

# Absolution

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Rev. Philip Hale — St. Paul Lutheran Church — Bancroft, NE — halepw@gmail.com

The topic of this paper is absolution. As in the Lutheran confessions, it is a much wider doctrine than just private confession and absolution. Though, since that has been a tangled matter it will be discussed at length. Absolution is simply the forgiveness of sins won by Christ. Without absolution there is no Gospel, no Church, and no salvation.

## Definitions

Theology is not about high-level, abstract concepts. It starts with biblical words and their definitions. How one understands and defines faith, grace, and works truly determines one's theology. Luther started a theological revolution by redefining a phrase. He rendered *poenitentiam agite* as “repent” instead of “do (the rite of) penance,” at the beginning of his 95 theses.<sup>1</sup> That simple move cleared room for the biblical teaching of forgiveness, freely given through faith. Repentance as a state before God contrasts sharply with meriting forgiveness through satisfactions and works.

Like repentance, the understanding of “absolution” was also expanded by the Lutheran reformers. It does not refer to a rite or a specific formula, since no scriptural basis for it could be found.<sup>2</sup>

*Absolvo*, the Latin root, means literally “to loosen.”<sup>3</sup> It corresponds to λύω in the New Testament, meaning “to loose, unbind, [or] release.”<sup>4</sup> This word is used in Matthew 16:19.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>1517, Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann, 56 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-86), 31:25. Hereafter cited as LW.

<sup>2</sup>Luther: “There is no reason why you or any man should expect from me any sermon on the other sacraments, until I learn by what text I can prove that they are sacraments. I esteem none of the others as sacraments, for that is not a sacrament, save what is expressly given by a divine promise exercising our faith.” 1519 letter to Spalatin, LW 35:5.

<sup>3</sup>D. P. Simpson, *Cassell's Latin Dictionary* (New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1959), 4.

<sup>4</sup>G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons 3rd ed., 1937), 274.

<sup>5</sup>“And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” All Scripture passages NKJV unless otherwise noted.

*Absolvo* is also similar to ἀφίημι, meaning “to send away, let go,” or leave.<sup>6</sup> It is a common word for forgiving sin, which is used in Matthew 18:18,<sup>7</sup> 6:12,<sup>8</sup> 9:2,<sup>9</sup> 12:31,<sup>10</sup> and John 20:23.<sup>11</sup> Following the biblical precedent, the definition of absolution was widened in evangelical theology.

When the Lutheran confessions are read, care should be taken to use the right definitions. Private confession and absolution is merely a human rite, though certainly useful and beneficial. Augsburg Confession (AC) XXV, 12 declares that “confession is not commanded in Scripture but was instituted by the church.”<sup>12</sup> Yet, the Apology to the Augsburg Confession (Ap) XII, 12 speaks of “absolution, which is really by divine command.” This shows that absolution is defined as much wider than a specific rite—it is the general forgiveness of sins through Christ. Private confession is an ecclesiastical custom and a “matter of human law,” while absolution, the Word of God which brings forgiveness, is lauded as a ‘sacrament’ (Ap XXVI, 12; Ap XIII, 4).

Looking closer at AC XI, “Concerning Confession,” it actually does not talk positively about confession in general.<sup>13</sup> “Concerning confession it is taught that private absolution should be retained and not abolished.” The technical term here is *privata absolutio* in both the German and Latin texts.<sup>14</sup> This is contrary to what one would normally expect, *confessio privata*.<sup>15</sup> It was used to express a different theological perspective. The liturgical rite of private confession is not significant in the confessions.<sup>16</sup> But absolution, or forgiveness of sins, through Christ is

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<sup>6</sup>Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Lexicon of the New Testament*, 70.

<sup>7</sup>“Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

<sup>8</sup>“And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors.”

<sup>9</sup>“Then behold, they brought to Him a paralytic lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, ‘Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you.’”

<sup>10</sup>“Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men.”

<sup>11</sup>“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

<sup>12</sup>*The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 200), 74. All quotes from the Lutheran confessions are from this edition.

<sup>13</sup>Concerning the confession of sins in the narrow sense, AC XI only states negatively that “an enumeration of all faults in confession is not necessary,” or possible.

<sup>14</sup>*Concordia Triglotta: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 46. John N. Hoffman, *The Broken Platform: A Brief Defense of Our Symbolical Books Against Recent Alleged Errors* (Philadelphia: Lindsay and Blakiston, 1856), 82. Luther uses this Latin term also in Smalcald Articles (SA) III, 8, 2. *Concordia Triglotta*, 494.

<sup>15</sup>*The Book of Concord*, 321 ft. 143.

<sup>16</sup>One major piece of evidence is that it is of relatively late origin. “In fact, throughout patristic literature not a word is mentioned concerning the existence of a form of private ecclesiastical penance.” It came out of the monastic communities of Ireland and Britain and replaced the practice of public penance after the 7th century. Fred Precht, *Changing Theologies of Private and Public Confession and Absolution*, (St. Louis: ThD

foundational in Scripture. Absolution was freed from a narrow meaning to theologially impact all articles of doctrine in an evangelical fashion.<sup>17</sup>

“The holy Absolution is a preaching of the Gospel to one or more definite persons, who desire the comfort of the Gospel.”<sup>18</sup> Conversely, “every Gospel sermon is an absolution.”<sup>19</sup> The Gospel itself is “in essence an absolution,” “addressed to the whole world.”<sup>20</sup> “Absolution is the forgiveness of sins, which is the sum and substance of the Holy Gospel itself.”<sup>21</sup> So when Ap XIII, 4 calls absolution a sacrament, it is the same as calling the Gospel a sacrament. Since there is no forgiveness of sins without the Gospel, the logic is sound.<sup>22</sup> This redefining of absolution and its separation from a particular rite (confession) marks a radical change.

## **Justification: The Center of Absolution**

Because absolution is part and parcel with the Gospel, Christ is at the center of it. To neglect this connection is to be non-evangelical. God wants men to absolve or forgive people their sins. Although only God can forgive, He wants absolution to be given through men. “And [Jesus] said to them, ‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature’” (Mk 16:15). Our Lord gave the command to absolve everyone with the Gospel.

An absolution would not be valid, unless a divine absolution lie behind it. Man’s absolution is valid, because Christ has already universally absolved the world. To do justice to the power to forgiven sins, the keys which unlock heaven, they must be rooted in the “Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29). The world was absolved in an objective sense, because

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Diss., Concordia Seminary, 1965; mimeograph Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary), 24. See ft. 96.

<sup>17</sup>Holsten Fagerberg, *A New Look at the Lutheran Confessions 1529-1537*, trans. Gene J. Lund (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 217-18.

<sup>18</sup>*Justification—Objective and Subjective: A Translation of the Doctrinal Essay Read at the First Convention of the Synodical Conference in 1872*, trans. Kurt Marquart (Fort Wayne: Concordia Seminary Press), 31.

<sup>19</sup>J. H., *Absolution; or Forgiveness of Sins: Established by the Holy Scriptures*, Tract. No. 5 (Columbus, OH: Lutheran Book Concern, 1880), 8.

<sup>20</sup>LW 50:76 (See ft. 126); Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 3 of 4, trans. T. Engelder, J. T. Mueller, and W. W. F. Albrecht (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 197.

<sup>21</sup>J. H., *Absolution*, 1.

<sup>22</sup>Luther emphasized the rite, or biblical formula, as a particular form of the Gospel, in saying there are two sacraments. “Here you see that baptism, both by its power and by its signification, comprehends also the third sacrament, formerly called penance, which is really nothing else than baptism.” LC 4, 74. “But we do not think it makes much difference if, for the purpose of teaching, different people have different enumerations [of the sacraments], as long as they properly preserve the matters handed down in Scripture.” Ap XIII, 2.

