

The Use of the Keys in Public and Private Confession

By, David W. Schmidt

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Introduction

The joys of writing a Pastoral Conference Paper! The stress, the blood, the tears! With great joy I accepted this assignment. Then as I started to study and do research, I realized what a broad topic this is. Like some of you young pups I don't own any religious software. So I do it the old fashioned way, I actually use books. So I began by studying the Bible, Luther, Church Fathers etc. And then I had the bright idea to look on the Internet and stumbled onto our Seminary web site. And to and behold there are like gazillion papers on my same subject. And I mean essays by the big shots, like Tiefel, Jeske, Becker. So what was a puny mission pastor going to add to a subject that has been well written about?

Why do we keep coming back to this subject? Why have there been so many papers written on this subject? The Reformation Fathers had to deal with the question carefully. Yet they faced it head on and the answers they formulated in our Book of Concord still serve us well:

Since absolution or the power of the Keys is also an aid and consolation against sin and a bad conscience, ordained by Christ Himself in the Gospel, confession or absolution *ought by no means be abolished in the Church* especially on account of tender and timid consciences and on account of the untrained(Smalcald Articles, III, VII)

Our confession it is so taught that private Abolutio (private Absolution) should be retained in the churches and not be allowed to fall into disuse. (Augsburg Confession Article XI)

I think the answer why we keep writing about this and why so many papers have been written is that we all perhaps think that indeed private absolution has indeed fallen into disuse in our circles. "It is generally admitted and commiserated that private confession has fallen into great neglect among us, and that to our hurt. We are free from the coercion an intolerable burden once imposed upon Christians of enumerating their sins at specified intervals before a clerical judge. Everyone knows this and has learned is so well that our liberty has become a license, as if one never need to make use of the comfort offered through private confession. . . Private confession is a precious gift that the Lord bestowed on His Church. It is there for Christians to use, not as an oppressive requirement but as a healing medicine to be sought out when a person feels the need for it. The service of *Private Confession in Christian Worship* was designed chiefly for this purpose."¹

Others have lamented, "The subject of private confession in our Lutheran Church has on occasion been a topic of discussion among our pastors and laymen. However, the practice itself, while not having reached the stage of disuse in our congregations also apparently has not been emphasized and encouraged to the degree that it was by Luther and others. Today, in most of our churches, the opportunity for private confession prior to the celebration of the Lord's Supper has been waived in favor of a very brief announcement in person or via telephone or filling out a card pre or post Communion. In most cases the general confession in the service itself has replaced private confession."²

Others say that indeed the practice has fallen into disuse and that it needs to be reinstated. "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

¹ Christian Worship Manual p222

² "How Can We Salvage Private Confession?" Delivered to the Metro-North Pastoral Conference, January 21, 1985 By Howard W. Kaiser.

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.'"³

So that is the situation and the background of this paper. Is it an important issue? Absolutely. Can I add anything to what has been written? I don't know perhaps some application ideas. Is this a serious situation? I believe we are definitely lacking something. But I don't think it is as serious as some make it out to be. I definitely learned a lot writing this paper and it is may prayer maybe you will learn something also and if not that, then a sort of mental review on this topic might be of benefit. We ask that the Holy Spirit be with us this morning.

Confession and Absolution (History – Reformation Time)

I think it would be very easy for us to imagine the pressures the Reformation Fathers had to do away completely with the practice of confession. Most Lutherans in those days probably had cruel memories of the confessional booth, which was something like a modern traffic court. Plead guilty and you may get off with a lighter sentence. According to the common practice, the confessing Christian had been led to believe that he could expect forgiveness only of specific sins that were remembered and recounted, and for which suitable satisfaction was rendered. In this people could never find peace; for very many sins they neither see nor can remember.

