

A Word to Sheepdogs

PERHAPS YOU, LIKE MARK BARZ and me, have come to appreciate the unique blessing of private confession comparatively late in life. Or perhaps you haven't experienced it yet either as penitent or confessor. No matter; in either case it remains one of God's mysteries (sacramenta) — blessed offers of divine forgiveness, life and salvation bestowed through earthly channels.

Pastor Barz's essay is deeply rooted in Scripture, replete with citations from both the Old and New Testaments. That person who dismisses Individual Confession and Absolution as a human invention will think otherwise after digesting all these references.

Yet this piece is also a thoughtful pastoral reflection not only on the "what" of Individual Confession, but also on its "why" and "wherefore." Pastor Barz shows us the practice up close and personal, indeed. Here we get a front row seat for all the practical logistics of this astonishing gift — that Christ Jesus would condescend to place his powerful absolving word on the lips of a mere mortal to speak in his name and stead.

We, who have long practice as pastors and confessors, have much still to learn. Any who have yet to take up the practice may find themselves ill-equipped and fearful — or even skeptical. In this rich essay there is bountiful material for all of us to grow and thrive as we begin to see that confession to our pastor is not extraordinary, but ordinary. God is surpassingly rich in His grace, indeed. In the keys he has given to his church he continues to heal and restore wounded hearts and battered souls — like yours and mine.

Dr. H. L. Senkbeil



Individual Confession and Absolution: The Care of Souls “Up Close”

Pastor Mark D. Barz

My Story

YOU MAY BE AS ANXIOUS as I was. I knew about Individual Confession and Absolution, of course. It’s something we talked about, somewhat, in my seminary days. It’s there, both anchored and implied, in the Scriptures. It’s there, clearly and strongly, in the *Book of Concord*. And certain pastors and theologians attempted to help us – to help me – understand and practice it.

The pastors of the Texas District of The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod gathered in Lubbock in November of 2000. We would do what usually happens at a district pastors’ conference: enjoy worship, be engaged by presentations, exchange conversation. Then we would go back to our homes and our families and our congregations, enlightened and encouraged.

But there was a different element on the agenda in Lubbock. In anticipation of our gathering we were told that there would be an opportunity for Individual Confession and Absolution. Prior to our worship on the first evening, pastors were invited to meet privately with another pastor. This wasn’t for problem-solving or idea-sharing or friendship-building; this was for speaking an honest confession of sins and for hearing the freeing good news of forgiveness in Christ.

I don’t remember the name of the church where we met. I don’t remember what we were served at the fellowship meal. I don’t remember anything

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about the service or the sermon. But I do remember clearly sitting in a hallway waiting for a classroom door to open, waiting for the door to close behind me, waiting for the first time I had ever said, “Dear pastor, hear my confession.”

I do not remember the specifics of what I spoke to my brother in ministry as I made David’s words my own, praying, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me” (Ps 51:10). But I do remember rejoicing to hear, “Mark David, I forgive you your sins in the name of the Father and of the (✝) Son and of the Holy Spirit.... Go, you are free.”

I thank God for those 10-12 minutes that evening in Lubbock, Texas. I thank God that Individual Confession and Absolution has, gradually and steadily, become a part of my life as a child of God, as a Christ-follower, and as a “Steward of the Mysteries”¹ (1 Cor 4:1), caring for the souls of the redeemed in my pastoral ministry.

Your journey toward and with Individual Confession and Absolution may be similar, or it may be quite different. You may have been reluctant, even resistant, to consider participating. Or you may have learned to receive, to offer, and even to embrace, Individual Confession and Absolution as part of your spiritual life and your pastoral ministry. You may have discovered — much earlier in your journey as a servant of Christ (perhaps, already, in your seminary years) — the blessings of Individual Confession and Absolution.

¹Scripture quotations and references are (unless noted) from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*®, copyright © 2001, by Crossways Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

My hope is that any and all pastors who read this paper will understand Individual Confession and Absolution better, appreciate it more deeply, be freed by regularly attending to it and rejoicing in it, and offer Individual Confession and Absolution as a key evangelical practice in their care of souls. And it is my hope that you will join me in sharing what we have discovered (or what you are yet to discover) with others within the Body of Christ, whether those given the vocation of *seelsorger* or those given the vocation of hearing the word and receiving the Sacraments.

What Does the Word Say?

Scripture speaks often of confession and absolution. It must, for God’s word delivers both his law and his gospel. After the fall, Adam and Eve attempt to hide from the seeking God rather than turn toward him in repentance (Gen 3:8-11). The conversation/confrontation between Nathan, the prophet, and David, the king, is one of the most powerful stories in the word (2 Sam 12:1-15). David’s resulting and revealing prayer of confession (Ps 51) is heart-felt and eloquent and is wonderfully and blessedly an ever-true expression, spoken and sung by the Church corporately and the Christian individually.

Other Psalms express the collective and personal need for mercy and grace. Here are some confessional pleas: “O LORD, God of my salvation; I cry out day and night before you. Let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry” (88:1,2); “O you who hear prayer, to you shall all flesh come. When iniquities prevail against me, you atone for our transgressions” (65:2,3); “There

is no soundness in my flesh because of your indignation; there is no health in my bones because of my sin” (38:3); and “Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity. For when I kept silent my bones wasted away, through my groaning all day long. I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover up my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,’ and you forgave the iniquity of my sin” (32:1,5). These expressions reveal the death of sin and the new life of God’s forgiveness. For broken hearts have nowhere to turn except to the certain promises of God.

Isaiah — the great Old Testament “evangelist” — calls the covenant people of God to confession: “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall become like wool” (1:18b). This is necessary because “Your sins have made a separation² between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear” (59:2). But the gospel in and through Isaiah is abundant and abundantly clear: “...He was crushed for our iniquities; ...All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned — every one — to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (53:4a,5,6); “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon (55:7); “...a Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn from transgres-

sion’ declares the LORD” (59:20); and “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted...” (61:1a). Finally and graciously, there is this word of present and promised hope: “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended and her iniquity pardoned, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins” (40:1,2).