“the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all” (Is 53:6). As a sin-bearer, Christ did not suffer for a select few, but for all mankind in general. Jesus did not complete just a part of our salvation, but all of it. So, when Jesus “was raised because of our justification,” all the world was in a sense justified or absolved (Rom 4:25).

If Christ had not absolved the world of sins, the Word which delivers that forgiveness would be null and void. This is the teaching of objective justification. The universal character of Christ’s atonement changed “the relation in which the world stands to God as far as it no longer remains the object of His wrath.”<sup>23</sup> In a very real sense, the world has been absolved in Christ.<sup>24</sup> “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation” (II Cor 5:19). Reconciliation has already been accomplished—you are forgiven! This is the Gospel.

The Gospel, or absolution, not only describes the forgiveness which Christ won, it delivers it. Though Christ died for all, not all receive it. The benefits of His suffering are distributed in the promise of the Gospel and received in faith. Faith is not needed to complete salvation, for Christ justified all sinners. “Christ has redeemed *all*, and merited remission of sins for *all* without exception.”<sup>25</sup> This is an unconditional Gospel—an effective Gospel which delivers its content, the forgiveness of sins. Only if justification depends entirely on Christ and His works, can salvation be by grace alone.<sup>26</sup>

John Gerhard precisely states: “As God punished our sins in Christ, because they were laid on Him and imputed to Him as our Substitute, so in the same manner [the Father], by raising [Christ] from the dead, absolved Him by this very act [of resurrection] of our sins which had been imputed to Him, and thereby [the Father] absolved us in [Christ] also.”<sup>27</sup> Outside of an objective justification, there is no free forgiveness. If Christ did not previously absolve mankind,

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<sup>23</sup>Conrad Emil Lindberg, *Christian Dogmatics and Notes on the History of Dogma*, trans. C. E. Hoffsten (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Book Concern, 1922), 260.

<sup>24</sup>“If Christ Himself is made guilty of all the sins that we have all committed, then we are absolved from all sins, not through ourselves or through our own works or merits but through Him.” Luther, *Galatians Commentary* (1535), LW 26:280.

<sup>25</sup>E. Hove, *Christian Doctrine* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1930; reprint Decorah, IA: Press of the Lutheran Publishing House), 226.

<sup>26</sup>*Justification—Objective and Subjective*, 42.

<sup>27</sup>*Justification—Objective and Subjective*, 21.

the preaching of the Gospel would be necessarily conditional. But, “our works cannot reconcile us with God or obtain grace” (AC XX, 9). Even faith is not a condition of salvation, but the means of receiving God’s grace. “For faith does not justify or save because it is a worthy work in and of itself, but only because it receives the promised mercy” (Ap IV, 56).

Absolution cannot begin in anything other than Christ and His healing wounds. There is where forgiveness is found. There is no power or grace from God apart from the Gospel of Christ. A defective view of absolution reveals a defective view of Christ’s justification of man. “Consequently, there must lie hidden in the keys of Christ his blood, death, and resurrection, by which he has opened to us heaven, and thus imparts through the keys to poor sinners what he has wrought through his blood.”<sup>28</sup> To detach the keys from Christ’s shedding of blood is to depart from the Gospel and bury Christ.

## Scripture and the Keys

To understand absolution and its power, Luther went to Scripture. He viewed it as the sole authority for doctrine. A single, clear verse was enough for Luther to stand on against the whole world. Luther carefully coordinated the three texts on the keys until he arrived at a singular, unified doctrine. It is impossible to understand Luther on the keys without first understanding his source of doctrine: Scripture.<sup>29</sup>

In Matthew 16:19, Jesus said to Peter: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Rome appealed to this passage as the foundation of the papacy, a special power and office given to Peter and his successors personally. But they failed to consider that the same power had been given to the apostles and all Christians. “It is not another Christ who speaks in Matthew 16 with St. Peter, and then in Matthew 18 with the other disciples, saying the same words and giving the power to bind and loose sin.”<sup>30</sup> Even here John 20 is influential,

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<sup>28</sup>Luther, *The Keys* (1530), LW 40:328.

<sup>29</sup>“For God does not want us to go astray in our own self-chosen works or speculation, and so He gathers us together and encloses us within the limits of the Word so that we are not tossed about by every kind of doctrine.” Luther, *Genesis Lectures*, LW 6:129.

<sup>30</sup>Luther, *Against the Roman Papacy, an Institution of the Devil* (1545), LW 41:318.

since it is the only passage to link the keys specifically to sin: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (Jn 20:23).

Of the three passages dealing with the keys, Luther used Matthew 18:18 the most: “Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Though these words are almost identical to Matthew 16:19 and John 20:23, the context of these words is crucial for Luther. Prior to His giving of the keys, Jesus lays out the procedure “if your brother sins against you” (v15). Right after this giving of the keys, Jesus declares: “For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.” Just as Luther interprets Matthew 16 in light of John 20, so also both of them must be interpreted in light of Matthew 18. Because the context is wider, it is the authoritative text for Luther and illumines the other two texts.<sup>31</sup> After citing Matthew 18:19-20, which describes who the power of the keys in verse 18 is given to, the *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope* (Tr) 23 states: “Thus [Christ] grants the power of the keys principally and without mediation to the church, and for the same reason the church has primary possession of the right to call ministers.” If what is given to Peter is also given to the apostles, and what is given to the apostles is given to all believers, then logically all Christians have the same spiritual power to forgive sins, because it is expressly given by Christ Himself. Every Christian “brother” has the same command and authority as Peter did. In this way, Luther biblically dismantled the papacy and the sacerdotal office.

Luther saw Scripture as doctrinally unified and precisely fitting together, especially whenever the same topic was spoken of. “For the words of God are everywhere the same and we are not permitted to give them one meaning in one place and another meaning elsewhere.”<sup>32</sup> For Luther, there was no other conclusion than to yield to all three passages in order to arrive at the correct doctrine of the keys. Luther saw a common divine Author behind these three texts, and therefore a single doctrine of the keys, which are given by God to the Church.

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<sup>31</sup> “Here it is clear that Christ is interpreting himself, explaining chapter 16 in this chapter 18, that the keys are given to St. Peter in place of the entire community, not to his person alone.” Luther, *On the Papacy in Rome* (1520), LW 39:86.

<sup>32</sup> Luther, *Concerning the Ministry* (1523), LW 40:27.

## Luther on Absolution

Luther's final *Invocavit* sermon of 1522 deals with private confession. It is a good entry to Luther's thought on the subject—both his great praise of private absolution and his refusal to make confession a mandate. Fresh from the Wartburg, Luther addresses the reforms instituted by Karlstadt and other radicals during his absence.

Though the sermon is on private confession, Luther starts out with this statement: "There is a confession which is founded on the Scriptures; namely, when some one commits a sin publicly, or with other men's knowledge, and is accused before the congregation."<sup>33</sup> Citing Matthew 18, Luther says this procedure would be beneficial, but is extinct.

Next, "a confession is necessary for us, when we go away in a corner by ourselves, and confess to God Himself and pour out before Him all our faults." This confession to God is repentance. This is necessary, for there is no true faith without it.

The third type of confession, the rite of penance, is not necessary: "I refuse to go to confession just because the pope wishes it and has commanded it." Yet Luther does not wish to discard it entirely because of its abuse.

