

May:

[Note to the readers. With this installment, our series Learning Luther ceases for the summer months to resume in September. Church leaders! If you have enjoyed and profited from these studies, permit me to exhort you to share the experience in an age appropriate way by supporting our new program, TforTeens ("Theology for Teens") at Roanoke College this summer. Please identify those young people in your midst who would benefit from this week with Prof. Ned Wisnefske, Chaplain Chris Bowen, our Synod Youth Minister Dave Delaney and myself. We will be pouring over the story of Creation and Fall in Genesis 1-3 with help from Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther. The cost is virtually free. Invest with us in cultivating future leaders of the church! -- Dr. Paul Hinlicky]

Confession (Book of Concord, pp. 476-80)

Introduction By Paul R. Hinlicky, Tise Professor of Lutheran Studies, Roanoke College & Docent, Evanjelicka Bohoslovecka Fakulta, Univerzita Komenskeho, Bratislava, Slovakia.

Confession is not a sacrament as such but a sacramental practice that negotiates between baptism into Christ and reception of His supper. It consists in contrite confession of sin and pronouncement of divine forgiveness. It may be public and general, as is customary in many Lutheran churches. It may also be private and particular. The latter Luther not only allows but emphatically endorses, indeed, he exhorts Christians to it in this concluding part of his *Large Catechism*.

As we heard last time, Luther refused to make a legalistic rule about frequency of communion, as had been done previously. Confession to the priest had been made a precondition to worthy reception; it was extorted with a checklist of prohibited thoughts, words and deeds. This legalistic practice, according to Luther, was a form of clerical tyranny based on coercion and fear, a lurid act of torture demanding an enumeration of embarrassing sins, producing a "slaughter of souls or consciences."

Yet Luther's critique was not intended to remove confession but to purify it by making it the cleansing work of God the Spirit for us. It does not mean that Luther drops the "precondition" of penitent self-examination, if one wants to put it that way; confession remains for him the needed preparation of the baptized people of God for worthy reception that will prove to be comfort to their souls, not poison.

As in the previous part on the Sacrament of the Altar, Luther declared on behalf of the Reformation churches, "We do not intend to admit to the sacrament and administer it to those who do not know what they seek or why they come," so here also he writes, "Anyone who will not believe the gospel, live according to it, and do what a Christian ought to do should enjoy none of its benefits."

Is this legalism? Does it mean we have to do something to be worthy of grace? An antinomian doctrine of justification would suggest that Luther here betrays the basic Reformation insight into grace. But Luther won't cooperate with an antinomian doctrine of justification. His law is *God's*

law and its *sacred* work is the daily crucifixion of the old Adam. He writes that those who in principle eschew this practice of baptism in confession, and are repulsed at the very thought of the Spirit's struggle against sin in their lives, should rather draw the conclusion, "I am not a Christian."

For Luther, how bizarre that folks should hardly be hoodwinked into taking communion without understanding how they therewith take upon themselves the cross of Jesus so that the Spirit can do battle against their flesh! Grace is not unconditional acceptance but the extraordinary favor and good pleasure of the Father that rests upon the Son by nature and is now bestowed by grace upon those who are in Christ by the Spirit's work. It is as such God's costly way by the cross of Jesus to His enemy that pardons in order to heal and kills in order to make alive. Where this Romans 6 struggle of the Spirit is unknown, there is no Christian life grounded upon baptism. Invoking instead a blanket amnesty in the name of grace turns Christ into nothing but a supposed revelation or illustration of a universal truth; it makes the work of the Holy Spirit in making Christians holy people pointless.

In other words, baptism is the radical hospitality of God and confession is baptismal practice in personally and concretely appropriating this extraordinary favor. This gift is not legalistically preconditioned on our doing something but rather consists in the work in us of Spirit gifted to us that manifests in repentance and faith. Thus, those who approach the altar seek the body of the Lord that was crucified and raised for them, that they may be renewed in this Lord's forgiving love and thus enjoy His life and salvation.

Unconscious, rote, conformist and but allegedly unconditional reception is nothing but a "liberal" return to the past practice of "conservative" Catholicism. This "grace" is so cheap you can hardly give it away. At least medieval Catholics thought grace was something precious enough to work for! How much more cheapened can grace be made? But a properly *catechized* Christian – remember, we are drawing now to the conclusion of the Large *Catechism*—is one who is coming to live *consciously*, hence also *conscientiously* before God, all the more aware of sin by the *holing* Spirit, all the more in need of grace that forgives real not fictitious sinners, all the more engaged in the personal struggle to progress forward in faith, hope and live as disciples who follow the Lord.

Luther could hardly contain his disgust at the "cheap grace" that "quickly understands whatever gives us an advantage and grasps with ease whatever in the gospel is mild and gentle." He continues, "But such pigs, as I have said, should not have the gospel or any part of it."

