

# A Comparative Study of the Principles of Confession and Absolution in the Format of Our Lutheran Liturgy

[Presented to Michigan District Pastor-Teacher Conference (WELS), Bowling Green, Ohio, June 10, 1987]

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"Sometime soon someone is going to have to write on the subject of Confession and Absolution in corporate worship." So I profoundly uttered in Worship 358 one day this spring. It wasn't six hours later that the chairman of your essay committee was on the phone with the request to write on the topic that heads up this page. Although I was accused of accepting the assignment for a variety of wrong reasons, I am being honest when I say I accepted with relish for the right reasons. Confession in corporate worship is a topic that needs to be studied. On the one hand, there are all sorts of voices that are asking whether Christians need to confess anything anyplace. The newest edition of the Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship wonders out loud:

With the questioning of ethical theories which relied heavily on rules there has also come a question of this kind of approach to self-examination. Once again, the extensive discussion about God is raising questions that have implications for self-examination; the issue is whether the shortcomings we need to confess actually consist in the breaking of small rules.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand there is at least one voice (and there are likely more) which is quietly suggesting that we lay greater stress—perhaps even reinstate the format of—private confession and absolution. In a reaction to a 1986 Bethany (Mankato) Reformation Lecture, Erling Teigen (ELS) wrote:

All, to be sure, would agree that the devotional life of pastors, teachers, professors and lay people alike, is sadly lacking. But can we expect it to be any different when we have allowed private confession and individual absolution to fall into disuse, when we have neglected the very heart of pastoral practice? We are the church which confesses, "It is taught among us that private absolution should be retained and not allowed to fall into disuse. (ACXI)<sup>2</sup>

It would be wonderful, of course, if we could stand back from this issue and take our stand on our usual safe, Scripture-based, middle-of-the-road position. However, any synod which has in its ranks one group which decries the confessional paucity of the Sampler's general confession and another group which has all but abandoned even the basics of communion announcements had better not be too uppity. It is likely that our pastors and teachers as well as those from Westminster and Bethany—to say nothing of this essayist—likely will benefit from the study which is behind this and hopefully other essays on the subject of confession and absolution in corporate worship.

Your committee asked me to begin this comparative study before the 1941 *Lutheran Hymnal*. With this request I am happy to comply. God absolved Adam and Eve without their making a formal confession. Yet confession of one's sins is a part of faith that Scripture presupposes. Not only does God encourage his children to confess (1 Jn 1) but he gives us plenty of examples of how his children have confessed. David, of course, is a classic example. His words in Psalms 32 and 51 not only teach us about confession and encourage us to confess, but they have been used for centuries as a model for Christian confession. David's confession in these psalms is the variety that Scripture most often encourages and most often displays: confession that comes from the heart with no other encouragement than exposing law and forgiving Gospel.

There are, however, on the pages of the Bible other kinds of confession besides this personal, man-to-God variety. At Passover time the children of Israel searched the house for any trace of leaven, the symbol for sin. This is surely a confession of sorts. Confession upon the event of confrontation is portrayed from time to time. Aachen admitted upon Joshua's demands that he had sinned by keeping booty from Jericho, Saul confessed

after Samuel warned him of his sin (although Saul's was a hypocritical confession), David came clean after Nathan's visit. Occasionally certain servants of God confessed individually the corporate sins of the nation. Moses confessed for Israel after her sin at the base of Sinai; both Ezra and Nehemiah confessed on behalf of the returning remnant. And on the Great Day of Atonement the High Priest would make confession for his own sins and the sins of his family. Moses records no formula for this rite, but the *Mishnah* stipulates these words for the priest:

O God, I have committed iniquity, transgressed, and sinned before Thee, I and my house. O God, forgive the iniquities and transgressions and sins which I have committed and transgressed and sinned before Thee, I and my house, as it is written in the Law of Thy servant Moses. "For on this day shall atonement be made for you, to cleanse you; from all your sins shall ye be clean before the Lord." <sup>3</sup>

The only example I could find of a "layman" doing "confession" "in church" is recorded in Leviticus 1:4. No words are stipulated, but the man who brings the burnt offering is instructed to "lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering." Surely this is an implied confession of guilt. Perhaps this practice is what David had in mind when he wrote: "Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false." (Ps 24:3-4)

Yet none of this is corporate confession, as we know it today. Nor can it be maintained that the following examples are exactly similar, either. On two occasions the returned exiles gathered for a corporate confession of their sins. However, both public confessions took place after specific national sins and were as much a recognition of the theocratic charter for the nation as they were confessions. The general confession in our service has none of those implications; perhaps our "A Day of Humiliation and Prayer" is closer in content.