For I wish [the pope] to keep his hands off the confession and not make of it a compulsion or command, which he has not the power to do. 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, since I know what comfort and strength it has given me. No one knows what it can do for him except one who has struggled much with the devil. Yea, the devil would have slain me long ago, if the confession had not sustained me. For there are many doubts which a man cannot resolve by himself, and so he takes a brother aside and tells him his trouble. What harm is there, if he humbles himself a little before his neighbor, puts himself to shame, looks for a word of comfort from him, and takes it to himself and believes it, as if he heard it from God himself, as we read in Matthew 18:19: "If two of you shall agree as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them."<sup>34</sup>

Though the rite of confession itself is not commanded by God, it can include something commanded by God: the Gospel, in the form of an absolution. Luther does not base his high regard

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<sup>33</sup>Martin Luther, "The Eighth Sermon: A Short Summary of The Sermon of Dr. M. Luther Delivered On *Reminiscere* Sunday on Private Confession," in *The Works of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman, 1915), 422-25; [http://www.godrules.net/library/luther/NEW1luther\\_b8.htm](http://www.godrules.net/library/luther/NEW1luther_b8.htm) (accessed September 8, 2009). Also translated in LW 51:97-100.

<sup>34</sup>Luther, "The Eighth *Invocavit* Sermon."

of the rite on a biblical text, but the resurrection of own his conscience through the Gospel. Following Matthew 18, he does not limit such absolution to the priest, but it can come from any “neighbor.” From his father confessor Staupitz, Luther had been revived through the Word. And private absolution is a valid form of the Gospel, because it is the Gospel. Yet, it is not the only form. Luther’s final *Invocavit* sermon continues:

And we must have many absolutions, so that we may strengthen our timid consciences and despairing hearts against the devil and against God. Therefore no man shall forbid the confession nor keep or drive any one away from it. And if any one wrestles with his sins, is eager to be rid of them and looks for some assurance from the Scriptures, let him go and confess to another in secret, and receive what is said to him there as if it came directly from God’s own lips. Whoever has the strong and firm faith that his sins are forgiven, may ignore this confession and confess to God alone. But how many have such a strong faith? Therefore, as I have said, I will not let this private confession be taken from me. Yet I would force no one to it, but leave the matter to every one’s free will.

For our God is not so miserly that He has left us with only one comfort or strengthening for our conscience, or one absolution, but we have many absolutions in the Gospel, and are showered richly with them. For instance, we have this in the Gospel: “If ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you” (Mt 6:14). Another comfort we have in the Lord’s Prayer: “Forgive us our trespasses,” etc (Mt 6:12). A third is our baptism, when I reason thus: See, my Lord, I am baptized in Thy name so that I may be assured of Thy grace and mercy. After that we have the private confession, when I go and receive a sure absolution as if God Himself spake it, so that I may be assured that my sins are forgiven. Finally I take to myself the blessed sacrament, when I eat His body and drink His blood as a sign that I am rid of my sins and God has freed me from all my frailties; and in order to make me sure of this, He gives me His body to eat and His blood to drink, so that I shall not and cannot despair: I cannot doubt I have a gracious God.

Thus we see that confession must not be despised, but that it is a true comfort. And since we need many absolutions and comforts, because we must fight against the devil, death, hell and sin, we must not allow any of our weapons to be taken away, but keep intact the whole armor and equipment which God has given us for use against our enemies. For you do not yet know what work it is to fight with the devil and to overcome him. I know it well; I have eaten salt with him once or twice. I know him well, and he knows me well, too. If only you knew him, you would not in this manner drive out confession.<sup>35</sup>

When Luther promoted private confession, he did not praise the confession, because God did not. It does not strengthen faith or merit forgiveness. Instead, the absolution is what brings life

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<sup>35</sup>Luther, “The Eighth *Invocavit* Sermon.”



and forgiveness in Christ, whether given in public or private. During his tribulations of faith, Luther was strengthened by the promise that God was reconciled to him. The personal nature of this form of absolution was very dear to Luther, not due to biblical principle, but because he found comfort for his own conscience there.

## Who May Absolve?

The keys are given to the Church (Mt 18). She is not defined by an institution or her clergy, though ministers are instrumentally involved in creating her. The Church is properly “the assembly of saints who truly believe the gospel of Christ and have the Holy Spirit” (Ap VII, 28). Because salvation or a higher spiritual state is not granted in ordination, pastors are not included in the definition of the Church. There is no promise of grace in ordination, but in baptism there is all of God’s favor, which all Christians have. Clergy are members of the Church in the same way that laypeople are, by faith in the accomplished reconciliation of Christ.

There is a seeming contradiction here. All Christians have the power of the Word and have been given the command to forgive sins (Mt 18:18), but practically, Luther and the other reformers consistently pointed to the pastoral office as the place to hear the Word. This dichotomy of principle and practical arrangement is by God’s design and ordering.

By theological principal, ministers do not have any special powers. They do have a special calling or duty “of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments” (AC V, 1). Pastors do not please God any more than laymen, because God is only pleased with faith in the promise of the Gospel.<sup>36</sup> In fact, “the priesthood [of believers] is therefore used to destroy any notion that the clergy are in a higher *stand* [level or position] or ‘estate,’ or that they are essentially different in character before God.”<sup>37</sup> The Gospel will not allow such differences. Either one is absolved by Christ or not, there are not differing levels of forgiveness in God’s eyes (Gal 3:26-28<sup>38</sup>).

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<sup>36</sup>“Whatever is not from faith is sin” Rom 14:23.

<sup>37</sup>Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 144-45.

<sup>38</sup>“You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

This includes speaking the Word of God. Pastors are not more holy, enabling them to proclaim the Gospel. All Christians have that inalienable right by baptism, for all believers are priests of God.<sup>39</sup> Possessing that power, though, does that mean that all are to exercise it indiscriminately. Luther explains:

For since we have proved all of these things to be the common property of all Christians, no one individual can arise by his own authority and arrogate to himself alone what belongs to all. Lay hold then of this right and exercise it, where there is no one else who has the same rights. But the community rights demand that one, or as many as the community chooses, shall be chosen or approved who, in the name of all with these rights, shall perform these functions publicly.<sup>40</sup>

Not by Gospel principle, but by God's established order, are the keys used differently by pastors and laymen.

What does AC XIV say? "They teach that no one should teach in the church or administer the sacraments unless properly called." That is how it is commonly understood, but not actually how it reads. A key word was left out: "they teach that no one should teach *publicly* in the church or administer the sacraments unless properly called." That one qualifying word makes a world of difference. "Publicly" here means a service on behalf of the Church, whether proclaiming the Word individually or to many people. The pastoral office is not a matter of power or of a special spiritual gravitas, but one of calling and service. AC XIV "does not deny the royal priesthood of all believers but presupposes it. Because the spiritual office has been entrusted to all believers, its administration is not left to the whim of every individual believer."<sup>41</sup>

Make no mistake, this is not a functional view of the office, à la Höfling. Clearly, God calls men into the office, to proclaim the Word publicly in the Church. Yet, besides publicly, on behalf of the assembled believers, there is another sphere in which the keys may be used. Privately, in one's own calling, where it does not interfere with the public teaching of the Word, any believer

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<sup>39</sup> "[The Father] has consecrated us all to be priests, in order that one may proclaim to the other forgiveness of sins." 1540 sermon by Martin Luther, *Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, 7 vol., eds. John Nicholas Lenker and Eugene F. A. Klug (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000; vol. 1-4 published as *Sermons of Martin Luther: The Church Postils*, 8 vol. in 4 vol., 1995; Vol. 5-7 published as *Sermons of Martin Luther: The House Postils*, 3 vol. 1996), 1.2:398.

<sup>40</sup> *Concerning the Ministry* (1523), LW 40:34.

<sup>41</sup> Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, trans. Paul F. Koehnke and Herbert J. A. Bouman (Philadelphia: Muhlenburg Press, 1961), 243.

can and should exercise the keys as he sees fit. Luther, in speaking of the “mutual conversation and consolation of the brothers,” memorializes in the confessions a uniquely private aspect of the keys (SA III, 4).<sup>42</sup> Here is the key to reconciling seemingly contradictory statements: where the Word or forgiving sins is considered a duty of the pastoral office, it is not an exclusive right.<sup>43</sup> That would be un-Lutheran, because it would apply a condition (that a “qualified” person must speak it to be valid) on the unconditional Gospel. But any Gospel absolution rests solely on Christ and His Word.

