quite strange" to the moralism of the Enlightenment. He goes on: "Another consequence of this is the disappearance of sacramental feeling. Sacramental thinking is meaningful only if the infinite is present in the finite, if the finite is not only subject to the commands of the infinite but has in itself saving powers, powers of the presence of the divine."^[13] That is to say, the sacramental essence of C&A, in which there is the presence of the divine, was foreign to Enlightenment thinking, with its focus only on the divine imperative. And while the Great Awakening did produce a new emphasis on missionary activity, its stress on conversion continued a moralistic piety, i.e., sacrifice as opposed to the sacramental gift of grace and holiness.

More generally, what served to consolidate the practice of C&F in the centuries since the Reformation was the gradual erosion of the practice of C&A., caused actually by a failure to replace old legalistic motivations with new evangelical teaching. In some places, such as my own youthful experience, a remnant of C&A had been preserved in a format referred to by us as *Anmeldung* — Announcement. The explicit rationale was signing up for Communion on the day before the periodic celebration of the Eucharist, a remnant of recording faithful membership in the parish. But for some conscientious pastors it was at least the occasion for a private word of encouragement — C&A lite?

— and occasionally even private sacramental C&A. With us, it was a "come to the parsonage on Saturday afternoon," and it was thus suitable for personal conversation with the pastor. We sat waiting in the downstairs parlor while anyone ahead of us was with the pastor in his upstairs study, sometimes affording pleasant conversation with the Mrs. pastor. Such were the dying gasps of C&A, visits with the pastor, which mostly failed to develop into confession of sin or a formal sacramental absolution. But it did nevertheless call us individually and personally to holiness, something which is now lacking by being an undifferentiated individual within the rite of public C&F. I recall that by the time I was in High School, this practice had evolved into a half-hour public Confessional Service as a separated tailgate prior to the Sunday morning worship for those intending to receive Communion. I believe it consisted of a hymn, penitential meditation, and corporate C&F. Being on Sunday, it avoided an interruption of the Saturday farm work, and avoided an extra trip to church.

When the LBW was published, some of us were glad to see that C&F had at least been detached from the Service. Still it took boldness for a pastor to dispense with C&F, even though it was hard to imagine that anyone had actually come to church with C&F in mind. They would miss it only on the basis of familiarity. Some pastors, myself included, refused to use it on festivals, when more elaborate entrance procession were particularly called for — when it would be particularly disjointed and counter active to the mood with which everyone had already arrived. We wanted to build on that excitement rather than interrupt it.

The recent publication of ELW was disappointing to me for pulling C&F back into the Service itself. It still has the usual two forms, originally forged out to the controversy of conditional versus unconditional absolution. The second, now barely hints at absolution, making it less objectionable to me on that score. Nevertheless, the ELW has unwittingly taken a step that may have opened a door to eventually marginalize inappropriate absolution. That is, we now have the alternative of Thanksgiving for Baptism. It too has a *may* rubric, but in that these rites are again included in the Service itself, a practice of choosing between, rather than eliminating, is strongly directed.

Perhaps, the Thanksgiving for Baptism is not a viable rite as is. It seems a bit awkward and exaggerated since all that is needed to accomplish the same is the font with water at the entrance of the church, when accompanied with evangelical teaching for regular personal use. Positively considered, it may be pointing in the right direction — an evangelical preface for the Mass. Luther suggested that we daily confess that we have been baptized. Perhaps some simpler form of such a reaffirmation and rededication would work to focus on the vocation of being holy — the proper foundation of the Mass.

Meanwhile, LCMS with its LSB now calls the Brief Order of Confession and Forgiveness *Confession and Absolution* and its first of two forms includes an explicit absolution, while the second is an announcement of available forgiveness. So there fortunately is the possibility of avoiding a declaration of absolution in a public rite, albeit, the title names this annunciation of available forgiveness, *absolution*.

C&F, AN ALIEN GOSPEL?

