

Confession

by Martin Luther

How Christians should be taught to confess.

What is Confession?

Confession has two parts. First, that we confess our sins, and second, that we receive absolution, that is, forgiveness, from the pastor as from God Himself, not doubting, but firmly believing that by it our sins are forgiven before God in heaven.

What sins should we confess?

Before God we should plead guilty of all sins, even those we are not aware of, as we do in the Lord's Prayer; but before the pastor we should confess only those sins which we know and feel in our hearts.

Which are these?

Consider your place in life according to the Ten Commandments: Are you a father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, or worker? Have you been disobedient, unfaithful, or lazy? Have you been hot-tempered, rude, or quarrelsome? Have you hurt someone by your words or deeds? Have you stolen, been negligent, wasted anything, or done any harm?

A SHORT FORM OF CONFESSION

The penitent says:

Dear confessor, I ask you please to hear my confession and to pronounce forgiveness in order to fulfill God's will.

I, a poor sinner, plead guilty before God of all sins. In particular I confess before you that as a servant, maid, etc., I, sad to say, serve my master unfaithfully, for in this and that I have not done what I was told to do. I have made him angry and caused him to curse. I have been negligent and allowed damage to be done. I have also been offensive in words and deeds. I have quarreled with my peers. I have grumbled about

the lady of the house and cursed her. I am sorry for all of this and I ask for grace. I want to do better.

A master or lady of the house may say:

In particular I confess before you that I have not faithfully guided my children, servants, and wife to the glory of God. I have cursed. I have set a bad example by indecent words and deeds. I have hurt my neighbour and spoken evil of him. I have overcharged, sold inferior merchandise, and given less than was paid for.

[Let the penitent confess whatever else he has done against God's commandments and his own position.]

If, however, someone does not find himself burdened with these or greater sins, he should not trouble himself or search for or invent other sins, and thereby make confession a torture. Instead, he should mention one or two that he knows: In particular I confess that I have cursed; I have used improper words; I have neglected this or that, etc. Let that be enough.

But if you know of none at all (which hardly seems possible), then mention none in particular, but receive the forgiveness upon the general confession which you make to God before the confessor.

Then the confessor shall say:

God be merciful to you and strengthen your faith. Amen.

Furthermore:

Do you believe that my forgiveness is God's forgiveness? *Yes, dear confessor.*

Then let him say:

Let it be done for you as you believe. And I, by the command of our Lord Jesus Christ, forgive you your sins

in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Go in peace.

A confessor will know additional passages with which to comfort and to strengthen the faith of those who have great burdens of conscience or are sorrowful and distressed. This is intended only as a general form of confession.

What is the Office of the Keys?*

The Office of the Keys is that special authority which Christ has given to His church on earth to forgive the sins of repentant sinners, but to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant as long as they do not repent.

Where is this written?*

This is what St. John the Evangelist writes in chapter twenty: The Lord Jesus breathed on His disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven" (John 20:22-23).

What do you believe according to these words?*

I believe that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, in particular when they exclude openly unrepentant sinners from the Christian congregation and absolve those who repent of their sins and want to do better, this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself.

**This question may not have been composed by Luther himself but reflects his teaching and was included in editions of the catechism during his lifetime.*

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The Word of Absolution

by Edward G. Kettner

Usually when Lutherans think about “confession” they think of the general order of confession as it occurs in our orders of Holy Communion. When thinking of private confession, their thoughts might gravitate to the Roman Catholic idea, perhaps even calling to mind the image of the confessional booth. Tied with the Roman idea is the concept of “doing penance,” that is, performing “works of satisfaction” which are deemed necessary to complete the work of setting us right with God.

For Luther, confession exists for the sake of the absolution. Luther recognized the importance of giving God’s people the assurance of the forgiveness of sins, since life and salvation are founded on the gift of the forgiveness of sins. He saw that Jesus Himself wanted people to have that assurance. Therefore the spoken word of forgiveness actually gives Christ’s forgiveness to His people. When Christ gives His Church the power to forgive sins on earth, the word of absolution unlocks the gates of heaven for the sinner. When it is necessary to tell people that because of their impenitence their sins have been retained, the gates of heaven remain locked to them until they repent and then receive absolution. This is known as the Office of the Keys. The keys are given to Peter (on the basis of his confession, and by extension then to all of the apostles) in Matthew 16:19, to all of the disciples present in the Upper Room on Easter evening in John 20:21-23, and to the Church as a whole in Matthew 18:18.

Since the Office of the Keys was given to the entire Church, all Christians can bring the Gospel to troubled consciences and can let people know that Christ died for them and that their sins are forgiven. At the same time, Christ also created the office of public ministry to administer Word and Sacrament, to announce

forgiveness to the people of the Church in Christ’s place. The Office of Ministry exists for the sake of the people of God. Thus the Office of the Keys is given to the Church and exercised publicly by the called ministers of the Church.

Luther knew that repentance and forgiveness must be tied together. Confession exists for the sake of the absolution. Luther recognized that sins could be confessed directly to God (as he instructs us to do in his evening prayer), and also to one’s fellow Christians. Yet he also knew the human conscience, and knew that



Confession and Absolution. Woodcut from the 1558 edition of Luther’s Small Catechism.

many times particular sins may trouble us, even if they have been confessed in the heart to God. Thus it helps us to hear the word of absolution come to us from outside of us, to strike our ears, and to assure us that Christ’s promise us indeed for us.

This happens in the general absolution on Sunday morning. Our confession includes an expression of sorrow for the sins we have committed and includes a plea for mercy from God and an expression of faith that God will be merciful to us for the sake of Christ. Then upon that confession,

the pastor—standing in the place of Christ and acting according to His command—forgives the sins of those who repent and confess.

Since sins are confessed based on contrition and faith, absolution is pronounced unconditionally; there is no need to add words like “if you truly repent,” since the penitent has already stated that. To add such a condition could create uncertainty in the mind of the penitent, causing them to ask, for example, if they are penitent enough. Absolution is meant to give assurance, not to raise doubts.

It is particularly beneficial, when troubled by sins, to go to your pastor and confess your sins in private, so that you may hear the word of absolution pronounced regarding the specific sins that trouble you. Examine your life, especially according to your station in life, that is, your vocation, and you will discover much to confess!

What if the sinner in the midst of the congregation recites the words but is not truly penitent? What if they prefer their sin to Christ’s forgiveness? The absolution is still valid, since Christ died for the sinner and atoned for the sin. Lack of penitence and faith, however, means that they have not received what was won for them. This brings us to the second part of the office of the keys. Christ tells His disciples that whosoever sins they retain, they are retained. If one refuses to repent of their sins, it is the duty of the pastor to declare to the impenitent that their sins remain, and that unless they repent of them they will perish. These are hard words, but for the sake of the sinner they must be spoken.

The word of absolution is the word of Good News spoken to the troubled heart. Hear those words, and be assured that you are hearing Christ speaking to you!

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