The words of the incarnate Christ Jesus are rich with repentance and restoration. Matthew introduces the public ministry of our Lord in this way: “From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’ (4:17). In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus promises, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (5:4); and he calls his new covenant people to begin confession by taking the “log” out of one’s own eye rather than focusing on the “speck” in his brother’s eye (7:3-5). The *first* miraculous healing of the paralytic in Capernaum is in these simple, but rich, words: “Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven” (Matt 9:2b; Mark 2:5 and Luke 5:20).

Of course, we must “read, mark, learn, and take to heart” our Lord’s teaching on confession and forgiveness in Matt 16:18-19 and Matt 18:18 — a chapter that also includes the parable of the “Unforgiving Servant.” Lutherans recognize these passages as defining and describing the “Office of the Keys.” This divine mandate to forgive those troubled by their sins makes confession and absolution more than a human or historical practice.

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² The New English Bible translates the Hebrew here as “barrier,” which strikes this writer as both a stronger and more descriptive word.

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Finally, the first post-resurrection words of Christ to his disciples are “Εἰρήνη ὑμῖν” (“peace to you”) as he appears in the upper room on Easter evening. (John 20:19) He speaks into existence the very gift these frightened men needed most. Our risen Lord then commissions the disciples by breathing on them these words, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld” (John 20:22,23). These first pastors of the Church are given the authority of the Authoritative One (Matt 28:18) to forgive and to withhold forgiveness.

The Book of Acts — “The Acts of the Holy Spirit” — is filled with confession and forgiveness. The pre-Ascension charge (1:8) is Christ telling them to be μάρτυρες (“witnesses”) of forgiveness, echoing his previous post-resurrection words (Matt 28:19-20; Mark 16:15; and, especially, Luke 24:46-49). Peter’s Pentecost day sermon leads to this good news invitation: “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (2:38). The promise of a merciful and gracious God to all who were far-off because of their sins is now received and believed as the Lord himself calls through his called apostles (2:39).

The healing of the lame beggar in the Temple courts provides an opportunity for Peter to proclaim to an astounded audience: “Repent...and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord” (3:19,20a). Other proclamations of confession and pronouncements of forgiveness include the apostles’ witness before the Sanhe-

drin (5:27-32); Stephen’s final words of prayer (7:60); Philip’s witness to the Ethiopian (i.e. 8:35); Peter’s sermon in the house of Cornelius (i.e. 10:43); Paul and Barnabas at Pisidian Antioch (i.e. 13:38); Paul’s speech at the Areopagus in Athens (i.e. 17:31); and the second recounting, this time to King Agrippa, by Paul of his conversion on the road to Damascus (i.e. 26:18). The post-Pentecost apostles proclaim what they were commissioned to proclaim!

How does the early church live and practice confession and forgiveness? The apostolic Epistles give both instruction and encouragement regarding the confession of sin and the forgiveness of that sin. Here are relevant passages (placed in an order of emphasis, which I have chosen):

◇ Paul writes to the church in Corinth words that are part of Lutheran worship services every Ash Wednesday: “...In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor 5:19,20). This gospel principal stands behind Paul’s Spirit-inspired counsel: it is relational³ — God to man and person to person — for the sake of reconciliation.

◇ As he greets the Christians in Ephesus, Paul writes: “In him

³ Paul’s anthropology is revealed in his passion for the care of souls. According to Udo Schnelle, “His (Paul’s) view of human beings is not merely pessimistic, but realistic.” (Quoted by John Pless in *Small Catechism as Field Manual: 2.*)

we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace” (1:7). His greeting to the Colossians is similar: “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (1:13,14). How is Christ Jesus known and made known? Through forgiveness! Through his forgiveness!

◊ The apostle John writes these words, known well to many Lutheran-Christians because of their place in one contemporary form of public confession:⁴ “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he [God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us” (1 John 1:8-10).

Luther and the Other Reformers

Martin Luther spoke and wrote frequently and forcefully, plainly and eloquently, about confession and absolution. This is no surprise. Luther’s own spiritual journey was a struggle with the righteousness of God. Is it attained and offered by man to a holy (and angry) God? Is it accomplished and offered by a holy — and gracious — God to man?

And Luther is a model for every pastor, for every Lutheran-Christian, re-

garding confession and absolution. He is our model because of his “Father Confessor,” Johannes von Staupitz. From this theologian, preacher, and Vicar General of all of the Augustinian friars across Germany, Martin Luther learned about true penitence and true righteousness. He learned so much that he would write, “Biblical words came leaping toward me from all sides, clearly smiling,” turning him from a “feigned and constrained love”⁵ for God to a joyful confidence in the God who was gracious and forgiving in Christ, his Son.

The very first of Luther’s 95 theses for debate on the trafficking of indulgences reveals his early conflicts — at first, hidden in his heart — with the Roman Church over confession. “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said ‘Repent’ (Matt 4:17), He willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” This assertion is followed — though not immediately — by these words of comfort: “The true treasure of the Church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God” (Thesis 62).⁶

Both his *Small* and his *Large Catechism* reveal Luther’s re-formed theology of confession and absolution. In his explanation of the Third Article, Luther teaches: “In this Christian Church he (God the Holy Spirit) daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers.” In the fifth chief part, Luther’s pointed question is “What is Confession?” He answers: “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

⁴This phrasing is part of the Confession and Absolution in Settings One and Two of the Divine Service in *Lutheran Service Book* (pages 151 and 167). This form slightly rephrases the words of 1 John 1 to read: “But if we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins...”

⁵*Luther’s Works*, AE 48:66.

⁶*Luther’s Works*, AE 31:25,31.

are forgiven before God in heaven.”⁷ (It must be noted that Luther is not speaking of confession and absolution in corporate worship, but in a personal interaction between the Christian and his pastor.)

Luther writes at much greater length on confession and absolution in the *Large Catechism* — clarifying that confession of sins is to God alone and to our neighbor alone — as well as in his rich (and not-so-brief) “Brief Exhortation to Confession”⁸ to free “burdened and tortured consciences” from the pope’s tyranny. This simple and strong sentence captures both Luther’s heart and his theology: “Go to the Confessional: this is what it looks like to drown the Old Adam and raise the New.”

