

The Absolution in the Theology and Practice of the Reformation

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Introduction

When I first received the assignment to present this paper on the absolution, my thoughts immediately jumped to pages 6 and 16 of *The Lutheran Hymnal*. In my liturgically-oriented thinking, I automatically linked the term absolution with the very formal declaration of pardon for sin which we weekly pronounce upon our congregations in the structured framework of our worship services. After all, since private confession and absolution before a called servant of the Word is not a common practice among us, who in many cases have also dropped the custom of communion announcements and the resulting opportunities for spiritual counseling that they afforded, is not the absolution of pages 6 and 16 the most widely used and the most effective way that we regularly absolve the members of our congregations and thus fulfill our Lord's command to remit sins?

However, we must take care lest we automatically feel that our liturgical practice, because of its dignified and reverent character, is somehow the best and most efficacious way that absolution is carried out among us. In his *Deutsche Messe* of 1525, Luther did not even write a formal confession and absolution into the service. Still, absolution was vitally important to him and he often encouraged faithful and effective use of it as can be seen in his words, "God has given us his absolution richly and in various ways, and no one of them is to be despised ...the more you have of (it), the better it is" (*Word and Sacrament*, Vol. 37, p. 258).

The point is this. As heirs of the Lutheran Reformation and its emphasis on the unconditional grace and forgiveness of our God, absolution should play a large part in our spiritual lives. It is more, so much more than just a 3 minute declaration of grace pronounced once a week. How should we view its role in the life of our congregations? Can we make greater and more meaningful use of it for the comfort and strengthening of our faith? Perhaps the theological and practical application of absolution by the Lutheran reformers can give us insight and direction for our own use of it.

What is Absolution?

In our catechism classes each of us learned and teaches the following: "Confession has two parts. The one is that we confess our sins; the other, that we receive absolution or forgiveness from the pastor as from God himself, not doubting but firmly believing that our sins are thus forgiven before God in heaven." This explanation of Luther's fifth chief part of the Small Catechism clearly defines absolution as the pronouncement of our forgiveness from God; it is the act of our heavenly Father, speaking through his messengers, setting us free from sin.

Certainly to sinful creatures who crave the forgiveness of sin and the resulting peace with the heavenly Father that it offers, absolution will be considered the most important part of the doctrine of confession. It is at this point that we pass from the condemnation of the Law to the soothing relief of the Gospel promises. It is

here that we are assured that the grime of our rags of unrighteousness is loosened and washed away by the blood of Christ. Such assurance of cleansing is to be announced to the comfort of the confessing sinner who “hungers and thirsts for righteousness” (Mt. 5:6). And it does not matter what manner or form is used, nor what the surrounding environment in which it is given might be. What is important is that the unadulterated truth of the gospel is maintained and unconditionally proclaimed.

Dr. Siegbert Becker writes,

It does not make any difference whether this is done in a formal way in the confessional service, when the pastor says, “Upon this your confession, I, by virtue of my officeannounce the grace of God unto all of you,” or whether he says it in the less formal way in the lesser absolution in the words, “God our heavenly Father hath had mercy upon us and...forgiveth us all our sins,” or whether he says it in the sermon by telling his congregation that the Lord Jesus has taken away all their sins..., or whether he assures some troubled soul in private confession, “Son, be of good cheer...,” or whether he says in a completely informal way in a sick call, “But, George, your sins are all forgiven,”—whether it is done in any of these ways, it is always the same absolution that is pronounced There is nothing in Scripture which would indicate that it must be done in some special way in set forms (Becker, 1979, p. 18).

Consider the following examples of various forms and settings of absolution that come from the pages of Scripture.

As Jesus was preaching to an assembly that had gathered in a house in Galilee, his sermon was interrupted by the friends of a paralytic whom they had brought to be healed. Looking upon the man and obviously seeing the deeper need of his heart, Jesus proclaimed, “Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven” (Mt. 9:2) - an absolution in very public, more formal surroundings. When a sinful woman sorrowfully anointed Jesus’ feet at the dinner table, he comforted her, “Your sins are forgiven” (Lk. 7:48) - an absolution in rather informal surroundings. When the prophet Nathan stood alone before a broken and contrite King David, he assured him, “The Lord has taken away your sin” (2 Sm. 12:13).