The point of this is that the Old Testament knows nothing of the kind of general confession that we know in our worship today. Not until the mature development of the synagogue do we find anything similar. It is important to note, of course, that the synagogue movement was a lay movement, for, if I might say it, lazy Jews. The exile had made it impossible for their ancestors to view the Temple sacrifices; in Babylon they could only review the rites. The synagogue idea was established so that there might be an opportunity for such review in localities far removed from Jerusalem. It was in the synagogue that the Word Section of our liturgy has its roots (lesson, psalm, lesson) and it is here that we find the first example of corporate confession. The *TAHANUN* followed a set of general prayers and preceded the reading of the first lesson. It was at first spoken only on the days nearest to the Great Day of Atonement, but eventually became a regular Monday and Thursday event.<sup>4</sup> A sample confession from the third century BC:

My God, before I was formed, I was of no worth and now that I have been formed, it is as if I had not been formed. I am dust in my life, how much more in my death. Behold I am before Thee like a vessel full of shame and reproach. May it be Thy will that I sin no more, and what I have sinned, wipe away in Thy mercy, but not through suffering.<sup>5</sup>

The prayer hardly needs the disclaimer that it is not canonical. It is so obviously not in the spirit of inspired examples of genuine confession. It is melodramatic to a fault and it is conditional ("only not through suffering"). I doubt Jesus would have prayed it in the synagogue, not just because it didn't apply to him, but more so because it was so contrived. It serves well, however, as the first example of what often happens when confession becomes formal rather than personal.

The Lord Jesus was not interested in form but in faith. That does not mean he was antinomian; he demanded obedience to God's law and especially to his law of love. But he taught clearly that obedience without faith and its fruits was not pleasing to God. He wanted his people to be pure in heart and mind; he wanted them to live their faith, not just to speak about their sins. A spoken confession was worthless without a pure heart. "If

you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift." (Mt 5:23-24) He saw in the Jewish leaders what happens when the form is correct but the faith is erring: "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.'" (Mt 15:7-9) Jesus gave to his apostles the right to hear confession and to absolve the penitent. He surely heard thousands say "Jesus, Master, have mercy on me!" He gave a format for baptism and for prayer. But not once does the Savior encourage formal confession nor does he present us with a form for it.

The apostles write in a similar vein, as we would expect. St. Paul, however, needs to have a few of his words studied and clarified. He wrote words to the Corinthians that have ever since affected our use of confession in church. The Corinthians were having all sorts of problems in their communion services: divisiveness, drunkenness, social exclusiveness, and a lack of church discipline. All these are listed elsewhere by Paul as acts of the sinful nature (Gal 5:19-21). Paul is aghast and reminds these Christians how incongruous it is to be intimately associated with Christ on the one hand (in the Lord's Supper) and to act as a child of Satan on the other. He issues a call that they be pure in heart before they participate in the Supper again:

Whoever eats the bread and drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. (1 Co 11:27-29)

To insist that Paul here calls for a special pre-communion confession is surely an overstatement. For one thing, the preparation Paul calls for is an understanding of what is present in the Sacrament; the communicant wants to ask himself: "What do I believe about this body and blood?" Confessing one's sins is only a part of the answer to that question. Secondly, the judgment which comes to believers who commune unworthily is a physical chastisement which means to catch them before they fall from faith: "When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world." (1 Co 11:32) And not only the sin of unworthy communing carries with it that judgment. Lenski says "It is the sin of communing unworthily which, like other sins, entails the penalty of judgment."<sup>6</sup> It is obvious that not only an unworthy communing brings about this judgment; God brings chastisement because of any number of sins (e.g. the death of David's son after his sin with Bathsheba). Finally, the unbeliever who communes receives no greater condemnation than the unbeliever who does not commune. Paul, I think, is making here in a negative way the same point he is making when he addresses the subject of corporate worship elsewhere. Before he encouraged the Ephesians to "speak to one another with psalm, hymns, and spiritual songs," he encouraged them: "Be very careful how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil." (Eph 5:15-20) Before he urged the Colossians to "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God," he advised them: "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion..." (Col 3:12-16) Whether Paul spoke about the Lord's Supper or any other part of corporate worship, he maintained that it was the heart and the picture window to the heart, the Christian life, which needed to be pure and prepared. Isn't this exactly what the writer to the Hebrews urged when he wrote these words (which are actually the basis for the invitation to our general confession): "let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water." (Heb 10:22)

That this was the understanding of the early church is made obvious by the fact that none of the early liturgies includes a general confession of sins. The *Didache* might seem on the basis of this admonition to indicate a pre-communion confessional service: "Assemble on the day of the Lord, break bread and celebrate the

Eucharist; but first confess your sins, that your sacrifice may be holy." <sup>7</sup> But Justin Martyr clarifies that expression:

We call this food the Eucharist, of which no one is allowed to partake except he is convinced of the truth of our teaching and has received the washing of the forgiveness of sins and for his regeneration, and so lives as Christ has taught us. <sup>8</sup>