This bombast, not to say verbal violence, belongs to a bygone era. But we should agree with this thought. I say this. While for me personally, the adoption of so-called "radical hospitality," i.e. the abandonment in principle of holy communion as the meal of the baptized, will mean a parting of the ways. In that case, I would challenge supporters of this reckless theology of cheap grace openly and honestly to advocate removing the name "Lutheran" from this denomination's name on the grounds of truth in advertising, and further, to repudiate Luther's teaching in this part of the catechism, just as we have (rightly!) repudiated Luther's late in life attacks on Jews as inconsistent with his better theology.

The Christian's work as new born children of God is to know sin, lament it (contrition), desire the consolation of forgiveness assured and on this basis to renew the struggle of the Christian life. The Spirit's work is to provide through the minister's words, *Ego te absolvo*, "I absolve you," that bone-deep assurance, coming from the outside the self but going all the way down to the marrow of the soul, of God's mercy. In this concrete and personal word of grace, the Spirit is present powerfully to raise again the believer to newness of life as life-long battle against the flesh.

Such confession is precisely not a "magnificent work" of self-torture to present to God as a bribe, as if God loved us the more we hated ourselves. It is rather a heavenly virtue, an act of verbalizing and unburdening oneself of the weight of guilt that actually weighs down a particular individual and paralyzes her. "For Christ bears all sin, if only it displeases us, so that our sins become Christ's and His righteousness ours" – this joyful exchange is the Leitmotif of Luther's theology. Confession *is* this joyful exchange. At the heart of confession joyful exchange is practiced. Knowing this, the well-catechized believer grounded in the daily practice of baptism would be moved by conscience to free and willing confession as a sick person is moved to medicine that cures disease and soothes its pain.

The reader should carefully note how much Luther talks in this section about the *desires of the heart*. It is not beliefs held in the mind that justify, even the belief that God is love, nice, kind, gentle, and forgiving and so on. Such beliefs may be true, but until by the work of the Spirit they crucify the wayward desires of the old Adam's heart and teach the children of Adam to seek first the kingdom of God and its righteousness, they are clanging gongs and empty symbols. By confession, our seeking, that is our desire, is reordered by the First Commandment and fulfilled in us by, works in progress that we are, of the Son and His Spirit.

A Brief Exhortation to Confession

By: Martin Luther

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 and weight he imposed upon the Christian community. 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 because people had to make confession even though nothing was more hateful to them. These three things have now been removed and made voluntary: that we may confess without coercion or fear; that we are released from the torture of enumerating all sins in detail; finally, that we have the advantage of knowing how to use confession beneficially for the comforting and strengthening of our conscience.

Everyone knows this now. Unfortunately, people have learned it only too well; they do whatever they please and take advantage of their freedom, acting as if they should or need not go to confession anymore. For a person quickly understands whatever gives us an advantage and

grasps with uncommon ease whatever in the gospel is mild and gentle. But such pigs, as I have said, should not have the gospel or any part of it. Instead, they ought to remain under the pope and submit to being driven and tormented to confess, fast, etc., more than ever before. For anyone who will not believe the gospel, live according to it, and do what a Christian ought to do should enjoy none of its benefits. What would happen if you wished to enjoy the gospel's benefits but did nothing about it and paid no attention to it? For such people we shall provide no preaching, nor will they have our permission to share and enjoy any part of our liberty, but we shall let the pope or his kind bring them back into subjection and coerce them like a true tyrant. The rabble who will not obey the gospel deserve nothing but a jailer like this who is God's devil and hangman. To the others who hear it gladly, however, we must always preach—exhorting, encouraging, and persuading them not to ignore such a precious and comforting treasure that the gospel offers. Therefore we also want to say something about confession in order to instruct and exhort the simple people.

To begin with, I have said that, in addition to the confession that we are discussing here, there are two other kinds, which have an even greater right to be called the common confession of Christians. I refer to the practice of confessing to God alone or to our neighbor alone, asking for forgiveness. These two kinds are included in the Lord's Prayer when we say, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors," etc. Indeed, the entire 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 joyful conscience? This kind of confession should and must take place continuously as long as we live. For this is the essence of a genuinely Christian life, to acknowledge that we are sinners and to pray for grace.

Similarly the second confession, which all Christians make toward their neighbor, is also included in the Lord's Prayer. We are to confess our guilt before one another and forgive one another before we come to God and ask for forgiveness. Now, all of us are debtors to one another; therefore we should and we may confess publicly in everyone's presence, no one being afraid of anyone else. For it is true, as the proverb says, "If one person is upright, so are they all"; no one behaves toward God or the neighbor as he or she ought. However, besides the sum total of our sin, there are also individual ones, when a person has provoked someone else to anger and needs to ask for pardon. Thus we have in the Lord's Prayer a twofold absolution: both our sins against God and against our neighbors are forgiven when we forgive our neighbors and become reconciled with them.