But Luther writes and preaches more, beyond his catechisms. In the final of his eight so-called *Invocavit* sermons, preached in Wittenberg in 1522, the reformer says, “I will...let no one take private confession away from me and would not give it up for all the treasures of the world, since I know what comfort and strength it has given me.”⁹ Luther further states, in his *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), that private confession and absolution “is a cure without equal for distressed consciences.”¹⁰ This gospel assertion is affirmed by this heart-felt encouragement: “If you are a Christian, you should be glad to run more than a hundred miles for confession.”¹¹ Luther needed for himself and want-

ed others to receive this care and cure of the soul “up close.”

There is no surprise that the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church are forthright and forceful in the articulation and defense of individual confession and absolution. As a key part of the “disputed articles” in the Augsburg Confession, we read:

Confession has not been abolished by the preachers on our side. For the custom has been retained among us of not administering the sacrament to those who have not been previously examined and absolved. At the same time, the people are diligently instructed how comforting the word of absolution is and how highly and dearly absolution is to be esteemed. For it is not the voice or word of the person speaking it, but it is the word of God, which forgives sin.¹²

And,

It is well known that we have so explained and extolled the benefit of absolution and the power of the keys that many troubled consciences have received consolation...They have heard that it is a command of God — indeed, the very voice of the gospel....¹³

Other portions of the Lutheran Confessions address “repentance” and “confession” or make note of these in speaking of another truth (e.g. the Formula of Concord recalls AC 25 and the Apology while addressing “election”). In fact, every one of the Confessional documents (apart from the Three Ecumenical Creeds) makes a clear and specific refer-

⁷ *Luther’s Small Catechism*, 25.

⁸ *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, Editors. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 476-480.

⁹ *Luther’s Works*, AE 51:98.

¹⁰ *Luther’s Works*, AE 36:86.

¹¹ Kolb-Wengert, 479.

¹² Augsburg Confession, Article 25 (German Text), Kolb-Wengert, 72.

¹³ Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article 11, Kolb-Wengert, 186.

“I will... let no one take private confession away from me and would not give it up for all the treasures of the world, since I know what comfort and strength it has given me.”

ence to confession and absolution in the articulation of what these new “evangelicals” believe, teach, and confess.

For the Reformers, confession was no longer a good work that we do or attempt to do (as taught and practiced by Roman Catholicism), but God’s good work to calm our troubled and terrified consciences. Roman confession — the so-called Sacrament of Penance — focused on man’s work; Lutheran absolution rejoiced in God’s work. This blessed discovery is one of the proofs that Luther did not set out merely to reform the Roman Church, but to reform preaching and pastoral care.¹⁴

General Confession and Individual Confession and Absolution

Modern Lutherans often wrestle with individual or private confession and absolution because they generally only know “general confession.” Indeed, I’m quite sure that many who faithfully sit in the pews of Crown of Life Evangelical Lutheran Church in San Antonio, Texas have heard me speak of “Individual Confession and Absolution,” but have never participated in it. What these saints know — because they experience it Sunday after Sunday in the divine service — is a verbal (and a silent) portion of the liturgy called “Confession and Absolution.” They all hear the same invitation. They all speak the same words of confession. They all hear the same words of forgiveness. They all speak a common “Amen.”

It is certainly not that this general confession is invalid. For, “if we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and

just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). And all those pronouns are plural. This form is valid precisely because it delivers the good news to broken and contrite people. It is valid because in the stead and by the command of Jesus Christ, his undershepherds say these powerful words as they sign the cross upon sinners: “I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁵ So God’s people affirm this valid and valuable absolution with their humble and hearty “Amen.”

There are many reasons for this disconnect, for the emphasis on general confession over — or in place of — individual confession and absolution. Here are the usual suspects:¹⁶ The Thirty Years’ War (1618-1648), the rise of Pietism, the debilitating power of rationalism, anti-Roman bias, Reformed influence and The Prussian Union (1817), the far-less-than-frequent celebration of the Lord’s Supper (which is an unfortunate result of many of the previously-noted events), the rise of the confessional service (preceding the divine service), and the decades-long — but rarely seen in our day — practice of

¹⁵ I remember well, in my preteen years, hearing my pastor (and my dad) say in a Lutheran parochial school chapel service: “There is only one time I don’t want to see people yawn in church. It’s not when Scripture is read. It’s not during my sermon. It’s when I speak the absolution.”

¹⁶ Each one of these could be given paragraphs; I direct the reader to Walter Koehler’s *Counseling and Confession* (see especially page 56); to the excellent research of Kristopher Morris in “Lord, to Whom Shall We Go: A Study of the Role of A Confessor and Its Usage Among LCMS Clergy;” and to “Confession and Absolution,” and to a recent document from the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. [See the bibliography.]

¹⁴ “Sola Gratia” (PowerPoint presentation, undated), John Pless.

General confession is for “general” sins; private confession is for sins that are hidden in one’s heart.

announcing for Holy Communion at the pastor loci’s study on Friday or Saturday before a communion Sunday.

And here are two more likely and contemporary suspects in this “crime”: first, the transformation of the pastoral office to that of a therapist or counselor;¹⁷ second — and more currently and maddeningly — the use of social media to speak our “confession of sins” to our “friends” and “followers” and to those we carelessly offend, not with sinful words or actions, but with a perceived violation of social mores.¹⁸

But there are differences and distinctions between “general” and “private” confession. General confession is offered to all; private confession is one-on-one. General confession is not consciously sought; private confession is longed-for and requested.¹⁹ General confession is for “general” sins;²⁰ private confession is for sins that are hidden in one’s heart. (It must also be said, as assurance to troubled souls: a non-specific confession is certainly preferred over an invented confession!)

¹⁷ See Walter J. Koehler, *Counseling & Confession: The Role of Confession and Absolution in Pastoral Counseling*, New Edition. (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Press, 2011).

¹⁸ See “Inclined to Boast: Social Media and Self-Justification,” A. Trevor Sutton, *Concordia Journal*, Winter 2019, 33-43.

¹⁹ Even popular writer John Grisham deals with this distinction. In his novel, aptly named *The Confession*, Grisham has a dying man demand a conversation with a Lutheran pastor. In the asked-for-solitude of the pastor’s office, the man confesses to murdering someone for which a different man has been convicted and is soon to be executed. [See a later footnote for another reference to confession and forgiveness in popular culture.]

²⁰ Robert Jensen in a response to a Larry Peters blog post titled, “The Half-Sacrament of Absolution” (2014).