Confession for first and second century believers was surely much more than spoken formulas. They seemed to have had an understanding that believers put what they knew about sin and forgiveness better into practice than into words and so found no reason to include a spoken confession in their communion liturgy. When one considers that the Church's earliest theological emphasis tended to be on the empty tomb and not on the cross and on the exaltation rather than on the humiliation, one can understand correctly Pius Parsch's statement:

"The primitive Church considered itself a 'holy people'; nor did it possess the clearly defined consciousness of sin (we might say 'the emphasis on sin') of medieval and modern times. It did not, therefore, see the need for a special rite of purification." <sup>9</sup>

"What do we do with the *"Lapsi"*? That was the question, which led the Church to her first discussion about an organized rite of confession. The *lapsi* (fallen ones) were those who had denied the faith under threat of persecution. Some in the church claimed they could not be forgiven more than once; others maintained that confession earned an absolution. The same argument soon raged over blatant and public sins, and blatant and public sins increased after Constantine allowed Christianity status in the empire. To satisfy the hard-liners, the ecclesiastical leadership determined that some sort of outward sign was necessary for readmittance into the church. The outward sign was to be determined between the confessor and the confessee. <sup>10</sup> Thus are the roots of Rome's auricular confession. As the church of the post-empire era sank into a merit plan of salvation, the confessional rose in importance. By 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council decreed that every Catholic must visit the confessional once a year or be excommunicated. In 1555 Trent solidified the doctrine. This summary means to be only a cursory overview:

1. The sacrament of penance is necessary for salvation
2. Penance includes contrition, confession, satisfaction, absolution
3. Confession includes an enumeration of all mortal sins
4. Satisfaction is determined by the priest as judge
5. Penance saves the baptized as surely as baptism saves the unbaptized
6. Contrition and faith perfected by charity justifies (along with the intention to attend Mass)
7. Imperfect contrition (out of fear or sorrow, not out of faith) does not justify, but prepares for the attainment of grace
8. The priest has the right to impose penance because God, although he removes all guilt, does not remove all punishment <sup>11</sup>

Incidentally, while Rome seems to be reharmonizing much of her theology, she has not changed the tune. This instruction is from a 1976 Roman Catholic catechism:

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.<sup>12</sup>

(In practice, however, Roman discipline seems to have broken down; many Catholics make no secret of having avoided the confessional for years with impunity.)

The Roman Catholic practice of penance, indulgences and the confessional were at the center of what Luther was striving to reform. Specifically, he objected to the following aspects of auricular confession:

1. that members were compelled legalistically to confess privately at least once a year;
2. that members were to enumerate all sins in order to receive absolution for them;
3. that the priest acted as judge, deciding on his own whether to remit or retain sins;
4. that personal confession to God was pronounced invalid in favor of priestly confession;
5. that doing penance was explicitly taught as an act whereby the sinner atoned (at least in part) for his own sin;
6. that the forced, artificial requirements tended to foster an artificial view of sins as actions alone, rather than as the disease as well;
7. in general, that auricular confession focused not outward, on Christ's promise of forgiveness (Gospel), but rather inward, on the sinner's act of contrition (Law), even to the point of viewing the confession as meritorious.

Despite the horrors of the abuse of the confessional, Luther saw many values in retaining the opportunity to confess one's sins in a formal way. In 1522 he said in a sermon: "I will allow no man to take private confession away from me, and I will not give it up for all the treasures in the world, since I know what comfort and strength it has given me."<sup>13</sup> Obviously, it was the absolution part of the rite which Luther valued most highly. This is clear from a statement in the Smalcald Articles: "For since private absolution originates in the Office of the Keys, it should not be despised, but greatly valued and highly esteemed."<sup>14</sup> It is not at all surprising that a man with such a clear concept of sin and grace should value a rite which so clearly allowed for a confession of sin and a proclamation of grace—and that he should value it for both himself and his people. In the Large Catechism's "Brief Exhortation to Confession," Luther adds: "If you are a Christian you should be glad to run more than 100 miles for confession."<sup>15</sup>

For as highly as he valued confession, he did not see as close a connection between confession and Lord's Supper as we see in our day. For one thing, he refused to demand the rite in a legalistic way: "I will not have anyone forced to it, but left to each one's free will."<sup>16</sup> Pieper draws from the St. Louis edition a quotation which shows that Luther felt he and other pastors or laymen could attend the Sacrament without going to confession.<sup>17</sup> In the Small Catechism Luther makes it clear that not confession, but faith is the essential pre-communion preparation: "Fasting and bodily preparation is indeed a fine outward custom. But he is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words, Given and shed for you for the remission of sins." I will maintain that Luther, like St. Paul, while stressing the value of a living confession, did not attach to the reception of the Sacrament the necessity of confession. "What is given in and with the Sacrament," Luther wrote in the Large Catechism, "the body cannot seize and appropriate. But this is done by the faith of the heart, which discerns this treasure and desires it."<sup>18</sup>