Besides this public, daily, and necessary confession, there is also the secret confession that takes place privately before a single brother or sister. This comes into play when some particular issue weighs on us or attacks us, eating away at us until we can have no peace nor find ourselves sufficiently strong in faith. Then we may at any time and as often as we wish lay our troubles before a brother or sister, seeking advice, comfort, and strength. This type of confession is not included in the commandment like the other two but is left to all to use whenever they need it. Thus by divine ordinance Christ himself has placed absolution in the mouths of his Christian community and commanded us to absolve one another from sins. So if there is a heart that feels its

sin and desires comfort, it has here a sure refuge where it finds and hears God's Word because through a human being God looses and absolves from sin.

Note, then, as I have often said, that confession consists of two parts. The first is our work and act, when I lament my sin and desire comfort and restoration for my soul. The second is a work that God does, when he absolves me of my sins through the Word placed on the lips of another person. 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 were only concerned whether we had confessed purely 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 pay off 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 despaired of confessing that purely (which was, of course, impossible), and no conscience could feel at peace or have confidence in the absolution. Thus they made the precious confession not only useless to us but also burdensome and bitter, to the manifest harm and destruction of souls.

We should therefore take care to keep the two parts clearly separate. We should set little value on our work but exalt and magnify God's Word. We should not go to confession as if we wanted to perform a magnificent work to present to God, but simply to accept and receive something from him. You dare not come and say how upright or how wicked you are. If you are a Christian, I know this well enough anyway; if you are not, I know it even better. But you must do it for this reason: to lament your need and allow yourself to be helped so that you may attain a joyful heart and conscience.

No one needs to drive you to confession by commanding it. Rather, we say this: Whoever is a Christian, or would like to be one, has here the reliable advice to go and obtain this precious treasure. If you are not a Christian, and desire no such comfort, we shall leave you to another's power. Hereby we completely abolish the pope's tyranny, commandments, and coercion, for we have no need of them. For, as I have said, we teach this: Let those who do not go to confession willingly and for the sake of absolution just forget about it. Yes, and let those who go there relying on the purity of their confession just stay away from it. We urge you, however, to confess and express your needs, not for the purpose of performing a work but to hear what God wants 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.

If all this were clearly laid out, and along with that if the needs that ought to move and induce us to confession were clearly indicated, there would be no need of coercion or force. Their own consciences would persuade Christians and make them so anxious that they would rejoice and act like poor, miserable beggars who hear that a rich gift of money or clothes is being given out at a certain place; they would hardly need a bailiff to drive and beat them but would run there as fast as they could so as not to miss the gift. Suppose, now, that the invitation were changed into a command that all beggars should run to the place, with no reason being given and no mention made of what they were to seek or receive there. How else would beggars go but with resentment,

not expecting to receive anything but just letting everyone see how poor and miserable they are? Not much joy or comfort would come from this, but only a greater hostility to the command.

In the same way the pope's preachers have in the past kept silence about these wonderful, rich alms and this indescribable treasure; they have simply driven people together en masse just to show what sort of impure and filthy people they were. Who was able under those conditions to go to confession willingly? We, on the contrary, do not say that a person should look to see how full of filthiness they are or should reflect on their condition. Rather we give this advice: If you are poor and miserable, then go and make use of the healing medicine. Those who feel their misery and need will no doubt develop such a desire for confession that they will run to it with joy. But those who ignore it and do not come of their own accord, we let go their way. However, they ought to know that we do not regard them as Christians.

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. If you are a Christian, you need neither my compulsion nor the pope's command at any point, but you will force yourself to go and ask me that you may share in it. However, if you despise it and proudly stay away from confession, then we must come to the conclusion that you are not a Christian and that you also ought not receive the sacrament. For you despise what no Christian ought to despise, and you show thereby that you can have no forgiveness of sin. And this is a sure sign that you also despise the gospel.

In short, we want nothing to do with compulsion. However, if anyone does not hear and heed our preaching and warning, we shall have nothing to do with such a person who ought not have any part of 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. For here the compulsion must be reversed; we are the ones who must come under the command and you must come in freedom. We compel no one, but allow ourselves to be compelled, just as we are compelled to preach and administer the sacrament.

Therefore, when I exhort you to go to confession, I am doing nothing but exhorting you to be a Christian. If I bring you to this point, I have also brought you to confession. For those who really want to be upright Christians and free from their sins, and who want to have a joyful conscience, truly hunger and thirst already. They snatch at the bread just like a hunted deer, burning with heat and thirst, as Psalm 42[:1*] says, "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God." That is, as a deer trembles with eagerness for a fresh spring, so I yearn and tremble for God's Word or absolution and for the sacrament, etc. In this way, you see, confession would be taught properly, and such a desire and love for it would be aroused that people would come running after us to get it, more than we would like. We shall let the papists torment and torture themselves and other people who ignore such a treasure and bar themselves from it. As for ourselves, however, let us lift our hands in praise and thanks to God that we have attained to this knowledge and grace.^[1]

^[1] Kolb, R., Wengert, T. J., & Arand, C. P. (2000). *The Book of Concord: the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (pp. 476–480). Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.