With this survey, let's more directly consider whether C&F is appropriate as the first part of the Mass: Consider that each Sunday's liturgy is to be a recapitulation of the story of salvation. That story did not begin with the giving of the ten commandments. It began, not in Eden at the Fall, nor at Sinai, but by a grace filled promise to Abraham. And God did not provisionally ask Abram and Sarai to admit that they were in bondage to sin. Instead, he made a promise that initiated faith and holiness: "I will bless you." (Gen. 12:2) And again, a second time, God said, "I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." (Gen. 15:1) Abraham is reported to have become righteous, i.e. holy, by faith and not by works of law. Had we known Abraham personally, we would have noted that he was imperfect even from a human point of view. But God saw him though his and Abraham's Son, and called Abraham righteous on the basis of the faithful faith that God inspired in him. Along with Sarah, he was the first of God's truly holy people. They lived that righteousness for the joy of the salvation promised; theirs was not a law based holiness, not a motivation by guilt, not grace based on contrition and confession of sinful unworthiness. Should not this pattern still work as a celebration by their children?

Why would we think it's necessary to be ritually purified via C&F before we approach God in worship since God has always and timelessly approached us first with his word of grace and promise, knowing that there is no other way to inspire love and holiness? C&F, arguably a sacrifice, should be recognized as offensive to God, and to us, in view of Christ.

By reason of this primal pattern of revelation and grace, the church's inspired liturgy ought to be, from the beginning, a restatement of God's grace unilaterally given, and then to be followed by thanksgiving for the now completed sacrifice of God's Christ through which the Spirit is pledged to come into us to make us holy with his righteousness. *That* is God's way of grace. Jesus in particular, reached out with mercy to obvious sinners who were not enjoying themselves, projecting a promise without preconditions, trusting that faith would follow with righteousness. Calling instead for an obligatory initial renunciation of sin and rededication to the law will never secure peace with God. In fact, it's a bad signal to send to any visitor as we begin Sunday worship.

The church needs to greet people as they come to worship, boldly reflecting the Gospel process, trusting that God has called them by his grace. Somehow worshipers have come, at least subconsciously, expecting that Christian worship is constructed to reveal, dramatize and make available that very gift of grace. If we begin worship by consistently reminding all that we are unreformably sinners, overlooking our justification and sanctification, is harassing them with the obvious — spiritual flagellation, if you will. The church must recognize that it deals largely with people confirmed in their faith in Christ. C&F, as a relentless every-Sunday preface, disregards this, and by its perpetual scheduling, produces a spiritual callus. It presumes worshipers going home with the inevitability of living in sin. C&F can only serve to weaken the motivation intended that we be holy before God. It presupposes a perpetual living in the flesh. When there is no expectation of holiness, the result is a fulfillment of the negative. Only by worship that consistently accents the freely available and bestowed grace and mercy of God for the encouragement of sanctification, will people dare to be God's holy people.

Paul's advice in 1 Cor. to examine ourselves (which some would argue is the basis of C&F) isn't to be understood as an encouragement to face up to sins and sinfulness, thus becoming worthy by contrition. Admittedly presuming sinfulness, Paul most certainly was primarily urging us to consider the state of our faith, faith in relation to Jesus as savior, which then allows us to face our sinfulness.

Still more so was Paul concerned with faith in the sacramental presence of Jesus to provide and assure us of forgiveness, life and salvation, i.e., power to be ever more holy.

C&F vs. C&A

There is an undeniable intentional parallelism by C&F over against C&A, with the intent of offering a simplified substitute. Actually most Lutherans would suggest that the two are essentially the same. Yet C&A is a genuine sacrament, with a divinely promised effect in the presence of the Word and faith, while the other is a pietistic mimic which pretends to offer the same gift, but is only at best a general admission to God of our need — it's a sacrificial component, not at all sacramental. And that brings to mind that Jesus quoted Hosea (Matt. 9:13), "I desire mercy not sacrifice." That is, be more concerned with making peace with offended neighbors as we promise in the Lord's Prayer than to lament sinfulness to God in a general and detached format. For good measure, consider also Heb. 10:5-7:

Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure." Then I said, "See, God, I have come to do your will, O God."

The confession in C&F, for reason of its generality about sin and sinfulness, is a simplistic sacrifice in search of peace with God. When confession is routinely used to preface worship or daily prayer, it becomes essentially a naive effort of purification — a human sacrifice to sue for grace. Such a confession as an initial act, when resorting to prayer, is a questionable hope for plenary forgiveness in a daily setting. It's like asking not for daily bread but rather for insurance against hunger.

A sacramental absolution was instituted by Christ for specific applications with individual penitents who seek and need reassurance of grace and salvation when specific sins have caused physical, mental or spiritual instability in everyday life.