And there are also important distinctions between “general” and “private” absolution. General absolution is spoken to all; private absolution is spoken only to one or, perhaps — in certain circumstances — to a few. General absolution is valid and true for all who hear; private absolution is the truth of God’s forgiveness for one sinner. General absolution encompasses all sins; private absolution is spoken to and heard about and rejoiced in for a particularly-named sin or sins. As J.G. Goesswein stated, “Private absolution is neither more [nor] less than the absolution the whole congregation receives in the gospel. ...[*But it is*] the gospel ... specifically applied to the circumstances of the individual sinner.”²¹ For private absolution is the gospel “up close.”

A Pastoral Aside: Caring for a Soul

When I am in certain situations of pastoral care, the opportunity to invite a soul to receive Individual Confession and Absolution may present itself. (This is what James Nestingen calls “having ears for confession.”²²) I may say, “It seems to me that you need to confess your sins (or this sin) and hear God’s certain forgiveness.” I will, then, take a few minutes to explain what Individual Confession and Absolution is and includes, especially if I am aware that this form is unknown or unfamiliar to the soul for whom I am caring. (I do keep copies of the rite both in my study and in the sacristy.)

²¹ J.G. Goesswein, “The 11th Article of the Augsburg Confession,” trans. Christopher Doerr, *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 106, No.2 (Spring 2009), 5.

²² This insightful phrase of Nestingen’s was shared with me in an e-mail conversation with Rev. John Pless in the fall of 2018.

And I will say something like this: “We confess our sins every Sunday as we begin the divine service. And one of your pastors speaks the certain word of forgiveness, the gift of God’s mercy and grace through his Son’s death on the cross. (If we are in my study, I will point to the crucifix — in the center of a dozen other crosses — on the wall above the kneeler.) That’s the good news I want to speak to you today. Let me assure you: I will never, I can never, tell anyone what you say in your confession. I promise you that confidentiality.”

I then invite my brother or sister in Christ to kneel. I stand or sit to the side and he/she begins: “Dear Pastor, hear my confession.”

What Shall We Call This Action/Transaction?

What shall we call it, this law-gospel encounter for and with a soul, this confrontation and consolation, this intersection of theology and the care of souls? Martin Chemnitz affirms the pastoral care aspect of this action/transaction when he writes: “This proclamation, whether it is called particular, individual, special, or private, is efficacious for the forgiving of sins because it is a ministry of the Spirit, through which God strengthens faith and forgives sins.”²³

So, is it “private” confession and absolution? Yes, in the sense that it happens only between two people and a report is never shared with others. The sins confessed are never revealed. It is the care of one soul “up close.”

²³ Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent* (Part II), trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978): 562.

Is it “personal” confession and absolution? Yes, in that the words of confession are from a single person and the words of absolution are one-person-directed and personalized.²⁴

Is it “individual” confession and absolution? Yes, because only one person, one sinner-saint, speaks to only one other sinner-saint who absolves, delivering the good news just to and “for you.”

Rather than inventing new nomenclature, I will use the term “Individual Confession and Absolution” from this point on in my paper. Each of the key words will remain capitalized as each one is an important component. And I will refrain from abbreviating. (In my opinion, such a holy interaction is somewhat devalued when it is shortened to “ICA.”)

Though we are not fighting the battle in the same way as fought by the Reformers, it is worth saying: the Roman Church succeeded in turning gospel into law regarding Individual Confession and Absolution. The required enumeration of all sins (even with the distinction between mortal and venial), the false teaching that proper confession is done in order to merit God’s mercy, and the assignment of “satisfactions” (i.e. “penance”),²⁵ all distort the gift and the blessings of Individual Confession and Absolution. But our Lutheran desire is that this specific “care of a soul” is only to deliver the gospel.

Individual Confession and Absolution goes beyond a general and generic confession. Yet the law does its work as participation in this sacred

²⁴ It is my pastoral practice to ask the penitent his/her baptismal names and to speak these in the words of absolution.

²⁵ “Confession and Absolution,” *Commission of Theology and Church Relations*, April 2018.

Preparing for Individual Confession and Absolution compels a “fearless personal inventory.”

act means that I willingly examine my heart for the sinful thoughts, desires, words, and deeds that have offended God and damaged or destroyed my relationship with my neighbor. Preparing for Individual Confession and Absolution — which may take minutes or hours or days of reflection — and then speaking to my confessor, compels a “fearless personal inventory.”²⁶ This process is not comfortable; it can never be comfortable.

The temptation is relentless: we constantly strive to build a case for our own blamelessness, for all humanity is fixated on self-justification. This is damning; it is deadly. Kristopher Morris states it this way: “The habits, passions, wills, and other machinations of man that are contrary to God’s word find their death in Individual Confession and Absolution.”²⁷ Walter Koehler, in *Counseling & Confession: The Role of Confession and Absolution in Pastoral Counseling*, expresses God’s deadly work in these words: “Anyone God wishes to justify, He judges; anyone God wishes to give life to, He kills.”²⁸

The law must do its killing work. If it is not allowed to do so — by one’s pride or arrogance, doubt or despair — then the gospel is muted or negated. Absolution is reduced to a generic announcement of God’s love and an encouragement to personal self-acceptance and, more despairingly, to self-improvement. This is far from David’s declaration:

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul;

²⁶ *Lutheranism 101*. General Editor Scot A. Kinnaman. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015), 158.

²⁷ Morris, 43.

²⁸ Koehler, 54.

The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.

Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight,

O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. (Ps 19:7,12,14)

The Rite and the Pastor-Penitent Interaction

“Pastor, please hear my confession and pronounce forgiveness in order to fulfill God’s will.”²⁹

“In order to fulfill God’s will.” It is his gracious will that sins are acknowledged and named, owned and repented of. It is his gracious will that specific confession will lead to specific absolution. Because “where sin is not confessed, it remains festering and corrosive, addicting the sinner to another go at self-justification.”³⁰ Above all, it is God’s gracious will that these sins are absolved — that the forgiveness of Christ’s suffering and death is brought “up close” and delivered to this redeemed soul. Without Holy Absolution, our confessions are simply attempts to excuse and save ourselves. If this interaction is devoid of Christ, then, to borrow St. Paul’s words from another context, “We are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Cor 15:19).