The tendency to restrict forgiveness to ministers only is not new. It is the old Roman doctrine, set down at the council of Trent against the Reformation teaching:

the holy synod declares that all doctrines are utterly false and alien to the truth of the Gospel which perniciously extend the ministry of the keys to any persons whatsoever outside of bishops and priests, thinking that these words of the Lord: [Mt 18:18] and: [John 20:23], were spoken to all the faithful of Christ indiscriminately.<sup>44</sup>

This is not a matter of order, but a matter of the Gospel. From God’s perspective, any absolution is valid because we have been absolved in Christ’s resurrection.<sup>45</sup> Because that original absolution was not lacking in anything, an absolution requires nothing of the speaker of the Gospel. That is essential to preserve the universal character and comfort of the Gospel.<sup>46</sup>

Luther, as shown earlier, believed the keys were given to the Church. Along with the confessional writings, Martin Chemnitz also acknowledged this fact:<sup>47</sup>

It is true that all Christians have a general call to proclaim the Gospel of God, Ro

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<sup>42</sup>Lawrence Rast, “The Keys: Christ’s Word of Law & Gospel,” *Life of the World* 3 no. 4 (October 1999), [http://www.lifeoftheworld.com/lotw/article.php?m\\_vol=3&m\\_num=4&a\\_num=4](http://www.lifeoftheworld.com/lotw/article.php?m_vol=3&m_num=4&a_num=4) (accessed September 5, 2009). It is proved by the context of Mt 18.

<sup>43</sup>Julius Köstlin, *The Theology of Luther in its Historical Development and Inner Harmony*, trans. Charles E. Hay (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1863), 260.

<sup>44</sup>Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, part II, trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), 620.

<sup>45</sup>C. F. W. Walther, “Sixteen Theses: English Lutheran Conference, St. Louis, Beginning Aug. 18, 1872,” in *Essays for the Church*, vol. 1, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 234.

<sup>46</sup>If an absolution depended on the status the person speaking it, we would look to the person, where absolute certainty would never be found, instead of to God’s Word, which is always certain. Faith needs a solid basis or it is not true faith.

<sup>47</sup>Martin Chemnitz, *Ministry, Word, and Sacraments: An Enchiridion*, trans. Luther Poellot (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), 29.

10:9,<sup>48</sup> to speak the Word of God among themselves, Eph 5:19;<sup>49</sup> to admonish each other from the Word of God, Cl 3:16;<sup>50</sup> to reprove, Eph 5:11<sup>51</sup> [and] Mt 19:15<sup>52</sup>; [and] to comfort, 1 Th 4:18.<sup>53</sup> And family heads are enjoined [to do] this with the special command that they give their households the instruction of the Lord. Eph 6:4.<sup>54</sup> But the public ministry of the Word and of the Sacraments in the church is not entrusted to all Christians in general, as we have already shown, I Co 12:28;<sup>55</sup> Eph 4:12.<sup>56</sup> For a special or particular call is required for this, Ro 10:15<sup>57</sup>.

Yet, this doctrine that the exercise of the keys belongs to the priesthood of believers was denied by Lutherans, especially during the confessional revival of the 19th century.

Then the Romanizing doctrine of some Lutherans on absolution as an exclusive right of ordained pastors, according to which lay absolution has but little or no significance, and as declared to be only a comforting encouragement without a real communication of the forgiveness of sins itself, is grossly in conflict with the doctrine of the immediate power of God's Word and the Holy Sacraments. And this, to an alarming extent, destroys the sinner's full comfort as it is found in the doctrine of absolution, which is the power to forgive sins, which is given to the whole Christian Church on earth, and hence to each individual in it.<sup>58</sup>

Wilhelm Loehe, though to be commended in other respects, is such an example. For him, only clergy could forgive. Laymen could console, while not actually remitting sins by the Gospel.<sup>59</sup>

The confessions and Luther do not allow a distinction in persons or powers, only in callings. "Furthermore, the ministry of the New Testament is not bound to places or persons like the

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<sup>48</sup> "... that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved."

<sup>49</sup> "... speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord."

<sup>50</sup> "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord."

<sup>51</sup> "And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them."

<sup>52</sup> v14-15: "But Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven.' And He laid His hands on them and departed from there."

<sup>53</sup> "Therefore comfort one another with these words."

<sup>54</sup> "And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord."

<sup>55</sup> "And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues."

<sup>56</sup> "for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ."

<sup>57</sup> "And how shall they preach unless they are sent?"

<sup>58</sup> J. H., *Absolution*, 4-5.

<sup>59</sup> Kurt E. Marquart, *The Church and Her Fellowship, Ministry and Governance*, Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics IX (Cresbard, SD: Luther Academy, 1990), 111. Loehe: "The office transplants itself. Only he who has the office can transfer it to another." Eugene F. A. Klug, *Church and Ministry: The Role of Church, Pastor, and People from Luther to Walther* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993), 155.

Levitical ministry . . . . That ministry is not valid because of the authority of any person but because of the Word handed down by Christ” (Tr 26). It will not do to pattern the ministry after the Old Testament—the “old things have passed away” (II Cor 5:17). “We do not have another priesthood like the Levitical priesthood—as the Epistle to the Hebrews [chaps. 7-9] more than sufficiently teaches” (Ap XIII, 10). Though the Gospel is conveyed in different spheres, the Gospel remains an efficacious Word of God no matter who speaks it.<sup>60</sup>

There is an “easy interplay between official and unofficial, public and private proclamation of the Gospel.”<sup>61</sup> The private ministry of the Word, by definition, does not interfere with the public ministry. It is done in one’s home and among one’s friends and family. Even in public or out in the open, there is a private use of the keys, as long as it is not on behalf of the assembled saints or in contention with public ministry.<sup>62</sup> This private use of the keys is not to impede on the office of public ministry that God instituted. That is why a Christian should not baptize or preach, unless a pastor cannot do so. That would be impeding on the public office, but the power and authority to do such things is inherent in every baptized priest.<sup>63</sup>

“The public exercise of ministry and the private exercise of ministry of the priesthood exist together in the church as complementary vehicles of the Word.” Like the objective absolution of Christ, the Gospel applies to, and can be spoken by, everyone. “In this context, then, ministry and priesthood are not confused; neither is derived from or reduced to the other, but they exist together as mutually enriching modes of God’s working, different in form but identical in content.”<sup>64</sup> Pastors cannot be around all layman at all times. But faith, created and sustained by God’s Word, certainly should be. It would be a mistake to let abuses of the priesthood of

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<sup>60</sup>“God promises that He will regard this fraternal reconciliation as valid in heaven (Matt. 18:18),” whether confessing to the one sinned against or not. Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, 595.

<sup>61</sup>Marquart, *The Church and Her Fellowship, Ministry and Governance*, 108-9.

<sup>62</sup>“Even though we were all called, however, we cannot all preach; but this does not relieve us of our obligation to confess Christ publicly.” Luther, Sermon from August 30, 1539 on Jn 3:34, LW 22:479.

<sup>63</sup>The Lord’s Supper is not to be done privately. It is by nature a public act of the congregation, even when administered “privately.” Jobst Schöne, *The Christological Character of the Office of the Ministry and the Royal Priesthood*, ed. Brent Kuhlman (Plymouth, MN: LOGIA Books, 1996), 3. “Thus it is not right (even if everything else were otherwise in order) to use the common sacrament of the church for one’s own devotional life and to play with it according to one’s own pleasure apart from God’s Word and outside the community.” SA II, 2, 9.