And yet, Luther and the other Reformation Fathers did not do away with private confession. They saw that there were indeed benefits to the practice. They understood that you could apply Law and Gospel to a very specific hurt. Luther said, "Yet I will let no man take private confession away from me, and I would not give it up for all the treasures in the world; for I know what comfort and strength it has given me. No man knows so well what it can do for him as he who must struggle and fight much with the devil. The devil would have slain me long ago if confession had not sustained me. For there are many doubts and false matters which a man cannot settle himself So he takes a brother aside and tells him his trouble. What harm does it do him to humble himself a little before his neighbor and put himself to shame? When you receive a word of comfort from him, accept and believe that word as if you heard it from God Himself."⁴

And yet the Reformers also protected confession from another kind of abuse, showboating. It is that style that recounts all the bad things I use to do when I did not have Jesus in my heart. I remember watching a Church of the Nazarene pastor omitting the fifth petition of the Lords Prayer. That was for those who still had trespasses to forgive. Not for him! And again Luther says, "Confession teaches us that we are rascals and sinner of the same stripe, as the saying goes: One is as 'pious' as are all the rest. But if someone enjoys special grace, let him thank God for it and not boast about himself. If someone has fallen into sin, such is the nature of his flesh and blood; and no one has fallen so deeply but that another, who is now standing, may fall more deeply but that another, who is now standing, may fall more deeply still. Therefore so far as we personally are concerned, there is no difference whatever between us. The grace of God alone makes the difference between us."⁵

Now for those who might be entertaining the idea that we need to reinstate private Confession and Absolution in the way we "use to do it." Listen again to what Luther says, "I think it is a truly necessary thing for souls, so much so that it may not be forced on anyone by laws and commands, but may be free to each according to his need, to be made use of when and where it will."⁶ Even though I believe the Reformers took Confession and Absolution much more seriously than we do today, I do believe that they safeguarded against

³ Erling Teigen , Reactor p.75 quoted in "A Comparative Study of the Principles of Confession and Absolution in the Format of Our Lutheran Liturgy." Presented to Michigan District Pastor-Teachers Conference, Bowling Green, Ohio, June 10, 1987.

⁴ From *What Luther Says*, p. 330

⁵ From *What Luther Says*, p.328

⁶ Quoted in "The Practice Of Private Confession And Absolution In The Lutheran Church" presented on August 9, 1979 by Mark A. Jeske

legalism, a slippery slope that I am familiar with. Again Luther, “Although we do not want to force and push anyone to private confession by making its omission a mortal sin, also not to obligate them to tell every sin, torturing consciences as happened under the Pope; nevertheless it is just as little to be tolerated that anyone would want to forbid confession and so remove Absolution from the churchWhat is Absolution other than the Gospel spoken to an individual person who thereby receives comfort about the sin he has confessed.”⁷

Obviously the Reformation re-introduced what had been lost in Confession:

Confession embraces *two* parts; the one is, that we confess our sins; the other, that we receive absolution, or forgiveness, from the confessor, as from God Himself, and in no wise doubt, but firmly believe, that our sins are thereby forgiven before God in heaven. (Small Catechism V)

The second part, obviously, is the more important. It is the Gospel of forgiveness which does the healing, not the admission of wrong. Only when I am assured, authoritatively, that the “the Lord has taken away your sin” (Nathan), am I relieved of the guilt-burden. Christian counselors have the only truly effective therapy for the troubled spirit. May we use it with confidence!

The trouble is, we tend to be more occupied with what we might do (the confessing) than with what God does (the forgiving). Luther was so confident of the latter, that he announced (on Maundy Thursday, 1523) that the usual practice of confession would be suspended. Instead, communicants were to announce for Communion to the pastor for an examination of Gospel understanding. Luther declared, “I have said that the Sacrament shall be given to no one except he be able to give an account *of what he receives*, and why he is going.”⁸ I think it is pretty clear that Luther believed in what we practice today in the form of close communion. The concern was for the communicant, that he should not fail to find in the Sacrament of the Altar its glorious and powerful message of forgiveness. Away with the guilt!

The Reformation Fathers obviously thought highly of the Use of the Key in Public and Private Confession. They did emphasize that it was not a legalistic requirement but I don’t think that they would ever imagine that it wouldn’t exist in a good Lutheran congregation. This paper will not touch upon the history of this practice from the Reformation period to the 1800’s there are plenty of references out there for that. Rather we are now going to look at what happened in the last 150 years.

Confession and Absolution History – Last 150 Years

Things do change! The changes in our church body during the last 150 years are incredible! I remember growing up of the pastor preaching 45 minutes a Sunday and nobody blinking an eyelash. All the women and girls wore hats and dresses, the men and boys wore suits, people knelt after communion and so forth. And who would have ever dreamed that we would use something other than the KJV! Change seems to have accelerated even more during my time in the ministry. Now we have power-point sermons, Greek and Hebrew Software, web-sites, sermons being preached over the internet, and on and on.