The penitent kneels. The confessor and penitent pray together, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your unfailing love; according to Your great compassion blot out my trans-

²⁹ From the Rite of Individual Confession and Absolution as included in *Lutheran Service Book* (pages 292-293).

³⁰ *The Small Catechism as Field Manual* [draft], John Pless, page 2.

gressions.... Against You, You only, have I sinned and done what is evil in Your sight.”³¹ Then he/she continues: “I have lived as if God did not matter and as if I mattered most.... My thoughts and desires have been soiled with sin. What troubles me particularly is that....” He may name anger. She may name envy. He may name greed. She may name lust. He may name apathy. She may name neglect. He may stammer and stumble. She may weep and whisper.

And his/her confessor listens. He listens with the heart given him by God, by God who is merciful and gracious, who is slow to anger, who abounds in steadfast love and faithfulness (Ex 34:6 and many other occurrences).

Only then does the pastor speak: “Do you believe that the word of Christ’s forgiveness I speak to you is from the Lord himself?” To which the penitent — with brazen boldness and quiet confidence — replies, “Yes, I do.”

The power of God’s law has brought death. The penitent has been stripped of every excuse. All his/her self-justifying idols have been crushed. He/she waits — and longs to hear — the final word, rejoicing that the undeserved good news is “up close.” Hands are on his head; human touch anoints and blesses her. The names first spoken at the font are spoken now and then followed by these holy and holiness-bestowing words: “In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins in

³¹ From the “Rite of Individual Confession and Absolution” as included in *Lutheran Worship* (pages 310-311). This is the form I most commonly use — both as a penitent and as a pastor — as it is the form by which I learned to participate in and practice Individual Confession and Absolution.

the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

Harold Senkbeil, my esteemed DOXOLOGY colleague, expresses the truth of this grace-full moment in these words: “There’s only one way to deal with sin. Not by reform, but by death and resurrection. Not by remodeling, but demolition and reconstruction.... And God accomplishes his new creation as He did the first creation: by his almighty word.”³²

Luther makes his affirmation in the first person. “Now, dear God, I have confessed before Thee my sins to my Confessor and in Thy name asked for grace....I cling to Thy promise and do not doubt Thy truth: as my Confessor has loosed me in Thy name, so I am loosed.”³³

Who Forgives?

This truth is profound and precious: God places his words — his mercy, his grace, his love — in a human mouth so that a redeemed soul hears and knows and rejoices that his or her sins are forgiven before God in heaven. For the pastor who hears and listens to a confession does not do so in order to be a judge or an executioner. Far from it! Rather, the confessor who was given Christ’s ears is now given Christ’s voice to announce the verdict of mercy, the certainty of forgiveness.

Who forgives the repentant sinner? The pastor does. This man? This fellow-sinner? This repentant and restored sinner? This same pastor who

³² Harold Senkbeil, *Dying to Live: The Power of Forgiveness*. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1994), 76.

³³ P.H.D. Lang, “Private Confession and Absolution in the Lutheran Church: A Doctrinal, Historical, and Critical Study,” (*Concordia Theological Quarterly*, October 1992), 247.

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also goes — who knows he *must* go — to receive Individual Confession and Absolution? Yes, really, this man.

Because an evangelical Lutheran pastor is a theologian of the cross, he recognizes, indeed, he rejoices, that he has nothing lasting to offer of himself. This pastor, this confessor, is not worthy. But Jesus is.³⁴ And the Good Shepherd speaks mercy and grace to his sheep through his under-shepherds.

This is why “Absolution is absolute.”³⁵ It is not based on the sincerity of the penitent. Nor is it based on the holiness of the confessor. It is the gospel “up close” because the Lord of the Church moves his words of forgiveness from the lips of the confessor to the ears and the heart of the penitent.

Karl-Herman Kandler writes: “This authorization fundamentally distinguishes confession and absolution from all other forms of therapy. They can surely uncover guilt and failure, but they cannot forgive.”³⁶ The absolute penalty for sin is death. This is the wage it must and will pay (Rom 6:23) to everyone, every time. So, “the only solution to the problem of the absolute is actual absolution.”³⁷

The confessor does not speak his own verdict. He does not — he dare

³⁴ Peter J. Brock, “Law and Gospel in Pastoral Care: A View from the Parish,” chapter 4, Albert B. Collver III, James Arne Nestingen, and John T. Pless, editors, *The Necessary Distinction: A Continuing Conversation on Law & Gospel*. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 72.

³⁵ Mark Schroeder, “Worship Matters: Confession and Absolution,” Blog post: <https://concordiakoinonia.com/tag/confession-and-absolution/> (May 21, 2012).

³⁶ Quoted by John Pless in *Small Catechism as Field Manual*, 5.

³⁷ Gerhard Forde, quoted by John Pless, 28.

not — add to the shame or to the guilt. He speaks the verdict of the cross. He speaks the pardon earned by the Lamb of God whose death has taken away this and every sin. And there are not two forgivers; there is only one. God is always the subject. But the “servant of the word” is given both the charge and the privilege of being God’s visual and vocal instrument. Yet the power of absolution always rests in the word of God.³⁸

A pointed question is silently asked by certain scribes when Jesus forgives the paralytic in the house with the hole in the roof at Capernaum: “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Mark 2:8). They’re right, of course. Only God can forgive sins. Only the God-Man, the promised Messiah, can forgive sins. This Christ Jesus asserts when, speaking with authority and power, he tells the man: “Rise, pick up your bed, and go home” (Mark 2:11). And, while our Lord has given this same blessed privilege to every Christian (Eph 4:32; Col 3:13), he has also given a privileged task to those men called into the Office of the Holy Ministry, to those who turn the Keys entrusted to them by the Church.

The pastor speaks, but the Lord acts. The pastor speaks, but the Lord confronts. The pastor speaks, but the Lord kills and makes alive. Nicolaus Herman, a Reformation hymn-writer, expresses these truths in his rich poetry:

The words which absolution give
/ Are his who died that we might
live;

The minister whom Christ has
sent / Is but his humble instru-
ment.³⁹

³⁸ Lang, 245.

³⁹ Nicolaus Herman (c. 1480-1561); *Lutheran Service Book*, #614:5.