As these few examples indicate, absolutions were pronounced in various words and ways and in a variety of settings in Scripture. Nothing indicates that it must be done in some special way or in “proper” surroundings. The reason, absolution is simply the pronouncement of God loosing our consciences from the bonds of sin and assuring us we are forgiven for Jesus’ sake. He, who assures that he was “reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them,” and who sends his messengers to invitingly implore, “be reconciled to God” (2 Co. 5:18,20), desires that the comforting and healing effect of the gospel be directed to the troubled and repentant heart, no matter what the circumstances. Neither words, nor form, nor rituals should interfere with his objective; nothing human should come in the way of the gospel pronouncement. And that quite naturally leads us to the next section of our study where the theology and practice of the absolution, as it arose from the ashes of abuse within the church at the time of the Reformation, has great meaning for our application and use of it.

How Absolution's Power and Benefits Were Suppressed

By grace God absolves us of our sin for Jesus' sake. That is the central truth of Scripture. Furthermore, throughout its pages we encounter a variety of forms and procedures by which this truth is proclaimed and assured to the sinner, particularly the repentant one. As a result the desire to absolve the repentant sinner in his presence for the strengthening of his faith seems to have become central to the doctrine and practice of the early Christian church. In its search to find meaningful ways of doing this, the practice of individual or private confession and absolution developed. A troubled soul, burdened by the weight of guilt for sin, would privately go to a fatherly confessor who would then privately absolve and comfort him with the gospel according to his particular needs. In the passage of time this practice became more prominent until it reached the point of established custom. By the 12th Century private confession and absolution overshadowed all other forms of confession in the Western Church (Koehler, 1982, p. 38). In and of itself there is nothing wrong with this practice. In fact, it can be a very meaningful and comforting one. Luther himself held it very dear to his heart. He writes,

I have a high regard for private confession, for here God's Word and absolution are spoken privately and individually to each believer for the forgiveness of his sins, and as often as he desires it, he may have recourse to it for this forgiveness, and also for comfort counsel, and guidance. Thus it is a precious, useful thing for souls, as long as no one is driven to it with laws and commandments" (*Word and Sacrament*, Vol. 37, p. 368).

Unfortunately the very thing of which he warned in that last phrase occurred. In 1215 Innocent III and the Fourth Lateran Council issued the famous canon on penance which required the faithful to confess privately at least once a year on pain of excommunication. Recently Pastor Mark Jeske noted that

On paper, at least, nothing has changed of this decree; a Catholic adult catechism published recently concedes only: "When for extraordinary reasons groups of people are not able to confess their sins individually, they may in some circumstances receive communal absolution. Such communal absolution, however, may be given only where there is a grave need, which is to be determined by the local bishop. ...Unless it is morally impossible for them to do so, they are obliged to go to confession within a year (Jeske, 1979, pp. 1-2).

Thus legalism entered the doctrine and practice of private confession and absolution, and with legalism abuse, and with abuse, false teaching which suppressed and negated the power and benefit of a true Scriptural absolution.

Soon private confession became the Catholic Sacrament of Penance in which absolution was not pronounced fully and freely according to the grace of God in Christ. Rather, it was pronounced only after 3 conditions were met by the confessing sinner: 1) *confessio oris*, oral confession to a priest; 2) *contritio cordis*, heartfelt contrition; 3) *satisfactio operis*, satisfactory compensation made for wrong done by performing some good work (Walther, p. 171), In the first place, there must be full, or plenary confession. The confessing sinner

must enumerate all of his sins in order to be absolved. Any omission in confession rendered the entire confession and absolution invalid and ineffectual. Imagine how the truly contrite sinner with a bad memory felt before, during, and after confession - fearful, extremely fearful lest he should have forgotten anything. Furthermore, as Luther and the other reformers frequently point out, we are guilty of not only “the gross and well-known sins, but also the subtle and hidden, known only to God. ‘Who can discern his errors? Forgive my hidden faults’” (Ps. 19:12; cf. *Concordia Triglotta*: Augsburg Confession, Art. XI, p. 47; Art. XXV, p. 69; Apology, Art. XI, p. 251; Smalcald Articles, Art. VII, p. 493). Therefore, it is an impossibility for the sinner to enumerate all sins.

In the second place, the person making confession must feel a perfect contrition and heartfelt remorse for his sins otherwise the keys of absolution would not turn to unlock the gates of heaven to him. Imagine the truly contrite sinner leaving the confessional anxious lest he had not been sorry enough.