<sup>64</sup>B. A. Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 104.

believers destroy God's sanctioned use of the Gospel in the private sphere.<sup>65</sup> God is the only Absolver and He is the One satisfied by Christ's sacrifice. He wishes His absolution to be found on all men's lips.

## **Luther: A Witness**

From early on, Luther's doctrine of the keys was fixed. His consistent interpretation of the three texts on the keys does not vary, even in his 1545 document *Against the Roman Papacy, an Institution of the Devil*, written mere months before his death.<sup>66</sup> His sermons also provide a wealth of data on his position, which has been a controverted point of discussion. Though Luther highly values the preaching office and consistently points to it, he does not strip the laity of their spiritual status. He does implicitly limit their ministry to the private sphere. The baptized Christian can handle the Word of God and forgive sins, not because of his own person, but because of the Word and Christ's resurrection, which is the foundation for any true absolution.

In the 1529 Marburg Articles, Luther wrote on the topic of confession: “[We believe] that Confession or seeking counsel from one's pastor or neighbor is to be done freely and without coercion. It is indeed beneficial to those whose consciences are distressed, afflicted, or burdened with sins, or have fallen into error, above all because of the absolution or comfort of the Gospel, which is what true absolution is.”<sup>67</sup>

Luther says in “A Brief Exhortation to Confession,” which “was added first in the 1529 revised edition of the [Large] Catechism,” though it is not in the 1580 Book of Concord:<sup>68</sup>

Besides this public, daily, and necessary confession [in the Lord's Prayer], there is also the secret confession that takes place privately before a single brother or sister. This comes into play when some particular issue weighs on us or attacks us, eating away at us until we can have no peace nor find ourselves sufficiently strong in faith. Then we may at any time and as often as we wish lay our troubles before a brother or sister, seeking advice, comfort, and strength. This type of confession is not included

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<sup>65</sup>Without the Gospel there would be no office or need for it. But there is a Gospel of forgiveness, therefore God gave the Church the office of preaching and administering the sacraments, for her sake. The Gospel which proclaims Christ is primary.

<sup>66</sup>LW 41:263-376.

<sup>67</sup>*Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord*, eds. Robert Kolb and James A. Nestigen (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 90.

<sup>68</sup>*The Book of Concord*, 476-80.

in the commandment like the other two but is left to all to use whenever they need it. Thus by divine ordinance Christ himself has placed absolution in the mouths of his Christian community and commanded us to absolve one another from sins.<sup>69</sup>

In a 1531 sermon on John 20, Luther shows that he respects the office and expects the pastor to exercise the keys, yet he does not exclusively tie the keys to the office. He assumes that the pastor will ordinarily loose and bind sins, yet the Gospel and forgiveness is not absolutely bound to that office. “You can be sure in your heart that if you hear your pastor—or another Christian if a pastor is denied you—pronounce your sins forgiven in Christ’s name, that it is most certainly true and is no less efficacious than if Christ himself, or an angel sent from heaven for the purpose, had pronounced it.”<sup>70</sup>

In a 1533 sermon on Matthew 9:1-8, the healing of the paralytic, Luther states:

Such power [to forgive sins] began, as we hear in this account, with Christ himself, and it continues for mankind, especially with those who occupy the pastoral office and are duty bound to preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins in Jesus’ name. Nevertheless, every Christian has the command, not only that he can, but should, say to you when you are troubled by your sin: Why are you troubled? As your fellow Christian, I say to you, you are not fair to yourself, for God is not ungracious toward you; you ought to trust these words just as surely as though God were speaking to you personally from heaven, never questioning them because of the person of the one from whom you hear them.<sup>71</sup>

In a 1540 sermon on John 20:19-31, Luther preached: “This [text] is not said alone to the ministers or the servants of the church, but also to every Christian. Here each may serve another in the hour of death, or wherever there is need, and give him absolution.”<sup>72</sup> Late in his life, Luther continues to interpret John 20 in light of Matthew 18 to prove the keys belong to the Church. “For here we have the Lord himself, over all angels and creatures, who says, ‘They shall all have the same power, keys, and office’—even two simple Christians assembled only in his name.”<sup>73</sup>

The Gospel is the power of God (Rom 1:16) and that Word is the basis for any absolution. “Indeed if we have been absolved through the mouth of a brother or a minister, we must not

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<sup>69</sup>Par. 13-14; *The Book of Concord*, 477.

<sup>70</sup>*Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, 6:66.

<sup>71</sup>*Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, 7:79-80.

<sup>72</sup>*Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, 1.2:393.

<sup>73</sup>Luther, *Against the Roman Papacy, an Institution of the Devil* (1545), LW 41:318.

look at the human being who is speaking. Nor should our eyes be directed toward danger and death.”<sup>74</sup> If we look to the person speaking, and not to God, faith is uncertain. People deny the faith, make wrong judgments, and misspeak. But God and His Word do not.<sup>75</sup> If absolution does not proceed from God, it is an uncertain and flimsy word.

Based on Matthew 18:18 and its context, the privilege of the keys is given to every Christian brother. “If you want to be absolved from your sins in this manner, go to your pastor, or to your brother and neighbor if your pastor cannot hear you; he has the command to absolve you and comfort.”<sup>76</sup> In chapter 48 of his *Genesis Lectures*, Luther wrote: “It is certainly a wonderful thing that a minister of the church or any brother is a minister of the kingdom of God and eternal life, the forgiveness of sins, and the destruction of hell, in short, of the opening of heaven and the kingdom of God.”<sup>77</sup> As shown by these quotations, Luther did not change his stance on who principally possessed the keys, though he did not think that each Christian could use them as he wished.<sup>78</sup> While maintaining the divine order of the pastoral office, he will allow no distinction in power or authority between Christians. All Christians are of the same status, but not all have been given the same role or calling.<sup>79</sup>

## Absolution Formulas

There is no scripturally mandated formula for absolution. Only the power and authority to forgive is given, not the form the words of absolution are to be spoken in, unlike Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.<sup>80</sup> Historically, a precative absolution, in the form of an intercession or

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<sup>74</sup>Luther, *Genesis Lectures*, LW 5:130. This portion of the lectures is thought to have been given in 1542. LW 5:X.

<sup>75</sup>“But such is the perversity of human nature that we do not believe that we are hearing the Word of God whenever He speaks through a man. For we weigh the Word according to the authority and weight of the speaker.” Luther, *Genesis Lectures*, LW 6:224.

<sup>76</sup>Luther, *Genesis Lectures*, LW 6:128-29.

<sup>77</sup>LW 8:183. This was likely written in 1545. LW 8:X.

<sup>78</sup>Consider this careless statement: “Although Luther fought against such authority, or power [of the priestly orders], in his *Babylonian Captivity* (1520), claiming that confession could be made to and absolution received from any Christian brother, one finds no such utterances after 1529.” Fred Precht, “Confession and Absolution: Sin and Forgiveness,” in *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, ed. Fred Precht (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993), 336.

<sup>79</sup>Cameron A. MacKenzie, “The ‘Early’ Luther on Priesthood of All Believers, Office of the Ministry, and Ordination,” <http://www.ctsfw.edu/library/files/pb/373> (accessed September 7, 2009), 2.

<sup>80</sup>J. H., *Absolution*, 13.



prayer (“May God forgive you”), is the most ancient.<sup>81</sup> What most Lutherans consider to be the definitive form of absolution, the indicative or effective form (“I forgive your sins”), is historically rather new. This form of absolution is credited to Thomas Aquinas, who died in 1247. He used the words of baptism (“I baptize you in the name . . .”) to show that a priest directly conveys forgiveness.<sup>82</sup> In fact, the Eastern church, as a whole, knows of no other form than the precative (“God forgive you”).<sup>83</sup> Right after the Reformation most Lutheran absolutions were declarative (“I declare that your sins are forgiven”).<sup>84</sup> Since Scripture does not give a distinct wording for forgiving sins, it is not surprising that several forms are found through the Church’s history.