And Absolution is not, it cannot be, conditional. As Herbert Girgensohn puts it: “There is no such thing as a hypothetical absolution.”⁴⁰ Real sins are cancelled by real forgiveness. This echoes the assertion of C.F.W. Walther who writes in his *Pastoral Theology*: “[Our theologians agree:] ... the formula of Absolution should be understood categorically and should be free of any added condition.”⁴¹ There are no “ifs” or “maybes” or “if onlys” attached to the confessor’s declaration.

Holy Absolution does and gives exactly what it says — just as the words and actions of the sacrament of the font and the sacrament of the altar do and give what they sign and enact and promise. God’s word is performative. And God’s words — in and from the mouths of evangelical confessors — are performative. They are, as Herman Sasse declared, “the sacramentum audible”⁴² to be confidently received by penitents.

“Let there be ...” (Gen 1:3) was the creating word spoken to the dark nothingness. And there was light. “The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life,” says Jesus (John 6:63). They are not *about* spirit and life; they *are* spirit and life. The words of Christ here promise to create all they describe, including the forgiveness of sins.

So, a pastor’s absolving words — in the stead and by the command of Jesus Christ — are performative. They kill. They make alive. They for-

⁴⁰ Quoted by John Pless in *Teaching Luther’s Catechism*.

⁴¹ Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther, *Pastoral Theology*. David W. Loy, Editor; Christian C. Tiews, Translator. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 194.

⁴² Herman Sasse, *We Confess the Sacraments*. Norman Nagel, Translator. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1985), 24.

give. They set free. As Oswald Bayer writes: “I absolve you of your sins’ is not merely a declaratory judgment of what already is (but) ... The word of absolution is rather a verbal act, which creates a relationship — between God in whose name it is spoken, and the person to whom it is spoken.”⁴³

The Blessings of Individual Confession and Absolution

It is my observation that many faithful pastors and many faithful members of our congregations have various degrees of anxiousness about Individual Confession and Absolution. It’s good in theory, but the reality is, often, a reluctance to seek or to offer this unique care for souls. What is the *real* reality? As Senkbeil perceptively writes, “There is no one so lonely as someone alone with his sin.”⁴⁴

So we must affirm the blessings! No, it’s not that “confession is good for the soul.”⁴⁵ It’s that confession — agreeing with the truth of God’s word — brings the Christian to hear the good news of the forgiveness of sins. This blessed interaction returns us to our baptism — where we died and were buried and were raised with Christ. Individual Confession and Absolution is baptismal renewal. We go under the flood. We are drowned. We die. And we live again: claimed,

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⁴³ *Lutheran Quarterly*, quoted by John Pless, 32.

⁴⁴ Senkbeil, 85.

⁴⁵ This seems to be an ancient Scottish maxim, originally expressed as “Open confession is good for the soul.” The question is whether this refers to “confession” of Christ for salvation (Rom 10:9) or “confession” of sins to God and/or to another Christian. Sources I discovered are, unfortunately, unclear on a more precise treatment of this quotation.

clothed, cleansed, connected, forgiven.

And what does forgiveness do? It applies to any Christian — and to us — the suffering and death of Christ on the cross. It cancels sin. It assures us of God’s mercy and grace. It sets us free. Forgiveness bestows a clear conscience (2 Tim 1:3) and releases us from an evil conscience (Heb 10:22). Forgiveness releases us from the accuser’s lies: “You’re too bad! You can’t be forgiven.” Or: “You’re not so bad! You don’t need to be forgiven.” This forgiveness is truth in the face of falsehood.

And Individual Confession and Absolution is concrete by its one-with-one and one-to-one words and actions. The loneliness of the sinner is abolished by Holy Absolution, because Christ himself is present in the brother who listens and speaks mercy and grace and forgiveness.

Yes, our Lord could call us to remember and rejoice in our baptism. (And he does.) Yes, our Lord could invite us to eat his body and drink his blood. (And he does.) But through Individual Confession and Absolution, the penitent hears the confessor say: “I forgive you....Go, you are free.” And, just as there is freedom within the Church to practice Individual Confession and Absolution, so is there freedom in the Church *through* practicing Individual Confession and Absolution. There is freedom from guilt and shame and despair.

A Narrative Aside: Confession and Absolution Near Death

Many Lutheran pastors and laypeople are familiar with *The Hammer of God*, by Bo Giertz. The first section, titled “The Hammer of God,” finds young pastor Henrik Samuel Savonius

called to the deathbed of Johannes. As the story develops, this highly-educated but inexperienced pastor is taught by Katrina, a former neighbor of Johannes, who comes to visit the critically ill man.

She goes directly to his bedside. “Johannes, wake up! It’s Katrina; do you hear?” In their conversation, Johannes says, “Katrina, I am a sinner, a great sinner...my heart is not clean, my mind is evil.” She states, “...that your heart is unclean — that is the work of sin — but now that you see it, that is the work of God.” A bit later, “Have you anything more to say, Katrina?” “Yes, one more thing, Johannes. ‘Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.’ ...‘With his stripes we are healed.’ ‘He is the propitiation for our sins: and for the sins of the whole world.’” “Amen. I believe!” said Johannes, in a voice that could barely be heard. Katrina rose and replaced the Bible on the table. “Now God’s work has taken place. Now you must ask the pastor to give you the holy sacrament.” Johannes nodded slowly. “Master, at Thy word I will let down the net.”

And Pastor Savonius prepared the Lord’s Supper, inviting the four Lutherans in that cottage to receive. When the formal confession of sins ended, Savonius asked, “Believest thou that God has given his ordained servants authority in his church through his holy word to forgive sins, and that my forgiveness is God’s forgiveness?” “Yes,” answered Johannes, so firmly and so unaffectedly, that Savonius...for the first understood that this was...a vital question, one that involve the realities of life and death.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Excerpts are from Bo Giertz’s *The Hammer of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publish-

*The
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This is not the usual form of Individual Confession and Absolution (with the introductory witness of Katrina), but it richly reveals the blessing of God's word, delivering certain forgiveness. This never-old, always-new narrative demonstrates that confession and absolution are the very intersection of theology and the care of souls. And this narrative shows the longing of a dying believer for comfort and hope and life that are found only in Christ Jesus.⁴⁷

An Experiential Aside: Corporate Confession and Individual Absolution

I had been told of the common practice of the Selbständige Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche [often abbreviated as the SELK] — the partner church of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in Germany. But this was observed and experienced by my wife and me on a Sunday morning in August 2016 at Dreieinigkeits Kirche in Berlin.

