

Confession and Absolution

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness – 1 John 1.9.

A true confession of sins implies that we confess before God that we have sinned and have thereby deserved temporal death and eternal damnation. We pray God to forgive us our sins and to remit the well-deserved punishment for Jesus' sake.

Such a confession is neither an exaggeration of our guilt nor of the well-deserved punishment. Scriptures declare that all men have sinned and come short of the glory of God; that they are dead in trespasses and sins; that by nature they are the children of wrath; that every man is cursed who confirms not all the words of the Law to do them; that death is the wages of sin.

Holy Writ presents to us fine examples of true confession. David pleaded with God: 'Enter not into judgment with thy servant; for in Thy sight shall no man living be justified.' 'Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Thy loving-kindness; according unto the multitude of Thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, Thee only, have I sinned and done this evil in Thy sight, that thou mightest be justified when Thou speakest and be clear when thou judgest. Behold, I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me... Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean.' The publican in the Temple sought refuge in the everlasting arms of God's mercy, saying: 'God be merciful to me, a sinner.' A brief, but comprehensive confession.

Such a confession, however, is not a good work meriting forgiveness of sins. The sinner dare not rest assured that his sins are forgiven just because he humbled himself before the supreme majesty of God and that, the more detailed his confession, the more certain he can be of forgiveness with God. No, the certainty of forgiveness comes to us through absolution, through God's own assurance that our sins are blotted out, that He will not hold them against us in judgment.

God truly forgives sins. Let no man doubt that fact. He has declared His very name to be 'The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgressions and sins.' The prophet Micah declared: 'Who is a God like unto Thee, that pardoneth iniquity and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of His heritage?' Hezekiah confessed: 'Thou hast cast all my sins behind Thy back.' David wrote; 'I acknowledged my sin unto Thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord; and Thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin.'

But in forgiving sins, God is not like unto a vacillating monarch, who breathes threatenings against the violators of the law, but weakens and is moved to pity and induced to be lenient when the malefactor appears before Him whining out a pitiful story and pleading for mercy. No, God does not and cannot overlook sin. God punishes every sin. Nor let us for a moment think that such sins perhaps as are confessed before God escape His divine wrath. When God forgives sins, He forgives them for Jesus' sake. For God laid all our sins upon Christ, and He bore the punishment we had deserved in our stead. 'God made Him to be sin for us who knew no sin that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him,' 2 Cor 5:21. 'Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the Law, being made a curse for us,' Gal 3:13. 'He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed,' Is 53:5. 'He His own self bare our sins in His own body on the tree,' 1 Peter 2:24. Christ is the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world. Yea, 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them,' 2 Cor 5:19.

A true confession of sins therefore implies, as said before, that we plead the mercy of God in Christ Jesus, that we ask God to apply to us, to put to our credit, the all-sufficient merits of Christ.

But how does God pronounce the absolution? How does He give every one who has confessed his sins the divine assurance that his sins are truly forgiven?

God pronounces the absolution through men. He has invested His Church, the believers, with full authority to forgive sins in Jesus' name. Matt 18:17–20 we read, 'And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church; but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.' John 20:21–23 we read, 'Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you. As My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you. And when He had said this, he breathed on His disciples and said unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost; whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained.' And the apostle Paul wrote to the Christians at Corinth, 2 Cor 2:10, 'To whom ye forgive anything, I forgive also; for if I forgave anything, to whom I forgave it, for your sakes forgave I it in the person of Christ.'

The Church of Christ here on earth exercises the power to forgive sins in various ways. Every Christian will consider it his special duty and privilege to comfort those who mourn because of their sins and long for forgiveness. He will tell them that through Jesus' blood and merit we are at peace with God.

Christian congregations will call ministers of the Gospel to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments; and whenever and wherever these ambassadors of Christ proclaim the glad tidings of the grace of God in Christ Jesus, God absolves every one who sorrowfully confesses his sins. Let the poor, penitent sinner rejoice in that message. This also applies when the united congregation joins in the public confession of sins in its services and the minister of Christ uses the following or a similar form: 'Upon this your confession, I, by virtue of my office, as a called and ordained servant of the Word, announce the grace of God unto all of you who heartily repent of your sins, believe on Jesus Christ, and sincerely and earnestly purpose, by the assistance of God the Holy Ghost, henceforth to amend your sinful lives, and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost.' Let us never commit the gross folly of feeling offended at such pronouncing of the absolution, but let us firmly believe that 'this is as valid and certain, in heaven also, as if Christ, our dear Lord, dealt with us Himself.'

As we are treating the doctrine of Confession and Absolution in this brief form, we would call your special attention to private confession and absolution. Private confession and absolution, as it is accepted in our Lutheran Church, is when a Christian goes to his pastor and makes a confession of sin and asks him to pronounce the absolution to him. Let us note, however that private confession has not been commanded by God; nevertheless it is a special privilege, of which all Christians may avail themselves according to their spiritual needs. Private confession can be the source of inestimable spiritual blessing to us, especially whenever our conscience is burdened with a sin which the devil will use to harass us by making us doubt our state of grace. To unburden our conscience to our pastor in private and have him convince us from Scripture that, though our sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow because the blood of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, cleanses us from all sins, surely is a blessing which should not be lightly esteemed. Oh, how many Christians in our own midst have been delivered from despair and eternal doom by means of such confession and absolution!

Also in Baptism and in the Lord's Supper God absolves those who confess their sins and seek forgiveness for their Saviour's sake. Scripture assures us that 'Baptism doth also now save us,' 1 Peter 3:21; it admonishes us to be baptised and wash away our sins, Acts 22:16; it declares that as many as have been baptised into Christ have put on Christ, Gal 3:26,27. The forgiveness once applied to us in Baptism is of lasting value. As often, therefore, as you think of your many sins, as often as you confess them before God, remember that what the Triune God said when you were baptised: 'Be of good cheer, my son, my daughter, thy sins are forgiven thee,' He is still saying to you.

Likewise we hear the absolving voice of Jesus in the Lord's Supper when the officiating minister says: 'Take and eat; this is the true body of our Lord Jesus Christ, given into death for thy sins. Take and drink; this is the true blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, shed for the remission of thy sins.' And here it is that our Saviour gives us His very body and blood as the seal of absolution.

Oh, the blessed doctrine of Confession and Absolution! It teaches us not only that there is forgiveness of sins with God, but also how it may be obtained. Oh, the riches of God's grace in the ordinance of Confession and Absolution! Let us avail ourselves of that grace; let us live and move and have our being in it by constantly using those channels through which God grants forgiveness to all who confess their sins to Him. God grant us grace unto that end! — (A F Woker *The Lutheran Witness*, 1930 pp, 130–132.)