What was needed before one received the Lord's Supper was thorough training and instruction in the Word. Only this, in Luther's mind, could bring about the proper preparation for the Sacrament and, for that matter, for life itself. He included no confession of sins in his German Mass; he did stipulate: "The German service needs a plain and simple, fair and square catechism."<sup>19</sup> The process of training was to be carried on by the parents in the home and by the pastor from the pulpit and it was to be a life-long training session. The reformer also realized that training to receive the Sacrament needed to be joined by the practice of church discipline; impenitent sinners were not to be admitted to communion. To carry out both tasks, to train and to discipline, the Christian pastor above all else needed to know his congregation and what they were up to.

It was that point of view which led Luther to determine to inaugurate announcements for the Lord's Supper.

The bishop should be informed of those who want to commune. They should request in person to receive the Lord's Supper so that he maybe able to know both their names and manner of life. And let him not admit the applicants unless they can give a reason for their faith and can answer questions about what the Lord's Supper is, what its benefits are, and what they expect to derive from it. In other words, they should be able to repeat the Words of Institution from memory and to explain that they are coming because they are troubled by the consciousness of their sin, the fear of death, or some other evil, such as temptation of the flesh, the world, or the devil, and now hunger and thirst to receive the Word and sign of grace and salvation from the Lord himself through the ministry of the bishop, so that they may be consoled and comforted; this was Christ's purpose, when he in priceless love gave and instituted this Supper.<sup>20</sup>

Luther is not speaking about a confession of sins here. This is obvious from what he writes several paragraphs later: "Now concerning private confession before communion, I still think as I have held heretofore, namely, that it neither is necessary nor should it be demanded. Nevertheless, it is useful and should not be despised."<sup>21</sup> So in Luther's view, it was not the communicant's confession which should precede communion, but rather the pastor's counseling which helped to assure that past administrations were taking root in the life of the individual.

There is another piece of evidence that makes it clear that, to Luther, not confession but knowledge, faith and life, were the best preparations for receiving the Sacrament. He was not inclined to ask that this announcement for communion be made by every church member before every reception of the Sacrament. For some, a once-a-year visit with the pastor might suffice; for others, once-in-a-lifetime would be adequate. On the other hand, weak and new believers ought to come before each visit to the Lord's Table. He suggested to those who were to visit the Saxon country congregations in 1528: "No one should be allowed to go to communion who has not been individually examined by the pastor."<sup>22</sup> One might also note that Luther's Paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer and his Exhortation before the Lord's Supper (which is not a confession but a general review of what might have been spoken about in a previous day's visit with the pastor) is found in the German service, not in the Latin. The Deutsche Messe was intended for the poorly educated and poorly trained people of the country congregations. The liturgy for the university family and the rest of the Wittenberger middle class (Formula Missae) has neither confession nor exhortation.

It must be perfectly obvious by now why Luther did not include a general confession of sins in either his Latin or his German service. To him, confession was not the heart of the matter—faith was. Where there was faith there would be confession. Confession/absolution was a fine and healthful spiritual custom and could be employed by a Christian before he came to the Lord's Supper, but he need not necessarily speak a confession or hear an absolution before the Sacrament. All he needed to do was believe; his pastor would help him, if he felt he needed it, to examine both the object and the strength of his believing.

The Augsburg Confession and its Apology speak with the same voice. "Confession is a human right only, not commanded by Scripture but ordained by the Church." (AC 25, p. 71) "It is not usual to give the body of the Lord except to them that have been examined and absolved." (AC 25, P. 69) "But a fixed time is not prescribed because all are not ready in like manner at the same time." (AP 11, p. 249)

There were those who, very soon, found an alternative to Luther's careful pastoral ways of preparing people for communion. Zwingli first, and then Calvin both felt that a paternalistic requirement of examination was popish.<sup>23</sup> Of course they both misunderstood Luther's intent. Unfortunately, others did as well. However, rather than eliminating the custom, this other side did Luther one better—they insisted upon it. Examination and confession in some areas was expected to be a part of every trip to the communion rail. Osiander was one of those who abused Luther's practice. The city council utterly rejected the entire notion of "Pastoral jurisdiction."

The *Kirchenordnung fuer Brandenburg-Nuernberg* of 1533 solved the problem by requiring personal announcement, leaving the matter of confession optional. So heated were emotions at this seemingly minor point that in 1541 Osiander was depicted as burning in hell on one of the floats in a carnival parade, and riots were averted only by Luther's personal intervention.<sup>24</sup> Some pastors retained (even into the last century in America) the "confession pence" which they received in the same way we receive money after private communions.