A “confessional service” precedes the divine service by 30 minutes. Sins are confessed together; voices are in unison. But absolution is spoken individually. It is delivered one-to-one, pastor-to-penitent, at the communion rail. Each sinner comes forward and kneels in silence, waiting for his/her pastor to stop before

ing House, 1960), 26-33.

⁴⁷ Another narrative is a contrary one, for it fails to bring the blessed good news. This is in an episode of the NBC television show *ER* from 2008 in which a dying patient tells the chaplain, “I want a real chaplain who believes in a real God and a real hell.... I need answers. I need someone who will look me in the eye and tell me how to find forgiveness.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhxURmVIOIQ> [I acknowledge with gratitude Timothy Pauls who shared this illuminating excerpt within a DOXOLOGY conversation.]

him/her, and to place his hands on his/her head. The words are simple and strong: “I forgive your sins in the name of Jesus Christ. Go, you are free.”⁴⁸

Perhaps our brothers and sisters in the SELK have a better and longer memory than we do. For, as noted earlier, the practice of only a “general confession” in the divine service is a more recent phenomenon in the Evangelical Lutheran Church. The reformers would be surprised, even shocked, at this innovation. Luther’s “Church Order” (of 1542) stipulated private confession and absolution; it did not permit general confession. This Reformation document stated strongly: “For a pastor to gather in a group those who decide in the morning to commune and to grant them a common Absolution: that should not be in any way.”⁴⁹

With the encouragement of a DOXOLOGY colleague, a form of confession and absolution similar to that seen at Dreieinigkeits was part of Holy Week at Crown of Life in 2019. For the first time, our Maundy Thursday services began with corporate confession followed by individual absolution.⁵⁰ Worshipers were invited to come forward, to kneel at the communion rail, and to await the pastor who placed his hands upon the penitent’s head, called the person by name, and said, “In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus

⁴⁸ I’m grateful to my friend Rebecca Bartelt for this insight: spoken interactions between a Christian and his pastor in Germany would generally use formal speech but, in this moment, the pastor speaks his words of absolution in informal (familiar) German. He says, “du,” not “sie.”

⁴⁹ As quoted in *Pastoral Theology* by C.F.W. Walther; and, yes, the ‘A’ in Absolution is capitalized in Walther’s original text.

⁵⁰ This is an option in *Lutheran Service Book*, pages 290-291.

Christ, I forgive you all your sins, in the name of the Father and of the (Ê) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Go; you are free.” Ashes of repentance and death had marked penitents to begin the lenten journey. Now a second cross marked God’s people with the cleansing of Holy Absolution.

A Second Experiential Aside: Private Confession in Public

Can private confession happen publicly? That seems a contradictory possibility. It seems so, until it happens and is observed. While attending and serving at several DOXOLOGY Grand Reunions,⁵¹ I have participated in Individual Confession and Absolution as both a penitent and as a confessor. And I have also observed Individual Confession and Absolution in view of any and all.

It’s a remarkable scene. Three confessors are situated within the sanctuary. Their stations are far enough away from each other that the dialog is audible, but unintelligible. The penitents wait in the pews until a station is open. Then one goes forward to speak his/her confession. As I sit and watch, I marvel at what occurs. Even though I cannot hear the exact words, I know what is happening: sinners are confessing, emptying their hearts, leaving their burdens; grace and forgiveness are delivered; consciences are cleansed and made good; souls are being cared for.

⁵¹ These are annual weekend events involving Lutheran pastors and wives in worship, teaching, fellowship, and pastoral care.

Confessors Confess

It does not go without saying, so I will say it: Pastors who hear confessions and speak absolution to sinners need to speak their own confession and hear absolution “up close,” delivered to them. A pastor *is* a penitent. A pastor *must be* a penitent.⁵² Having a confessor and being a confessor go hand-in-hand.

I’m certain that many pastors for many years have spoken absolution in the divine service and in Individual Confession and Absolution, yet never asked another pastor to hear their confession and absolve them. Of course, their words of forgiveness were still valid and efficacious. They were because these men spoke God’s gracious words. However, confessors should confess. Confessors should experience both the pain and humiliation of Individual Confession and the joy and peace of Individual Absolution.

“Only the brother under the Cross can hear a confession,” Bonhoeffer writes in *Life Together*. It’s not that this man experiences life and pastoral ministry, which qualifies him to listen to the confessions of the souls he cares for, but it is the “experience of the cross that makes one a worthy hearer of confessions.”⁵³

Under the cross, the pastor lives and suffers and serves. Peter Brock expresses it in these words: “The Lord commands the pastor to preach the

⁵² Walther is clear and strong on this point. He writes: “*In case of necessity a preacher may go to the Holy Supper without confession, ... even the preacher needs this important means [of grace].*” (Italics are in the original.) *Pastoral Theology*, 198.

⁵³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (published in German in 1939; published in English in 1954 – New York: Harper Collins, 1978), 118.

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word the pastor suffers, and only in suffering that word of law and gospel does the pastor divide it rightly.”⁵⁴ The dividing of law and gospel is not an academic exercise, it is done in and for the care of souls. It happens when a pastor suffers as a penitent; it happens when a pastor suffers in serving as a confessor.

Though this is not the same as a pastor going to another pastor for Individual Confession and Absolution, this is the practice we have begun at Crown of Life, the parish I presently serve. In the morning on the First Sunday of Advent, we begin the church year by using the form of confession from *Compline*.⁵⁵ First, the two called pastors confess their sinfulness and their sins to the congregation. God’s people hear the servants of Christ admit that they are sinners. Then they say to us: “The almighty and merciful Lord grant you pardon, forgiveness, and remission of all your sins.” And the pastors say, “Amen.” After this the congregation speaks a corporate confession, and they hear God’s mercy and grace, his pardon and forgiveness, in the voice of one of their pastors.

Buried. To Stay.