Although the Gospel promise is not fixed in certain words, the indicative absolution is justly valued.<sup>85</sup> It highlights a theological divide with Reformed, who do not believe in an effective forgiveness conveyed by the Word. “The absolution is a real communication of the forgiveness of sins”—it delivers what Christ won.<sup>86</sup> However, starting with the pietists, a conditional absolution rose to prominence.<sup>87</sup>

Consider this reasoning written by Henry E. Jacobs: “In connection with the so-called general absolution, this retention [of sins] should always be used: since otherwise, in a mixed assembly composed of both classes, the promises of the gospel are applied without discrimination, and while comforting believers, may serve also to harden hypocrites, who have need of the law, instead of the Gospel.”<sup>88</sup> This pulls the focus away from Christ to the sinner. It dulls the promise of forgiveness, so hypocrites will not abuse it. But Christ did not discriminate who He died for; He did not let the scoffers sway Him to avoid paying for the sins of the world. One

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<sup>81</sup>This directly follows from James 5:15-16: “And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.”

<sup>82</sup>Precht, *Changing Theologies of Private and Public Confession and Absolution*, 66.

<sup>83</sup>John Mason Neale, *A History of the Holy Eastern Church*, part II (London: Joseph Masters, 1850), 1021.

<sup>84</sup>The Mecklenburg formula was the basis for the American Lutheran declarative absolution. Precht, *Changing Theologies of Private and Public Confession and Absolution*, 112.

<sup>85</sup>The Roman Church at Trent made the indicative absolution the only valid absolution formula. Henry Charles Lea, *A History of Auricular Confession and Indulgences in the Latin Church Part One* (Philadelphia: Lea and Bothers, 1896), 488.

<sup>86</sup>J. H., *Absolution*, 4.

<sup>87</sup>Precht, *Changing Theologies of Private and Public Confession and Absolution*, 138, 160.

<sup>88</sup>Henry E. Jacobs, “Retention of Sins” in *The Lutheran Cyclopedia*, eds. H. E. Jacobs and John A. W. Haas (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1899), 409. Jacobs cites as his only source Theodor Kliefoth’s *Die Beichte und Absolution*.

should not be afraid to offer the Gospel indiscriminately.

Theologically, a conditional absolution is problematic. To make forgiveness conditional is to make Christ's death less than perfect. That turns man's repentance, faith, or spiritual state into a work needed to complete salvation. Faith that rests in any way on man's efforts is a false faith. "For faith does not justify or save because it is a worthy work in and of itself, but only because it receives the promised mercy" (Ap IV, 56). Therefore, a conditional forgiveness destroys the consolation of the Gospel and turns men inward, away from Christ. By claiming to avoid abuse, a conditional absolution cuts people off from the only connection we have with God, the Word of forgiveness.<sup>89</sup>

Absolution applies "the merits and benefits of Christ for the forgiveness of sins."<sup>90</sup> Christ's death was not conditional, neither is the forgiveness which He offers. To make forgiveness conditional is to direct a sinner to his own heart or faith, which pulls him away from the Gospel of Christ. "For it is a *conditionalis clavis*, a conditional, a vacillating key which does not direct us to God's Word, but to our own repentance."<sup>91</sup> "An uncertain absolution is none at all. Indeed it is equivalent to lying and deception."<sup>92</sup>

The Gospel does not need to be made conditional. By nature it is an unconditional promise, but that does not mean that unbelievers receive the benefits just by hearing it.<sup>93</sup> The *ex opere operato* understanding of the sacraments, that they are efficacious merely by their performance, was rejected by the Lutheran reformers as a way to God apart from faith. "Now if the Mass blots out the sins of the living and the dead *ex opere operato*, justification comes from the work of the Mass, not from faith, which Scripture does not allow" (AC XXIV, 29). "This promise is not conditional upon our merits; it freely offers the forgiveness of sins and justification . . . . For

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<sup>89</sup> "If one makes the Gospel according to its essence dependent on whether man believes, then faith has nothing to which it can cling." *Justification—Objective and Subjective*, 33.

<sup>90</sup> Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, 575.

<sup>91</sup> Luther, *The Keys* (1530), LW 40:367.

<sup>92</sup> Luther, *The Keys* (1530), LW 40:344.

<sup>93</sup> "The power which ministers of the Church have to remit sins is not *absolute* (*αὐτοκρατορικὴ*), or principal and independent (which belongs to God alone, against whom alone sin is committed), but *ministerial and delegated* (*διακονικὴ*), by which to contrite and penitent sinners they remit all sins without reservation of guilt or punishment, not only *ιστορικῶς*, or *by way of signification and declaration*, but also *effectually and really*, yet *ὀργανικῶς* (instrumentally)." David Hollaz (1646-1713) in Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1875; reprint Philadelphia: United Lutheran Publishing, 1961), 613.

if the promise required the law and condition of our merits, it would follow that the promise is useless since we never keep the law” (Ap IV, 41-42). Instead, the sacraments “require faith,” since they are promises of God (AC XIII, 2).

The Gospel is unconditional, because Christ became our curse and fulfilled all the conditions for our salvation. However, the reception of Christ’s universal justification, the subjective or personal justification of an individual sinner, is only through faith. “The promise is received by faith; . . . the merits of Christ are the payment because there must be some definite atoning sacrifice for our sins” (Ap IV, 53). By God’s command Christ’s free forgiveness is given, “which through the gospel he has scattered throughout the world” (Ap IV, 101). Therefore it is not man’s decision whether to forgive or not, God has made His will abundantly clear in Christ. God “desires all men to be saved,” for Jesus “gave Himself a ransom for all” (I Tim 2:4, 6).

## **Private Absolution: A Practical Problem**

It is easy to declaim the fact that private absolution has been abandoned. Yet, one cannot blame American churches for this. Even pietists cannot be held accountable, for they actually embraced the confessional chair, though for more subjective, soul-inquiring reasons.<sup>94</sup> Even in Germany, evangelical confession did not take root as one might assume. In Lutheran churches, the “decline of individual confession was completed in the seventeenth century, although the signs of its demise were already present in the sixteenth century.”<sup>95</sup> There was a problem very early on with private absolution.<sup>96</sup>

“Confession, or absolution, should by no means be allowed to fall into disuse in the church—especially for the sake of weak consciences and for the wild young people, so that they may be examined and instructed in Christian teaching” (SA III, 8, 1). From the beginning of the

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<sup>94</sup>Philipp Jakob Spener valued the examination to “learn of the spiritual condition” of parishioners. Precht, *Changing Theologies of Private and Public Confession and Absolution*, 138, 160.

<sup>95</sup>Jobst H. M. Schöne, “Preparing Christians for Confession: How To Address Penitents,” in *Shepherd the Church: Essays in Honor of the Rev. Dr. Roger D. Pittelko*, ed. Frederic W. Baue (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 2002), 201.

<sup>96</sup>Unlike other Christian teachings, there are no early church writings to illustrate the heart of this rite. “Outside of certain monastic practices and exceptional situations, the ancient church knew nothing of private confession but only public penitence.” *The Book of Concord*, 205, ft. 337. See ft. 16.

Reformation, private absolution was tied with the communion examination. Though historically they are related, theologically they do not mix well. “For it is not customary to administer the body of Christ except to those who have been previously examined and absolved” (AC XXV, 1). Though Luther wanted to make confession free, it “entered through the backdoor,” in the communion examination and it became de facto compulsory.<sup>97</sup>

Private confession is not mandated by Scripture, so it could not be enforced. But in I Corinthians 11:28 examination is commanded by God.<sup>98</sup> Therefore, the pastor has the “duty to hold those who want to receive the holy supper to personal announcement in advance and to use it faithfully and wisely for an exploration.”<sup>99</sup> Luther encouraged this dubious line of reasoning by interpreting “A man ought to examine himself” as “No one should be allowed to go to communion who has not been individually examined by his pastor to see if he is prepared to go to the sacrament.”<sup>100</sup> Thus, the “voluntary” confession and absolution was joined to the mandatory communion interview.