It is amazing that 100 years ago our WELS pastors would preach on the evils of dancing, life insurance, birth control,⁹ and women’s suffrage. And today those topics are not included normally in our sermons. Things do change. And the practice of public and private confession has also changed. I find it ironic however that just at the moment in history when the secular world, through its writers of fiction, its dramatists, and its

⁷ Quoted in *Pastoral Theology* by C.F. W. Walther (Who by the way has quite an extensive writing on Private Confession and Absolution.)

⁸ (Cf. F. Bente, *Historical Introductions to the Symbolic Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*; CPH, 1921, p75)

⁹ Alan Graebner said that “Contraception made the marriage bed ‘far filthier than a pigsty. Preventing conception was ‘the sin of the age.’” Quoted in *A Tale of Two Synods* by Mark E. Braun p42. One of the best written books I have ever read, and the fairest account I think ever given to the situation of the CLC and it’s withdrawal from the WELS.

psychiatrists, speaks more universally of the sense of guilt that ever before—that just at this moment the church speaks less of confession and forgiveness than before.

Christian churches today seem unsure of themselves about this, an area in which they should be specialists. In many churches today many do not want to speak about sin and guilt. They are negative things and emotionally unhealthy. “More often, the Law simply lies buried beneath a whip-cream overlay of positive thinking talk which has no reference to grace and forgiveness. Many a secular psychologist would chide them for this, and brand them as a threat to mental health, if not civilization.”¹⁰

So yes things have changed in the way we practice private and public confession and many things have influenced this. But what were things like a 150, 100, 50 years ago? 150 years ago the Missouri Synod was much stronger than the WELS when it came to the practice of private confession. “Where (private confession) is not in use, the pastor is to strive through teaching 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.”¹¹ Walther makes this interesting comment: “The preacher himself can, if necessary, go to the Holy Supper without confession, but he should not let that happen except in case of necessity. Every preacher should rather choose his own father confessor, confess to him regularly, and receive absolution from him. The preacher also needs this important means. How can he expect his listeners to respect the holy preaching office if he himself the appearance of despising it by not having a pastor of his own?”¹²

The practice of private confession was never originally introduced by Wisconsin men, in fact some congregations even wrote into their constitutions an express prohibition of it. President Bading however put an end to it saying that it was legalistic.¹³ By 1868 however both synods seemed to both be actively practicing private confession.

And yet my impression is that Missouri Synod and the Wisconsin Synod were not quite on the same wavelength on this issue also. Professor Becker says, “For this reason also we for the most part in our church employ the general confession of sins and the general absolution- Nowhere has the Lord commanded us to pry into the secrets of the hearts of our fellowmen. From the beginning the Lutheran Church has opposed every effort to force the sinner to recount and reveal all the specific details of his sinfulness in auricular confession. Even when private confession was maintained and the sinner was encouraged the speak of specific sins that troubled his conscience, it was not made law that every known sin must be confessed nor was a complete and detailed confession ever made a condition of forgiveness. In the early days of the Wisconsin Synod when attempts were made by some conservative Lutherans to impose the practice of private confession on the church, our Synod resisted these legalistic attempts. It may be true, as is charged by some, that we have at times been guilty of what is called a “cavalier treatment” of private confession, but that charge has a hollow ring to it when it comes from men who would seek to entangle us again in this yoke.”¹⁴

One begins to wonder if this issue had anything to do with Ecclesiastical Polity. Missouri has traditionally always been a little more “high Church” than the WELS. But it seems by the 1920’s and 1930’s the practice in both synods was changing. In 1928 George Luecke said in the *Theological Monthly*, “Private Confession and absolution has, in the course of time, fallen largely into disuse also in our Lutheran Church, and public, or general confession has taken its place.” During this time in the WELS it was customary to have a confessional service on Saturdays. It became unpopular in the cities at first and then quickly spread into the rural areas. It was replaced with people making private communion announcements during the last couple of days before the Communion Sunday. It was replaced with the communicant announcing themselves to the Pastor in his office before the service. It was replaced with the communion sign-up sheet.

¹⁰ Quoted in *Journal of Theology* Vol. 19 Number 4 December 1979 By Rollin A. Reim pg. 29

¹¹ Quoted in *The Practice of Private Confession And Absolution In The Lutheran Church* Presented August 9, 1979 by Mark A. Jeske

¹² Quoted in *Pastoral Theology* by CE W. Walther pg. 129

¹³ See extensive remarks on the situation in *The History of the Wisconsin Synod* by J P. Koehler pg. 81-84

¹⁴ Quoted in *The Doctrine of Confession and Absolution* by Sigbert W. Becker an undated paper found on the Seminary web-site.