A pastor’s ears are opened to hear, to receive, the penitent’s confession. A pastor’s mouth is opened to pronounce the absolution of Christ. And when the final words are spoken — “Go, you are free” — his ears have become a tomb. Because God has removed the sin, these sins, as far as “the east is from the west” (Ps 103:12), then the pastor who hears this confession is forbidden to share

it or expose it in any way at all.⁵⁶ What is buried into the pastor’s ears and heart stays in the grave. This corpse is never to be disinterred.⁵⁷

I have no doubt that these are, to many pastors, the words of the Rites of Ordination and Installation we recall with the greatest clarity: “Will you promise never to divulge the sins confessed to you?”⁵⁸ Though these were not yet included in the Agenda used at my ordination on 18 July 1982 at Bethlehem Evangelical Lutheran Church in Saginaw, Michigan, they were spoken to me on 22 February 1987 at Crown of Life in San Antonio. And I replied: “Yes, I will, with the help of God.”

John Fritz wrote these words to pastors and pastors-in-training in the 1930s: “There really exists a silent agreement ... that whatever is confessed is said *inter nos* [Latin: “among ourselves”] in the strictest sense of these words and dare not

⁵⁶ *Lutheran Quarterly*, Pless, 34.

⁵⁷ In his *Pastoral Theology* (1932), John Fritz includes in a footnote that a Lutheran minister in Minnesota was held in contempt of court with a fine of \$100 or thirty days in jail because he refused to divulge a confessional secret. However, the *Supreme Court* [I’m unclear if it was state or national] sustained the pastor on appeal. In our time, recently proposed legislation in the state of California [California Senate Bill 360] would compel priests and pastors to disclose to designated governmental authorities confessions of sexual abuse. In response, an op-ed by a Dominican priest stated this: “In 1813, the New York Court of General Sessions commented on the Catholic sacrament of confession and the government’s proper role in respecting the secrecy of the confessional as a part of its constitutional duty to protect religious freedom. It said: ‘To decide that the minister shall promulgate what he receives in confession, is to declare that there shall be no penance; and this important branch of the Roman Catholic religion would be thus annihilated.’” *USA Today*, April 28, 2019.

⁵⁸ *Lutheran Service Book Agenda*, 166 and 179.

⁵⁴ Brock, *The Necessary Distinction*, 81.

⁵⁵ *Lutheran Service Book*, 254.

*Under the
cross, the
pastor lives
and suffers
and serves.*

be revealed.”⁵⁹ The matter is closed when Holy Absolution is pronounced. Your confessor, your pastor, your *Seelsorger*, will not bring it up – not to you, not to anyone else.

He is given blessed amnesia. And so are you!

My Hope and My Prayer

May the Lord of the Church renew his redeemed people with the precious gift of Individual Confession and Absolution, granting joy and peace to those who confess to faithful shepherds who faithfully speak the freeing forgiveness of the cross.

May He grant care and courage to pastors to praise⁶⁰ and teach and offer Individual Confession and Absolution – to have ears and mouths and hearts for this practice of pastoral care – sharing a gift that they have begun to practice with a confessor and to treasure as they receive the forgiveness that they give out with their lips and hands.

Here, again, is Luther; he gets the last word: “I have been baptized. I have been absolved. In this faith I die.”⁶¹ ■■

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⁵⁹ John H. C. Fritz, *Pastoral Theology: A Handbook of Scriptural Principles*. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1932), 135.

⁶⁰ Walther, 184.

⁶¹ *Luther on Genesis 48*, quoted by Kristopher Morris, 60.

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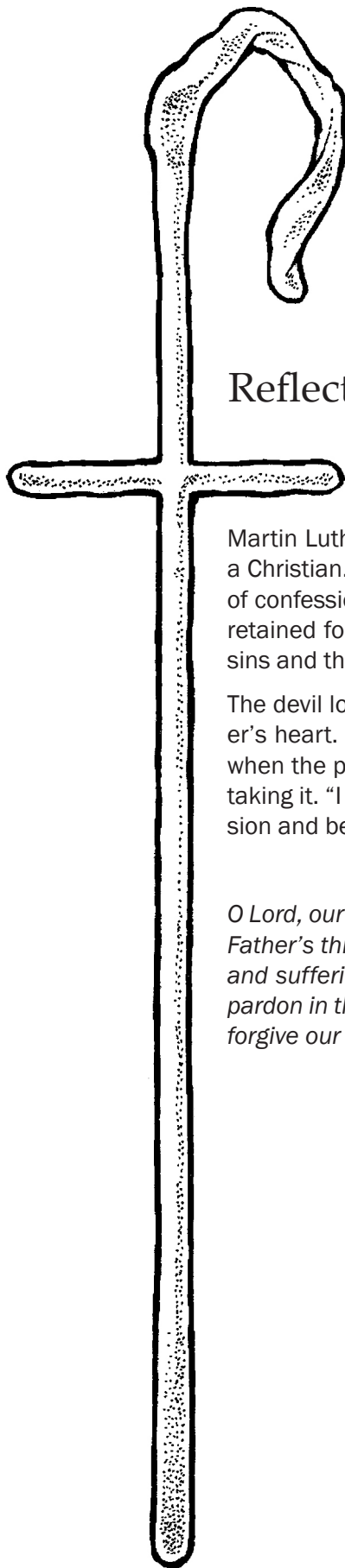
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Reflection

Martin Luther once wrote, “When I urge you to go to confession I am urging you to be a Christian.” Pastor Barz is urging us to be Christians, and to regain the joyful practice of confession and absolution. What a treasure the practice of individual confession is, retained for the hope and clarity of the absolution, the freedom of the forgiveness of sins and the confidence that God’s mercy indeed belongs to me!

The devil loves doubt. He loves to weasel in between the preacher’s lips and the hearer’s heart. “That Gospel’s not for you,” the devil lies. “That promise is not yours.” But when the pastor’s hand is on my head there is no space for the devil. There is no mistaking it. “I forgive you all your sins.” May God use this essay to urge us to go to confession and be strengthened in the confidence and comfort the Lord delivers to us there.

✠

O Lord, our Heavenly Advocate, we give you thanks that you speak our name before the Father’s throne. We thank you for the pardon and peace that we have by your sacrifice and suffering, your death and resurrection. Grant that we would hear these words of pardon in the absolution, that confessing our sins, you, who are faithful and just, would forgive our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Amen.

Pastor Bryan Wolfmüller