Finally, the person confessing must render the satisfaction prescribed by the priest. He still must go out and do something. That means the individual would leave the confessional in no better shape than when he had first entered it, for the burden of his sin still weighed upon him until he had released it by doing what was necessary to please and appease the holy God. And how could one be sure that he had ever done enough works to make him right before God?

Thus, what Luther encountered before 1517 was a church enmeshed in a type of activism that would foster within the individual either a self-righteous spirit or a tormented soul that could find no assurance of peace through the knowledge of sins forgiven. This activism spurred the individual on to endless and fruitless doing rather than to restful and confident being on account of Christ and his completed, unconditional work of salvation. Add to this the attempt, to sell forgiveness through indulgences and you had a situation in which the guilt-ridden conscience could not be appeased and questions regarding the certainty of salvation could not be answered.

The result of such legalism, abuse, and false teaching was that the proclamation of God’s unconditional grace that pardoned the sinner for Jesus’ sake (what we would refer to as true absolution) was never spoken. In its place the Roman church had substituted an absolution that was conditional upon the proper attitude and penance of the penitent, something that sinful man could never fully attain on his own. In such a way true absolution’s power and benefit to forgive and comfort the sinner were suppressed

How Absolution’s Power and Benefits Are Released

Suppose that a prisoner is sitting on death row awaiting execution for his crimes. As he waits he hears a vague rumor that pardon has been granted to him. However, no one comes to release him and on his own he is unable to verify the rumor. The result is that every creaking of the prison door causes him to start because he is not sure if the person coming to see him will release him or take him to the place of execution. His condition is a dreadful one even though his pardon is a reality.

Such was the condition of the confessing sinner under the Roman church’s doctrine and practice of confession and absolution. It was dreadful. Although the reality of God’s pardon was true, no one came to assure the individual who was imprisoned by the guilt for his sin of it. And in fact they could not for the Roman doctrine and practice was totally at variance with the central doctrine of the Christian religion, the doctrine of

justification by faith without the deeds of the law. Until this doctrine was “rediscovered” at the time of the Reformation, absolution’s power and benefits could not be enjoyed by the one held captive by sin.

What the reformers came to realize on the basis of their study of the Word was that sin is atoned for not by the deeds of satisfaction that a penitent sinner might offer to God as payment for his wrongs, but that he only satisfaction which could be acceptable before God was the perfect life and the perfect suffering and death of God’s own Son. That his suffering and death was sufficient to pay the price of satisfaction, God revealed by raising him from the dead. (Rm. 4:25). They also came to realize that forgiveness is a free gift of God, graciously offered to all in the Gospel, received by faith, and, most importantly, it is not in any way conditional, relying on the works of men. This central doctrine of the Christian religion, the doctrine of justification by faith without the deeds of the law, rediscovered at the time of the Reformation is the thing that gives absolution its power and which releases its benefits in the heart of the penitent. Regarding this Dr. Becker writes,

(This is) where the heart of the Lutheran doctrine of absolution lies. No one will clearly understand what the Lutheran Church teaches on absolution unless he has first of all clearly understood the doctrine of objective justification, or universal justification. This doctrine is the glory of our church. There is no other church in which this doctrine is taught as clearly as in the Lutheran Church Dr. Walther...says, “Now, who was justified in Him? Who was declared clean and guiltless through Him? It was we human beings; it was the whole world...Christ’s resurrection is the absolution which God Himself has spoken upon all men” (1979, p. 21).

Long ago God already forgave every man his sin, believer and unbeliever alike. Nothing more remains to be done by the sinner himself before the anger of God is appeased. Therefore, a Christian can go to any man on earth and say to him, “Your sins are forgiven.” Must it be a minister who declares that? Luther responds,

Indeed where there is no priest, each individual Christian - even a woman or child - does as much. For any Christian can say to ‘ you, “God forgives you your sins, in the name,” etc., and if you can accept that word with a confident faith, as though God were saying it to you, then in that same faith you are surely absolved Even so one should observe, and not despise, the established orders of authority (*Word and Sacrament*, Vol. 35, p. 12).

No, one does not have to be a minister in order to absolve another of sin. When a Christian says, “Your sins are forgiven,” it is as “valid and certain in heaven also, as if Christ, our dear Lord, dealt with us himself,” for Christ already said it long ago. Having atoned for the sins of the whole world, Christ commanded Peter and the rest of the disciples on behalf of the whole Christian Church, “Whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Mt. 10.19).