Loeche explains: “In the course of time, private confession became too much for both pastors and congregations; they dismissed it, and a confessional address took its place.”<sup>101</sup> Practically speaking, communion will be infrequent if the burdensome custom of necessary examination is practiced, as in early Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod history. Conversely, because private absolution was tied to the examination, it was lost along with the interview.

The main purpose of the interview was discipline, but that is not the Lutheran purpose of private absolution. Early Lutheran theologians “saw in private confession an unparalleled source of consolation and also an extremely effective tool for moral discipline.”<sup>102</sup> Law and Gospel made strange bedfellows in the communion examination. Listen to Walther’s circumlocution:

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<sup>97</sup>Precht, *Changing Theologies of Private and Public Confession and Absolution*, 90.

<sup>98</sup>“Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup.”

<sup>99</sup>C. F. W. Walther, *Pastoral Theology*, trans. John M. Drickamer (New Haven, MO: Lutheran News, 1995), 107. In Walther’s day not having a communion announcement was tantamount to open communion—a denial of Christ’s body and blood.

<sup>100</sup>*Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony* (1528), LW 40:296.

<sup>101</sup>Wilhelm Loeche, “Private Confession and Absolution with an Introduction by the Translator,” trans. Kevin G. Walker, *LOGIA: A Journal of Lutheran Theology* XI no. 1 (Epiphany 2002), 32.

<sup>102</sup>Ronald K. Rittgers, *The Reformation of the Keys: Confession, Conscience, and Authority in Sixteenth-century Germany* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 98.

during the confessional announcement, “if possible, the preacher should find out what he needs to know without giving the person the impression that he is being examined.”<sup>103</sup> Unsurprisingly, an enforced examination did not cause people to seek the Gospel promise in private absolution, which was appended to it. “It goes without saying that the stronger the tie between examination and confession became, the further confession was removed in the mind of the people from its original purpose as a function of absolution on the personal, individual level.”<sup>104</sup>

## Pastoral Approaches

Luther derided the Roman rite of penance. It “breaks open the bridal chamber of Christ and makes all Christian souls into whores.”<sup>105</sup> The intrusive Law-based character of coerced confession and the enumeration of sins made consolation absent from the Roman practice. Therefore, the Lutheran confessions speak of private absolution. Private confession is retained, not for the confession’s sake, but only for the Gospel’s sake—that is absolution or “the very voice of the Gospel” (Ap XI, 2).

In the Roman view, absolution was a judicial sentence by the priest. Trent countered the reformers: absolution “is in the nature of a judicial act in which a sentence is pronounced by [the priest] as though by a judge.”<sup>106</sup> The pastor, though, is merely a minister of the Gospel, who does not pry or inquire, but absolves. “Absolution is not judgement but the administration of another’s gift. For Christ gave the command to remit sins; ministers administer this command. They do not have a command to investigate secrets” (Ap XII, 103). According to the confessions, then, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature,” means to absolve all (Mark 16:15).

Anyone who desires absolution has a right to hear it because he is one for whom Christ died

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<sup>103</sup>Walther, *Pastoral Theology*, 117.

<sup>104</sup>Fagerberg, *A New Look at the Lutheran Confessions*, 225.

<sup>105</sup>*On Confession: Whether the Pope Has Power to Command It* (1521), translated and quoted in Ronald K. Rittgers, “Private Confession in the German Reformation,” in *Repentance in Christian Theology*, eds. Mark J. Boda and Gordon T. Smith (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006), 194.

<sup>106</sup>Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, 620. “This they defend by saying that “every judge who desires to pronounce a sentence must know the crime of the accused, not only the deed itself but all the circumstances which make the crime greater or less.” J. H., *Absolution*, 26.

(I Cor 8:11). The caveat would be one openly unrepentant, but suspicions alone should not prevent the pastor from absolving.<sup>107</sup> One desiring forgiveness for his sin is showing evidence of repentance. The unrepentant, who need to hear the Law and have their sin bound, do not really desire an absolution. Instead, they seek confirmation of their guiltlessness or simply permission to sin. The purpose of the binding key is to save and forgive by means of the Gospel, by driving one to Christ.<sup>108</sup> The Law does this by destroying the sinner's security through God's wrath. It takes no special skill to absolve or observe the openly unrepentant. For if faith were first required to hear the Gospel, there would be no faith. The Gospel must ring out unfettered to the whole world.

Yet, later Lutherans were not as clearly evangelical concerning private absolution. The temptation to act as judge and inquisitor, rather than a simple Gospel proclaimer, was too great. Loehe wrote: "It must become possible for the father-confessor to become acquainted with the period and sins for which he shall speak absolution; otherwise his absolution will not be enough for the burning desire of the confessing soul; [it] will not be able to be given in that pastoral form and with the emphasis that such a heart truly needs."<sup>109</sup> Like with pietists and the Roman priests, the "bridal chamber" of the conscience was violated in the Lutheran confessional.

Faith and a soul's state is God's business alone. "The priest is necessarily uncertain as to your contrition and faith, but that is not what matters."<sup>110</sup> Christ's passion as sin-bearer alone proves that the sinner is worthy of grace. Absolution "is not a judgment, which merely establishes that something is true already. This would mean that someone could assume that absolution or justification has taken place already, in an inner, divine way for that individual."<sup>111</sup> Forgiveness, and also the faith which receives it, is delivered by the external word of promise. That is why absolution should not be carefully guarded or protected from abuse, but distributed to all the

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<sup>107</sup>J. H., *Absolution*, 24.

<sup>108</sup>"For the key which binds carries forward the work of the law. It is profitable to the sinner inasmuch as it reveals to him his sins, admonishes him to fear God, causes him to tremble, and moves him to repentance, and not to destruction. . . . In short, the two keys advance and foster the gospel by simply proclaiming these two things: repentance and forgiveness of sins." Luther, *The Keys* (1530), LW 40:372-73.

<sup>109</sup>Loehe, "Private Confession and Absolution," 31.

<sup>110</sup>Luther, *The Sacrament of Penance* (1519), LW 35:15.

<sup>111</sup>Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 52-53.

world.

It was enough for Luther that a person desired absolution—“Beyond that, he is not obligated to know anything.”<sup>112</sup> Whereas for Luther, private absolution was a means to receive the Gospel in a uniquely personal way, the pastoral possibilities were expanded by later theologians. As the emphasis shifted to the sinner, whose state necessarily remains sinful in this world, the certainty of the Gospel was minimized. Luther would not have people confess secret passions or lusts of the heart, “which the soul is forced to bear against its will.”<sup>113</sup> He desired to maintain the objective character of the Gospel by not delving into man’s inner subjectivity, which erodes the confidence of faith.

For the neo-confessionals of the 19th century, pastoral care meant private confession. Klaus Harms, in a 1814 catechism, wrote: “the confessional is the true workshop of the pastor.”<sup>114</sup> “‘The confessional,’ says [Theodor] Kliefoth, ‘is the place ordained for the cure of souls’”<sup>115</sup> That is a curious statement, because the confessional chair, including private confession, is not ordained by God at all. Loehe continues in this trajectory: “Private Confession is the mother of all care of souls and for it there is no substitute.”<sup>116</sup> This elevation of confession is at the same time a devaluation of the absolution, and therefore the Gospel. Forgiveness requires no investigation, Christ has already laid His wounds bare in the Word.<sup>117</sup> If salvation depends on “the arbitrary decision” of the pastor, it no longer rests on Christ’s atonement.<sup>118</sup>

In contrast, Luther emphasized only the promise—barring one’s sin-stained heart or being interrogated are not directly beneficial for faith in Christ. Sinners’ hearts or spiritual state will never be worthy of God’s grace. Only Christ can supply what we lack—true righteousness. In

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<sup>112</sup>Luther, *The Sacrament of Penance* (1519), LW 35:17.