The group that found Luther's examination popish found an alternate right in the Roman Mass. The Mass, about 1000, had picked up from a Milanese baptismal hymn<sup>25</sup> a *confiteor* ("I confess") which became popular among priests for their own private preparation for serving in church. By the beginning of the 14th century it was common; the Missal of Pius V (1570) solidified its position.<sup>26</sup> The text began as did many personal prayers (including Luther's) with the sign of the cross and the baptismal invocation, "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." (This is perhaps as good a place as any to mention, in light of the above revelation, that there is no high tradition to the service opening with the Trinitarian invocation. Besides, its grammatical status—a prepositional phrase—gives us all sorts of problems. How about beginning the service with "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all"?) Reed summarizes the rest of the ancient text:

The text begins with the responsive reading by the priest and his attendants of Psalm 43: "Judge me, O God ... send out Thy light and Thy truth ... then I will go unto the altar of God..." The psalm is followed by a lengthy confession with enumeration of many saints, a form of absolution, and the Collect for purity ("Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known," etc.  
27

At first the priest seems to have spoken the confession in the sacristy while he vested; eventually it was spoken at the chancel steps as the choir chanted the Introit. The congregation did not speak the *confiteor*; it was not meant for the people.

But it worked for the people, some thought, and so a few pastors began to rid the old *confiteor* of its false doctrine and use it at the beginning of the service. The Calvinists especially picked up the practice, although they normally added a "confessional service" on the day before the Sacrament was to be offered. (Since the Reformed allowed the Sacrament so rarely, this did not add heavy loads to pastoral schedules.) The Anglican Church, for instance, follows that practice. Her main service has a short general confession at the beginning; both Morning and Evening Prayer (the orders which would be used for a pre-communion confession) contain a lengthy confessional section. Lutherans who adopted this custom tended to be those most influenced by Calvin. Bucer, for example, included a general confession in his order for Cologne. Melancthon began his service for Mecklenburg with a general confession.

The last example of a recasting of the priestly *confiteor* into a general confession is that of Olavus Petri in Sweden. Petri was no Calvinist and, to be honest, I haven't been able to document why he determined to go in the direction he did. Petri was a student in Wittenberg during the hottest days of the Reformation, 1517-1519. He had a great deal of contact with Luther and his associates. In one way or another he seems to have picked up an order of service which was being used in Nuremberg; it contained a general confession (remember the Osiander story?). This was the order that appears almost word for word in his church order for Sweden in 1531.<sup>28</sup> The service began with an hymn. There followed a long confession of sins after which the people heard a short prayer (not an absolution) for forgiveness. By 1541 that prayer was eliminated. The Kyrie and Gloria in Excelsis followed in the classic order. As I'll show by and by, Petri's decision to include a general confession has far reaching results for the church in America and for the Wisconsin Synod.

For 100 years after Luther's death, the state of affairs in Lutheranism concerning confession/absolution changed hardly at all. Some territories employed a general confession/confessional service almost exclusively and only allowed an occasional private confession. Others became very used to a pastoral examination and knew they

could confess specific sins should they desire to. There were surely cases where private confession and/or examination were legalistically demanded. The period is quiet in the books I studied. The action begins again at the end of the Thirty Years War.

The war had devastating effects on the spiritual life of Lutherans in Germany. The church suffered irreparable losses. Pastors who were not killed were driven into exile and poverty. Those who were permitted to stay in their parishes served their people in barns or in forests. Church life was disrupted, churches were closed or destroyed. A whole generation of Lutheran youth grew up without religious education. The war ended in victory for the Lutherans, but at a horrible price.

After 1648 the church tried to restore an orderly religious life, but the common people were not nearly as receptive as they had been before the horror. The leaders of the church have to be blamed, but they are blamed with understanding, for using rules and doctrinal regulations to call the people back to a religious order of sorts. Communion and a prior confession were insisted upon—under threat of imprisonment.<sup>28</sup> The worship service which surrounded the Sacrament became as formalistic as the confession which preceded it. And what was worse, the congregations were huge! No pastor or pastoral team could hope to carry out Luther's idea of pastoral training and care under the circumstances. Without the ability to pastor a congregation and with the determination to "get" the people into church and communion, we see pastors of that era sadly watching as their members came into close association with Christ (in worship and in communion) while living as children of Satan. (cf. p. 3 and the situation at Corinth)

What we can see, men like Philip Spener could see, too. He deplored the sight and, what is more, he deplored what he felt was the cause of it, i.e., too great an insistence on doctrine and too little on training for living. He was not altogether outside of the truth. He correctly wondered how any pastor could effectively examine 20 communicants in an hour. He considered the confessional to be a farce and determined that confession ought to be made only between man and his God. If he would be willing to allow anything, it would be a general confession and perhaps a general confessional service.