We do not read in the Gospels of any general absolutions, or even pronouncements of available forgiveness to a multitude in the pastoral ministry of Jesus. When Jesus did pronounce forgiveness of sin it was always to an individual and with at least an implied confession and contrition for whatever sinfulness had caused a debilitation of spirit or life.

Likewise, in the ministry of John the Baptist, there is no record of anything but individual absolution by way of John's version of baptism. One by one, those who came to hear him, were enlisted into a community which was to watch for the coming of the messianic age via repentance and faith, living a sanctified life. When they asked John what they were then to do, he directed them to share their coats and food, and to practice justice in their vocations. (Luke 3:10ff) "I desire mercy, not sacrifice."

C&F, and also a public or corporate, so called, C&A, must be recognized as a human derivative of the sacrament of C&A. Its declaration can't therefore be a genuine absolution. How can it be? It's spoken to all who have innocently come to worship, probably not even having any expectation of making a confession and therefore not spiritually prepared. Assuming the people to be in need of

unburdening their conscience for the sake of peace, an easy, and unauthorized substitute for C&A is offered, furthering the obsolescence of C&A. The church must instead come to terms with its failure to successfully motivate people to come to C&A. It can't continue to take refuge in C&F. As long as we use C&F, every possible motivation to receive C&A faithfully as needed, will fall flat. It's good for the church to want to absolve its people, but without specificity for the ailments, it is somewhat like the irresponsible use of antibiotics, which often leads to mutation and resistance. Undiagnosed, undisclosed and unconforted evil, likewise only grows and becomes entrenched with an ersatz absolution not sacramentally authorized.

Conceivably some Christians might by the rite of C&F indeed make confession of a particular sin, the guilt of which causes them to worry about their salvation. And they might actually dare to believe a blind absolution broadcasted to all. But failing a concrete confession before a human sanctioned to stand in for Christ himself, the discipline of the vow of amendment of life, which must be part of any true confession, will result in stillbirth.

The form and cast of characters for biblical confession and absolution must be the same as is stipulated in Matthew 18:15ff: "If your brother sins against you...." There must be a particular sinner who is confronted by, or who approaches, a person who stands in for Jesus Christ. A particular sin is the issue, with the objective of restoring, repairing or enhancing the body of Christ. Such can and often should be the agenda of almost any private pastoral visitation, such as in a hospital, work place, home, or even a telephone conversation. It's simply a pastor being a pastor instead of merely a friend, or worse, one driven by inclusivity or simple hospitality.

Most modern versions of C&F no longer include the earlier more explicit formula appropriated from C&A which challenges the penitent to believe that the confessor can absolve in the stead of Christ himself. However, a vestige of this remains in the Brief Order: "called and ordained minister of the church of Christ and by his authority...." Clearly it is seeking to establish that C&F is essentially the same as sacramental C&A, differing only in that it's public instead of private, and that seen as an advantage. But there is no correspondence to the rigorous practice of C&A which calls a specific penitent with a specific problem to be specifically absolved, and even with specificity regarding renewed holiness.

In actual fact, C&F is for that reason not the sacramental Office of the Keys. It is only a formalized human encapsulation of the Word of God. It is a statement that we humans are "captive to sin" and "we have sinned...." A sacrifice of Jesus is then hinted, or not even mentioned, as it is in the optional ELW "confession." Finally, the Spirit is unspecifically invoked to help us. In effect it, in a general way, prejudices the entire Mass. If it could produce what it pretends, there would be little reason for worshipers to remain for the Mass with its bloody climax.

In its biblical form, C&A, on the other hand, is the individualized pastoral practice by which the church listens to troubled sinners individually and in private, or to confront untroubled sinners wherever they are. It's a mechanism or formula to relay Christ's forgiveness to one whose peace and sanctification is being undermined by guilt for a particular sin. Furthermore, it's a tool to use with belligerent sinners to sober them, if necessary, by binding their sin for divine judgment.

This latter underside of C&A is perhaps what makes people reluctant to go to Confession — the genuine possibility that an absolution will be refused. Better and less dangerous they will think to

opt for public C&F so as to avoid a personal confrontation with divine teeth, not appreciating that forgiveness in this unauthorized form can never be more than a statement of objective, not subjective, justification. Without sacramental authority and personalization, it provides no help in removing a handicap on the road to sanctification or holiness for an individual Christian.