A pastor in a 1962 sermon stated, “Lutheran church custom is to follow some kind of ritual in the matter of confession and absolution in the church service. None of the customs are established for the purpose of making a show of humility in the matter. The purpose of the ritual or liturgy is to make the teaching of sin and grace a solemn and serious procedure. But good or acceptable as any particular form may be, we treat them as customs, outward arrangements, externals that may be changed, as long as Gospel absolution, that is, the Gospel itself is proclaimed.”¹⁵

The Use of the Keys in Public and Private Confession Today

So why did things change? For one I don’t think we as pastors or laity get into God’s Word has much as we used to. Perhaps as a whole we have become more desensitized towards sin. We live in a society that has become stressed, busy, and basically wanting to get over with church as quickly as possible. We have so many distractions now days that they didn’t have back then. We are too busy to think about sin. I don’t think that Bill Gates put Solitaire on the computer I think Satan did, that icon is so tempting! But why did the practice of private confession disappear. There is probably no overwhelming reason. But it is true that the pastor is no longer considered the authority figure that he used to be. Pastors kind of just take it for granted that the communicant is prepared.

Have we allowed the practice of Private Confession to fall into disuse? I don’t think so. For one thing I think in the old days they sometimes used the Lord’s Supper as a hammer of justice instead of the Means of Grace. Sure it’s sad perhaps that we don’t have the individual contact to present Law and Gospel in private. But you know one of the ironies is this; you would think that since the pastor is not held in as high esteem anymore, people would be going more and more to secular counselors. But during my ministry in Fayetteville, hardly a week goes by when I don’t have organized counseling sessions. And I don’t know if it’s because of the military but perhaps it’s more that we live in such a sinful society that people are having more and more problems, that we are the cheapest counselor’s available. And before every organized counseling session I use the Order for Private Confession and Absolution in our hymnal.

What shall we do? One pastor suggests: “In all teaching situations-sermon, Bible Class, confirmation class, Sunday School and day school--the Lord’s Supper ought to be presented from both angles as vividly as possible. We must see both our desperate need for it and the blessed release, which it brings. Pastors need to be ready to invest large amounts of time into building deep, personal relationships with their members so that the people trust them, will come to them, will unburden themselves. Without having to advertise, “We practice Private Confession” a pastor can, in private, personalize both the darts of the Law and the warmth of the Gospel in a way, which will fulfill his role as *Seelsorger*, one who is looking after people’s Souls.”¹⁶ One of the best nuggets of advice that I received in Seminary was this: “If you visit your people when they don’t have problems, then they will come to you when they do.” And that has really held true throughout my ministry.

I don’t think we have to salvage private confession. I think we just have to be more receptive to the opportunities that we will have. Many times I have had private confession situation in times of trouble, ill health and many other reasons. All of us deal with Church Discipline cases, another excellent opportunity to use the keys in Confession and Absolution. But for some reason we are not as diligent as we should be in this area. I remember the Sunday after I was first installed, I had Council Meeting and we starting going through the roster and came upon a lady of whom I was informed, had not been in church for 10 years. I called her up that night and said I was concerned about her membership. She asked, “What do I have to do to remain a member.” I said, “First of all come to church.” She said, “I can’t do that!” And I never was able to get her back.

As far as public confession is concerned, we can perhaps be more innovating with our confession of sins, maybe make it more relevant, like I’m sorry for wasting so much on TV or the Computer, I’m sorry that I don’t monitor or spend time with my kids, thinks like that. Use the Service of Corporate Confession and Absolution on at least Ash Wednesday.

¹⁵ Quoted from Catechism *Sermons* Pamphlet #6 Pastor George Schweikert 8-27-62

¹⁶ Quoted in “The Practice of Private Confession and Absolution In The Lutheran Church” Presented by Mark A, Jeske

I don't know if I added anything to the subject. But I enjoyed doing the research and my prayer is that you were somehow edified by it. I don't think we can go back to the time of Luther, Walther, Pieper, or Beckmann and I don't think we have to. What we do have to do is go back to the Word of God, immerse ourselves in it and let it trickle down to our people.

To Him alone be the glory!

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