Rationalism was not willing to accept even that. Confession presupposed sin and sin presupposed a divine standard. To the rationalist there was no standard but the one of his own making. There was no need to confess sins that were not, in fact, considered sins. If there was no need for confession there was surely no need for absolution and, for that matter, there was no need for Lord's Supper, either. For the sake of tradition, the Sacrament was retained and offered occasionally. Also for the sake of tradition confessional services were sometimes retained *pro forma*.

1817 marked the 300th anniversary of the posting of Luther's 95 Theses. There wasn't much to celebrate; Luther's doctrine had been abandoned and the churches of his Germany were empty. But in Kiel, Klaus Harms issued a call to repentance and faith and the Confessional Awakening was born. Harms was joined by like-minded men who, although they cannot be considered orthodox by Scripture's standards, pointed in the right direction. The pastors engaged in the movement reestablished the authority of Scripture in their congregations and districts, restored the historic liturgical rites and reinstated private examination and confession before communion. In the south Wilhelm Loehe of Neuendettelsau advocated a more orthodox reformation and an even more conscientious pre-communion confession. Loehe is purported to have said, "The worst private confession is better than the best general confession."<sup>30</sup> Considering how general confession was the darling of both the Reformed and the Pietists and used by the Rationalists, his obvious overstatement is forgivable!

All of these currents were floating in the theological air as Henry Melchior Muehlenberg arrived in Philadelphia in 1742. More than any other man Muehlenberg shaped the course which confession/absolution has had—and still has—in our churches. As we will see, his shaping was almost accidental!

Muehlenberg was a thorough-going pietist, sent by August Francke from Halle to serve scattered Lutherans in the new world. But, as Professor Fredrich remarks occasionally, Muehlenberg failed to live up to his reputation after he crossed the Atlantic. He wanted to be a Lutheran, at least a Lutheran of sorts. Despite what must have been a staggering workload and a frustrating one at that, Muehlenberg within several years set his

hand at composing a historic order of service for the Lutherans he was trying to serve. And he was determined to restore discipline in an undisciplined land by means of private confession.

Had Muehlenberg had only his own congregation to serve, his ideal might have worked. However, he was a gathering pastor, and soon enough it was simply a matter of too many numbers and too little time. Muehlenberg found himself spending more time examining than anything else. The confessional service was a part of his Pietistic background and before long it became convenient to inaugurate that kind of service and the general confession which accompanied it.

The second factor that led Muehlenberg to this decision was his determination to eliminate the boundary lines between the various American Lutheran groups. In this, of course, he was completely a Pietist. He seemed to have decided early on that the best way to accomplish this was through a common order of service. His "One Church, One Book" theory is still in place among America's liberal Lutherans. The Pennsylvanians were eager enough to be gathered, but the Swedes around Philadelphia needed more coaxing. Any order that would be acceptable to them had to include elements of their high mass which neither Pietism nor Rationalism had ever destroyed. As you may recall from a previous remark, one distinctive element of Petri's liturgy was its general confession at the beginning of the service. With his prayer for forgiveness having dropped away in the course of time, the service proceeded from confession to Kyrie with the sermon serving as the absolution. This is exactly the order of Muehlenberg's service: exhortation, confession, Kyrie, Gloria, etc. Does this look familiar?

It does, of course. It is also, of course, completely out of sync with the historic Christian and Lutheran service. And so, when the confessional revival came to America and Lutheran leaders sought to implement in our nation the same conservation restorations which had worked in Germany, their first goal was to restore the historic order of the Lutheran synaxis: Introit, Kyrie, Gloria in Excelsis. Unfortunately, by this time Muehlenberg's general confession was so well-known and so well-loved among eastern Lutherans that it was retained before the Introit, in the same place as the old *Confiteor*. This was the order of both the Church Book (1868) and the Common Service (1888). The service books that contain both services also include orders for confessional services.

The fathers of the Missouri Synod were the sons of German pastors who scorned everything but the private confessional. Martin Stephan was a strong advocate of the Luther ideal and the Saxons followed his example. We have noted already Loehe's opinion about general confession. The Franconian colonies imitated his lead. Loehe's 1844 agenda has a confession at the beginning of the service; he did not use a confessional service. The model constitution for the Michigan colonies stated:

1. Announcement for confession is to be made personally to one's own confessor one or several days before confession.
2. As a body we practice private confession and desire private absolution.<sup>31</sup>

Walther's 1856 Kirchen-Agende has neither a general confession nor an exhortation and in the first Saxon constitution we find this clause:

Where private confession is not in use, the pastor is to strive through teaching and instruction to introduce it. Yet in congregations where the total abolishing of general confession and absolution is hindered by insurmountable obstacles, general confession may be kept along with private confession.<sup>32</sup>

What may seem to be to us legalistic today was not thought to be so by our own Koehler.

