

## Individual Confession: Personalized Forgiveness

By Harold L. Senkbeil

We say it regularly in church: “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints, *the forgiveness of sins*, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.” Notice how the forgiveness of sins is at the heart of the Holy Spirit’s work in Christ’s church. He is forever delivering the precious gift of the forgiveness of sins to blood-bought souls through the efficacious power of God’s mighty Word.

That Word does what it says. When God the Father spoke into the vast empty void of the first creation: “let there be...,” there was! Whatever He spoke sprang into existence by the sheer force of His Word. Both light and life, the animate and inanimate creation all came into being just because He said so.

That’s the way it is with the forgiveness of sins. Whenever we hear the word of the Gospel and believe it, we have what it says: “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, not counting their trespasses against them.” (2 Corinthians 5:19) You probably know that scripture verse well. ...but there’s more: “...and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.”

What this means is that Christ’s church on earth has been given the special power to forgive sins in Christ’s name and stead – kind of a “power of attorney” by which you and I can receive Christ’s forgiveness from His called servants, not doubting but firmly believing that with these words we are indeed forgiven before God in heaven.

Jesus teaches us to ask God for our forgiveness (“forgive us our trespasses”) and to confess our sins to our neighbor, especially when we have wronged him or her. But besides these two kinds of confession there is a third, unfortunately less well known among Christians: the confession we can make to our pastor.

We’re likely used to hearing him say in church: “As a called and ordained servant of the Word I therefore forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” We all this the general absolution. It’s valid and effective, since it has the command and promise of Christ Himself.

But did you know that you can also receive individual absolution, that is forgiveness, custom-made just for you? In our Large Catechism, Martin Luther writes:

...we strongly urge you by all means to make confession of your need, not with the intention of doing a worthy work by confessing but in order to hear what God has arranged for you to be told. What I am saying is that you are to concentrate on the Word, on the Absolution, to regard it as a great and precious and magnificently splendid treasure, and to accept it with all praise and thanksgiving to God.”<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> *Concordia, The Lutheran Confessions: A Reader’s Edition of the Book of Concord*, (St. Louis: CPH), Large Catechism V(22), p. 469.

So magnificent is this splendid treasure of the Word of absolution, Luther writes, that “If you were a Christian, then you ought to be happy to run more than a hundred miles to confession and not let yourself be urged to come. You should rather come and compel us to give you the opportunity”<sup>2</sup>

So why the big deal about individual confession, you might ask. Isn't general confession and absolution just as effective? Most certainly! Individual confession is not required, but beneficial – it's the opportunity to receive pointedly and personally the forgiveness Jesus earned for you for the specific sins that burden your conscience.

Just think for a minute: which e-mails are you more likely to open? Those from trusted friends with a personal message just for you, or some electronic spam sent randomly? This is the advantage of individual vs. general confession – it's the gift of forgiveness customized for you and the guilt that's weighing you down.

Unfortunately, this gift has fallen into wide-spread disuse in recent generations. Therefore most people have some very practical questions when they consider going to confession the first time:

1. How do I know my pastor will keep my confession confidential?
  - It's his solemn duty never to divulge sins privately confessed to him; that's part of his ordination vow.
2. What will my pastor think of me when he hears what I've done?
  - He will respect you for your confidence in the power of Christ's forgiveness. Besides, sins absolved in Jesus' name don't exist any more and therefore won't affect how he relates to you in the future.
3. How do I start?
  - Start with reviewing “Confession” in your *Small Catechism*. Then set up an appointment with your pastor and ask him to help you understand how Confession works. He will guide you and – when the time is right for you – hear your confession and absolve you in Jesus' name.

You've got nothing to lose but guilt and shame – and a clean conscience and joyful spirit to gain! (Psalm 51:10)

Harold L. Senkbeil, M.Div., STM, DD  
Associate Professor, Pastoral Ministry and Missions  
Concordia Theological Seminary  
Fort Wayne, Indiana

---

<sup>2</sup> Large Catechism, V(30), p. 470.