What is so profoundly regrettable in all this is that Lutherans supposedly hold C&F so dearly through comfortable familiarity, that they demand it, or do they? One might think they trust such an absolution as genuine, and unfortunately some actually do. But yet, it can't deliver in the crisis of temptation, or as a challenge to be actively holy. It has no sacramental essence by which unfaith is subdued and emboldening partnership with the Spirit is actualized. It is a husk.

PSYCHOLOGY OF C&F

C&F should also be reviewed for its psychological impact so as to hopefully see it in a new light. Consider once more that C&F is intended to be offered to the faithful who come to Mass, even faithfully every Sunday. They are in fact the holy people of God. C&F is after all not included in the church's worship just for an occasional troubled sinner, or for those who aren't aware of their sin. Sunday worshipers are God's people who are genuinely trying to be real Christians — and we must grant them that and encourage it. If certain of their sins are a handicap, these can't be managed by C&F.

Christians coming to worship are in a sense much like one's group of familiar and loved family members. What would be the effect or benefit of "welcoming" such persons back into your home, or on arising with them each morning, with some obligatory form of apology for yesterday, instead of an encouraging greeting to communicate hope, love, and commitment to new mutual faithfulness? Or worse yet, consider the corrosiveness of expecting all members of your family to begin each day with a silent inventory of past deficiency, or a spoken admission of all-around failure — pessimism gone rampant!

There is a contradiction between a smiling pastor greeting parishioners as the church door, then immediately followed by presiding at C&F. Just because God is holy and works to make us so, doesn't mean that when we are to meet him that he expects us to begin with an apology and dwell on our failure with all the debilitating power of the accompanying guilt. Surely he prefers Christians to come to worship standing tall and proud to have come to be named as his holy people, glad for their progress in sanctification through the preceding week, ready to listen to what more can be learned to perfect their faith and holiness, and then to joyfully celebrate the accomplished fact of salvation, the full blotting out of any and every sin and failure to the extent that even God remembers them no more, all in anticipation of the power and peace heaven will afford, but also as the Spirit will further provide.

Insistence on the need for C&F as a preparation for worship, calls into question the gracious way that Jesus welcomed and continued to deal with anyone who was hungry for God. He could be quite blunt with those who thought they had already put their lives in good order, but consider for instance the calling of his disciples, Matthew Levi in particular. Here was a person whom we might think had a lot to confess, but Jesus apparently sensed that he had a longing to follow him — that he

was jealous of Peter, James, John, etc. — that he sensed that Jesus was a man from God who had God's gifts to share; and so Jesus simply invited him to follow. We do not read of Jesus later taking Matthew aside, nor can we imagine it, to make sure he had come clean about having been a prodigal, so that discipleship could by that contrition go forward.

Or consider with what grace Jesus became spiritual friends with Mary Magdalene, or that other woman caught in adultery! Their absolution was granted by Jesus in a face saving way on the strength of an implied and obvious confession, and a silent Kyrie. It was based on the gift of faith they had in him.

Martin Luther is also a psychological witness for us via the recognizable progressive order of his *Small Catechism*. With its six chief parts we are, first of all, by the Ten Commandments to understand something of holiness. These do not prescribe a doable road of, or toward holiness, but the way of faith. These commandments transferred to the New Covenant illustrate what we may still lack, and what we will try to become. And, for Luther, most especially, these are not to provide an emphasis on our sinfulness but on that of mercy. Then the Creed summarizes the love of God working through all three persons. Next we learn how to pray our Kyries with the prayer Jesus gave us. Furthermore, we review the foundational significance of being baptized for the sake of its power to be God's holy ones. We are then encouraged to go to confession when we are in trouble with a specific sin, for the joy of its absolution and freedom to resume holiness. And finally, we are urged to join in the celebration of the Eucharist — the way Jesus said to remember him — so as to express our faith in his crucifixion for our salvation, receive power for holiness, and to give thanks. All in all, in the SC, Luther has expressed a face-saving religion which allows us to live positively instead of legalistically.