The Missourians on the whole cannot be charged with false doctrine or legalism in respect to either of the two forms of the confessional. On the contrary, they must be credited with faithfully having counseled their congregations by extensive doctrinal discussion.<sup>33</sup>

Koehler is perhaps too kind to Missouri, (and he does inveigh against her elsewhere) considering how many instances one can find of a legalistic abuse of a fine custom. Any number of Wisconsin congregations suffered because they became involved in battles with local Missourians over private confession. On the other hand, his defense was perhaps necessary. What with her Pietistic background and her early interactions with the Reformed, Wisconsin was much more inclined to the confessional service and general confession than she was to private confession and examination. Her main order of service (at least after 1920) was patterned after Muehlenberg's insofar as it followed the confession with the Kyrie (or, in the alternate service, the Agnus Dei!), but the confession of sins was not spoken by the people but by the pastor alone. I would guess Koehler saw value in Missouri's more Lutheran and historic position and wished that his synod might employ it without Missouri's legalism.

Despite her antipathy to private confession, Wisconsin shared in attitude and in form some of Missouri's confessional excesses. As the Saturday confessional service became unpopular especially in the cities, the confession was "stuck" between the sermon and communion. This custom soon separated Word from Sacrament in our services and destroyed not only the historic service but the common and frequent use of the Holy Supper as well. How often could one expect parishioners to sit through both a regular sermon and a confessional sermon on one Sunday morning! Many of our congregations used the form for confessional service that came out in Missouri's 1921 Agenda. It displays almost a Pietistic uncertainty as to the good intentions of the communicants' confessions. This question follows the actual confession:

And now I ask you before God, is this the sincere confession of all of you, that you heartily repent of your sins, believe on Jesus Christ, and sincerely and earnestly purpose by the assistance of God to Holy Ghost henceforth to amend your sinful life? Then declare so by saying, Yes. <sup>34</sup>

That question is innocuous compared to an English form from Wisconsin's 1912 agenda. The introduction and the beginnings of the paragraphs are listed here:

Hear, therefore, what manner of persons God absolveth and who receive the Holy Sacrament unto their salvation.

You need to be heartily sorry...

You must heartily desire God's mercy...

You must firmly believe...

You must forgive those who sin against you...

You must also have an earnest purpose to better your lives... <sup>35</sup>

The Order of the Confessional Service in *The Lutheran Hymnal* is scarcely less harsh. Four sets of questions and answers are concluded by imperatives as follows:

Verily, you should confess...

Verily, you should repent...

Verily, you should so believe...

Verily, you should so promise...

When we compare the confessional services of both the *Church Book* of 1917 (ULC) and the *Service Book and Hymnal* of 1958 (LCA, ALC) we find none of that hardness. Both services contain a series of questions before the actual confession and neither commands confession, repentance or faith.

The general confession employed in *The Lutheran Hymnal's* Service without Communion is based on Melancthon's composition for Mecklenburg.<sup>36</sup> It is the regular communion service confession of the Common Service. Despite a long search I have not been able to find the source of the familiar "Almighty God, merciful Father, I, a poor, miserable sinner..." although I found it in many of the German agendas. I am not going to discuss the controversy over the wording of the absolution. It has to do with the phrase, "I forgive you all your sins..." Already Luther took a stand for this sentence against those who preferred to say "I declare to you the full forgiveness..." All of the absolutions in contemporary Lutheran liturgies use the "*ego te absolvo*" form.

Another form which contemporary confessional models contain is the beautiful prayer from the old Roman *confiteor*:

Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open and from whom no secrets are hid, cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy name, through Jesus Christ our Lord.<sup>37</sup>

That prayer breathes the spirit of the orders of confession, which are found in the Lutheran hymnals on the scene today. The orders for the beginning of the service lean heavily on 1 John 1; the confessional service orders invariably employ Psalm 51 and an exhortation. Exhortations and invitations have none of the harshness we could find in forms of 50 years ago. From what I can determine, there seems to be a purposeful effort to rid corporate confession of all forms of legalism that in the past were often obvious.

The Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship floated one of these evangelical forms along with two other ideas in the early 1970's. They sought to add a reconciliation with one's neighbor to the confession of sins:

L: Let us confess our sins before God and in the presence of one another."

C: Most holy and merciful Father, we confess to you and to one another that we have sinned both in our actions and in our failure to act.

L: We are forgiven and reconciled to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Therefore, let us be reconciled with one another and share the peace of the Lord.<sup>38</sup>

The second ILCW innovation was to incorporate the general confession with the general prayer and to place it just before the Communion liturgy. The experiment prompted serious study of the whole matter of confession, private and public. Although the innovations were generally panned (and eventually canned!) the resultant study determined, I think, that *Lutheran Book of Worship* should contain an excellent general confession of sins and a fine form for corporate confession.