As we noted earlier, God assures us that “he was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them” - universal justification (2 Co. 5:19). And Paul continued, “He has committed to us tyre message of reconciliation.” That message of reconciliation is, “Your sins are forgiven.” When it is spoken to us, we should remember this is God’s Word, not just man’s! It may come to us through men, but God is

speaking. Therefore, we should not doubt it, but firmly believe it. Furthermore, he has commanded us, to preach this Gospel to every creature. We are to go to every man and tell him; sins are forgiven for Jesus' sake. This is absolution and then we can all stand before our congregations and say, "I announce the grace of God unto all of you, and in the stead and by the command of our Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins."

Of course, this is where the Reformed theologians attack the Lutheran doctrine of absolution. They say that it is gross arrogance on our part to stand before a group of people and tell them their sins are forgiven. After all there may be some out there who are not members of the elect, or there may be some who are impenitent or are hypocrites, there may be impenitent adulterers, or liars, or robbers, or even downright atheists. You cannot tell them they are forgiven, can you? Yes, we can and we must for God himself has commanded us to preach it. To him it makes no difference who they are and what they have done. Jesus died and took away their sin, reconciling them to God. Dr. Becker adds,

The pastor has a perfect right to tell them that they are forgiven. If he knows that they are murderers and thieves he will first speak to them of their sin and of God's wrath and the eternal damnation of hell in order to bring them to a realization of their sin. God's standpoint it makes no difference who they are and what they are. Jesus died for them and took their sins away. And we will tell them this whether they are believers or unbelievers, again because we know it is true. And we will hope and pray that this time they will believe us so that they too will know that it is true (1979, p. 23).

After all, at absolution we really say nothing more than that which has already happened, that is the precious truth that forgiveness of sins has been completed by Christ. "It is finished." Walther pleadingly comments on this: "If only we would truly believe in absolution with what joy would we attend church whenever it is pronounced!" (Walther, p. 173)

That brings us to the importance, the vital importance of faith: in absolution, the murderer, or hypocrite, even the atheist may be forgiven of his sin, but without faith in that forgiveness absolution's power and benefits (peace, joy, hope, eternal life, etc.) cannot be released within the heart-part of an individual for his enjoyment. He is still virtually a prisoner to sin, just like that man in prison who heard the rumor of pardon but did not believe it could not enjoy its benefits.

This is why Luther and the Lutheran Symbols have so much to say about the importance of faith in connection with confession and absolution. In words that sound very similar to the words in our Catechism, the *Augsburg Confession* says,

Now repentance consists properly of these two parts: One is contrition, that is terrors smiting the conscience through the knowledge of sin; the other is faith, which is born of the Gospel, or of absolution, and that believes that, for Christ's sake, sins are forgiven, comforts the conscience, and delivers it from terrors (*Triglotta*, p. 49, Art. XII).

The Apology adds,

Absolution is not received except by faith. That absolution, however is not received except by faith can be proved from Paul, who teaches, Ro. 4:16, that the promise cannot be received except by faith. But absolution is the promise of the remission of sins nothing else than the Gospel, the divine promise of God's grace and favor]. Therefore, it necessarily requires faith (*Triglotta*, p. 269, Aft. XII).

Everything, then, depends on this faith," Luther writes, "which alone makes, the sacraments accomplish that which they signify, and everything that the priest says come true. For as you believe, so it is done for you" (Word and Sacrament, Vol. 35, p, 11).

Unquestionably, the characteristic mark of our Lutheran teaching on absolution as it comes out of the Reformation is the emphasis on faith and the submission of reason to the divine Word of God. This completely separates our teaching from the doctrine of the Roman church or the Reformed. When God says the world is reconciled in Christ, that means the entire world is reconciled in Christ! When God says go out and preach it to all creatures, that means go out and preach it to all creatures! When God says believe it, that means believe it unconditionally!

So then, how are absolution's power and benefits released to the individual? Only through faith which rests on the central doctrine of Scripture, the doctrine of justification by faith without the deeds of the law. It is this central truth, restored to us in the theology of the Reformation, that governs our practice and use of this the greatest of all declarations, "Son, your sins are forgiven." God grant that we keep it that way for the comfort and strengthening of our faith, for Jesus' sake.

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