Finally, three short quotes from Luther, which give us specific advice or direction in how to speak about C&A as we seek to recover this sacrament in our day for a new generation of God's holy people:

To others who hear it gladly [namely, C&A], however, we must always preach, exhorting, encouraging, and persuading them not to lose this precious and comforting treasure which the Gospel offers. Therefore we must say something about confession to instruct and admonish the simple folk.^[14]

If anybody does not go to confession willingly and for the sake of absolution, let him just forget about it. 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.^[15]

In short we approve of no coercion. However, if anyone refuses to hear and heed the warning of our preaching, we shall have nothing to do with him, nor may he have any share in the Gospel. 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.^[16]

IN CONCLUSION

C&F can not dare to call itself a sacrament. By its general and indiscriminate "absolution," people are made comfortable. It comes without the discipline that could help to avoid living in the flesh. Compare it to bathing which includes no intention of staying clean. A bath conveniently solves the problem for the moment and on a schedule as it may be required. When so called forgiveness is freely and easily available on schedule, there is little incentive to become holy — lazy saintliness, at best.

C&F may have seemed like a good idea in the aftermath of the Lutheran Reformation especially because of the 17th century decline in the weekly celebration of the Eucharist, and its even more individualized sacramental partner of C&A. By the influence of pietism, both of those were considered to be too formal to be accepted as sincere and effective religious expressions, requiring no feelings. Whatever was formal came to be regarded with suspicion for the possibility of hypocrisy, or for the vigorously rejected *ex opera operato* argument. Divinely instituted forms were replaced with correct and sincere feelings — which of course are just as easily faked. The inevitable hunger for an assured word of forgiveness which resulted from the disuse of the Eucharist, led to the promotion of a substitute, the emotionally based C&F. In its monastic origin it had made good sense to confess and forgive every other member in the religious community and then go peacefully to sleep. But with its use as a preface for the Sunday Service of the whole Christian community, it was no longer dealing with minor daily interpersonal rifts and slights, but came to be applied to major sin and fleshly rebellion against God and his will for humans.

The most frustrating aspect of C&F is that it is without sacramental warrant, and at the same time a mutilation of one that *is*, by which we could boldly resume holiness. It is instead a unilateral bargain for righteousness by human work, i.e., the work of admitting to being a sinner, and even without a specified promise of amendment.

Our conclusion, based on the primary fact of our being God's holy people, is that we don't need C&F whereby to receive weekly installments of forgiveness. If we are his holy people, i.e., committed, pastorally encouraged, absolved of the confessed problem sins, and actively living within that consciousness, we are already perpetually reminded of our underlying unworthy origin and our regrettably imperfect efforts to be holy within ourselves. No ritual confession of sinfulness will make us more holy. Every Christian who is truly a Christian, by that faith confesses to being a sinner; it needs no explicit repetitious formal restatement. Far better to be challenged to be holy. And better that we make something more of the rite of the sharing the Peace as an Amen to the word as read and preached, before we glory in the absolution to be provided as we then commune with our Lord. Thank you! All glory to God!

FOOTNOTES

[\[1\]](#) *Logia*, Spring 2008, p 5

[\[2\]](#) *Book of Concord*, Edited by Theodore G. Tappert, (Muhlenberg Press; Philadelphia PA 1959) 459 — *Confession*

[\[3\]](#) *Ibid.*, 457

[\[4\]](#) *Ibid.*, 548

[\[5\]](#) *Ibid.*, 458

[\[6\]](#) *Ibid.*, 458

[\[7\]](#) *Luther's Works*, American Edition. Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann. 56 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-86.) 40:367 — *The Keys*

[\[8\]](#) *Ibid.*, 40:368

[\[9\]](#) *Ibid.*, 40:373

[\[10\]](#) Pius Parsch, *The Liturgy of the Mass*, translated by F. C. Eckhoff (St. Louis: Herder, 1939) 65

[\[11\]](#) *Luther's Works*, American Edition. Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann. 56 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-86.) 44:15ff — *Treatise on Good Works*

[\[12\]](#) *Ibid.*, 44:243ff — *Monastic Vows*

[\[13\]](#) Tillich, Paul *Perspectives on 19th and 20th Century Protestant Theology*, Harper & Row, 1967

[\[14\]](#) *Book of Concord*, Edited by Theodore G. Tappert, (Muhlenberg Press; Philadelphia PA 1959) 457-8

[\[15\]](#) *Ibid.*, 459

[\[16\]](#) *Ibid.*, 460