What shall be the shape of the orders of confession in our new hymnal? It was that question which led me to the decision to write this paper. Without claiming any corner on wisdom these are some conclusions which seem to be obvious. I will welcome your comments.

Neither private or general confession/absolution (as a form) is commanded by Scripture. In fact, the Lutheran Confessions clearly call these "a human right." There are actually no examples in Scripture of what we would call general confession.

Nowhere in the New Testament do Jesus, Paul, or any of the other writers attach confession/absolution to the Lord's Supper nor do any of the early church fathers nor any of the first liturgical orders. Rather, both Jesus and Paul stress that preparation of one's heart and purity of one's life is the proper preparation and prerequisite for corporate worship in general and the Lord's Supper specifically. To this the fathers, Luther, and the Confessions heartily agree.

To achieve the proper preparation of the heart Luther saw no better means than an on-going and thorough training in Scripture. In the highest periods of orthodoxy we find similar points of view. Pastoral care and concern find their greatest ability in personal contact. The timing for such training was, in Luther's mind, dependant on an individual's private circumstances.

Organized confession (either private or general) is at best only a poor replacement for the spontaneous and free confession of the heart. Besides this, organized confession in history has often been the result of a legalistic attitude concerning proper preparation for membership or for the Lord's Supper and has invariably carried with it legalistic abuses.

Organized confession has, in fact, often hindered the purposes of the Lord's Supper. It has given to the Sacrament a somber rather than a joyful ambiance and has, in many cases, actually discouraged pious but troubled Christians from attending. Where confession included a confessional address the Sacrament was separated from the Word and made communion seen to be only an occasional part of a Christian's life. Still today, many of those customs remain.

On the basis of a similar study, Peter Brunner concludes:

Thus we have cut the cord which ties the reception of the Lord's Supper to communion by law and by custom to a preceding reception of absolution. It is surely true that we stand in great need of absolution. No line dare be written which questions this need or which minimizes the magnitude of this gift. But the reception of Holy Communion may be made absolutely dependent on a preceding confession with resultant absolution only when that ultimate boundary has been crossed, when a commandment has been transgressed which effects the exclusion from the living membership of the body of Christ. In all other instances I dare not demand of myself or of others that confession be made and absolution received prior to the reception of the Sacrament. Of course, opportunity for confession must be offered on, or better before each Sunday or holy day on which Holy Communion is administered. But we must maintain the independence of confession over against Holy Communion and the independence of Holy Communion over against confession.<sup>39</sup>

What shall be the shape of the orders of confession in our new hymnal? Perhaps the first question needs to be: What will be the shape of confession in the church? The present attitudes must be the molders of the forms of our worship. Can these suggestions begin to help form some new attitudes?

Don't rely on forms to get people ready either for communion or for life. Only a constant application of Law and Gospel can accomplish such preparation. Do that pastorally and consistently.

Stress the need for self-examination and confession in preaching and teaching. Don't be afraid of offering your services as a confessor. Encourage private confession without making it contrived or legalistic. Offer an alternative to communion cards.

#### **PRACTICE CHURCH DISCIPLINE!**

Hold a confessional service that has no connection with Lord's Supper. See who comes. Preach on confession; include a confession of sins. Surely absolve those who assemble. It might become obvious that the Christians in our care have more of a desire for this than we have supposed.

Include in a Sunday bulletin Luther's Christian Questions or make them available in the narthex. Encourage their use during the Voluntary.

We ought to include in our services a general confession, not as a prerequisite for reception of the Sacrament, but as a confession of faith as to what the Church believes about sin and forgiveness. Brunner writes in another place:

The sin of humanity, the sin of Christendom, the sin of the congregation gathered here, and the sin of its members is a reality which must be expressed by way of confession as the congregation confronts the presence of God. This confession of sin also evidences that the congregation is not a summation of individuals, but a body, a unit, in which all bear one another also in sin.<sup>40</sup>

Allow our services to be arranged in such a way that general confession can be omitted on occasion. Our Liturgy Committee has passed by the Joint Hymnal Committee a new communion service that places a quiet confession and absolution before the first hymn. *Lutheran Book of Worship* has a similar arrangement. Don't demand that the confessions in the new hymnal contain everything we know about sin. For one thing, such a confession would be impossible to write; for another, the function of confession need not call for such completeness. As I have tried to say, confession in church cannot replace confession at home. Nor ask us, I beg, to create forms which make it sure that our people really are confessing their sins!

Once again it comes down to the task of the pastor and his teachers. There are no easy ways to lead the people of God to be what and who he has called them to be. Drives won't make them good stewards. Methods won't make them good evangelists. Forms won't make them good confessors. It takes the Word for that and it takes people to proclaim the Word. May God give us wisdom to use his Word wisely and well in all areas of faith and life and may he grant us a loving brotherhood so that we might work together to find what is best for the people he loves.

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