<sup>113</sup>*A Discussion on How Confession Should Be Made* (1520), LW 39:34.

<sup>114</sup>John T. Vitello, *The Significance of Individual Confession and Absolution in the Lutheran Church* (Thesis: Concordia Theological Seminary Library, 1983), 30.

<sup>115</sup>Döllinger, *The Church and Churches: or, The Papacy and the Temporal Power: An Historical and Political Review*, trans. William Bernard Mac Cabe (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1862), 311.

<sup>116</sup>Quoted in John T. Pless, “The Lively Use of Loehe: Kenneth Korby’s Contribution to a Renewed Reception of His Pastoral Theology in The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod,” (Presentation, 23 July 2008), <http://www.ctsfw.edu/academics/faculty/pless/LivelyLoehe.htm> (accessed September 5, 2009).

<sup>117</sup>“Ministers, however, act only as ambassadors and are dispensers of Another’s benefits; they have not been commanded to search hearts but to proclaim the remission of sins to those who indicate that they repent and believe the Gospel.” Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, 616.

<sup>118</sup>Köstlin, *The Theology of Luther*, 260.

that vein, private absolution was important to Luther because “better than any other medium, it conveyed the vitally important *pro me* [for me] aspect of the Gospel.”<sup>119</sup> It delivers the Gospel, which has a universal context, directly to an individual.

Forgiveness is not delivered piecemeal. Quoting a Bible passage, preaching a sermon, or being privately absolved, all deliver the same gift.<sup>120</sup> But as Luther pointed out, there is a distinct psychological benefit when one weak in faith is absolved privately. In that instance, it is harder to ignore the application of the Gospel pinpointed at one’s self. “[Luther] declares, in general, that the confessor *exercises (exercet) faith*, inasmuch as he presents the Word of Christ.”<sup>121</sup> The promise is the same, though the form and context are different. This follows the example of Christ our Lord, who absolved individually (but not privately) with diverse formulas in Matthew 9:2,<sup>122</sup> Luke 7:48,<sup>123</sup> Luke 19:9,<sup>124</sup> and Luke 23:43.<sup>125</sup> There is no one way to absolve; anyway in which the forgiveness of Christ is communicated is a true absolution. No theological distinction can be made between public and private absolution. The “only real difference [is] one of venue.”<sup>126</sup> Whatever absolution is delivered, “that absolution is not based on the state of man’s heart, but entirely on the state of God’s heart.”<sup>127</sup> Therefore, the pastor should be continually absolving in all he says.

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<sup>119</sup>Rittgers, *The Reformation of the Keys*, 81.

<sup>120</sup>John T. Pless, “Your Pastor Is Not Your Therapist: Private Confession—The Ministry of Repentance and Faith (Eastertide 2001),” in *A Reader in Pastoral Theology: Articles from LOGIA: A Journal of Lutheran Theology* (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 2002), 100.

<sup>121</sup>Köstlin, *The Theology of Luther*, 261.

<sup>122</sup>“Then behold, they brought to Him a paralytic lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, ‘Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you.’”

<sup>123</sup>“Then He said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven.’”

<sup>124</sup>“And Jesus said to him, ‘Today salvation has come to this house.’”

<sup>125</sup>“And Jesus said to him, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.’”

<sup>126</sup>Rittgers, “Private Confession in the German Reformation,” 201. Luther and Melanchthon, replying to the city council of Nürnberg during its absolution controversy with Andreas Osiander, wrote defending public absolution: “The preaching of the holy gospel itself is principally and actually an absolution in which forgiveness of sins is proclaimed in general and in public to many persons, or publicly or privately to one person alone. Therefore absolution may be used in public and in general . . . just as the sermon may take place publicly . . . . Even if not all believe [the word of absolution], that is no reason to reject [public] absolution, for each absolution, whether administered publicly or privately, has to be understood as demanding faith and as being an aid to those who believe in it, just as the gospel itself also proclaims forgiveness to all men in the whole world and exempts no one from this universal context. Nevertheless the gospel certainly demands our faith and does not aid those who do not believe it; and yet the universal context of the gospel has to remain [valid].” (1533), LW 50:76-77.

<sup>127</sup>Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 3, 195.



## Conclusion

As with all other articles of the Christian faith, absolution is correctly taught when it is intertwined with justification. When it becomes disassociated from the passions of Christ, it becomes a unique ‘magical’ power apart from the Gospel or a peculiar spiritual ability belonging to the minister. Not only is that wrong, it dishonors our Lord and pretends there is another way to God other than believing in His merciful death.

It is a mistake to not relate the use of the keys to faith. A pastor cannot damn a person, by locking heaven to him, if he has faith in Christ. The words are spoken on earth, but the action is done in heaven by God. Sins are forgiven when a man trusts the Word of absolution spoken to him. “Thus we teach that in the use of the sacraments faith needs to be present” (Ap XIII, 19). Absolution is a word of promise that faith is to depend on. “A promise is useless unless it is received by faith” (Ap XIII, 20). If a man doubts the absolution and does not believe God has forgiven him, he is not forgiven before God—even though the pastor speaks authoritatively. Even the rite of private absolution is nothing other than the Gospel—it has no other power than the promise of the Gospel.

Some confessional Lutherans claim that those who follow the confessions are bound to reintroduce the rite of private confession and absolution. But a church custom, without God’s express command, cannot be mandatory.<sup>128</sup> A confessional Lutheran, though, will acknowledge the value of a private absolution for those weak in faith.<sup>129</sup> It does not have to be advertised as anything other than Christ’s forgiveness applied directly and personally by God Himself. To absolve is to deliver the forgiveness Christ won in words. Whether absolution follows the liturgical rite or not, God’s word effectively conveys Christ’s merits, publicly or privately.

The example of Lutheran churches at the time of the Augsburg Confession serves us well: “The people are also most diligently taught concerning faith in the word of absolution,” “because it is the voice of God and is pronounced following the command of God” (AC XXV, 2). The Lutheran understanding of private confession is that it is highly valued because it is a helpful

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<sup>128</sup> “Retain” in AC XI is often given a wider meaning that it actually has. Retain means to keep, not to introduce what is no longer a custom. “Retain” is rather softer than saying “we observe,” or “it is necessary.”

<sup>129</sup> Precht, *Changing Theologies of Private and Public Confession and Absolution*, 127, 133.

and direct way consciences are consoled with the Gospel promise. Private absolution is therefore a valid, though specific and narrow, use of the keys, in that it delivers Christ and sustains faith. “Those who deny that faith justifies do away both with the gospel and Christ and teach nothing but law” (Ap IV, 70).

God is indeed rich in His grace, giving the Church many absolutions and forms of justifying grace through Christ.

In 1537, preaching on Matthew 18:15-18, [Luther] stated that God pours out his forgiveness, “in every corner, so that they not only find the forgiveness of sins in the congregation but also at home in their houses, in the fields and gardens, wherever one of them comes to another in search of comfort and deliverance. It shall be at my disposal when I am troubled and sorry, in tribulation and vulnerable, when I need something, at whatever hour and time it may be. There is not always a sermon being given publicly in the church, so when my brother or neighbor comes to me, I am to lay my troubles before my neighbor and ask for comfort...Again I should comfort others, and say ‘dear friend, dear brother, why don’t you lay aside your burdens. It is certainly not God’s will that you experience this suffering. God had his Son die for you so that you do not sorrow but rejoice.’<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>130</sup>Translated by and quoted in Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith*, Christian Theology in Context Series (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 135.