

Individual Confession and Absolution as Integral to Pastoral Care: An Apologetic
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A Case Study on a Nonchalant Attitude towards God's Gift

In January of 1991 I submitted one of my last regular papers my fourth year at seminary to the Rev. Professor Kurt E. Marquart of sacred memory who had sparked my interest to dig a little deeper on private or individual confession and absolution from Luther and the *Confessions*. I wanted to know more about this practice. I was certainly cognizant of the Scriptural priority of confession itself. For example, how comforting is Psalm 32 in which the Psalmist testifies to the healing power of confession by writing that when he kept silent his strength was dried up as by the heat of summer, that is until the point that he acknowledged his sin which led to the Lord forgiving his sin? I knew that confession was conducted even when the Christian prayed. We do it every time we pray The Lord's Prayer. I was also aware of mutual confession taught in James 5:16 which is of great value and indeed a very means of grace as we refer to it in the *Confessions* as "the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren (*Concordia 2nd edition, SA, Article IV, 278*)."

Individual Confession and Absolution not Required

So while the project had made an impression on me in terms of historical relevance and certainly realizing that private or individual confession and absolution was a legitimate means of grace, I was also significantly out of touch with the actual *practice* of private or individual confession and absolution. But after all, this was not a terrible thing. While we stand by the need to confess our sins and while we certainly always hold up the power of the absolution (Christ Himself imputed to us by means of the Gospel), conducting these *in the particular setting of private or individual confession* is as AC XXV reminds us "of human right only

(*Concordia 2nd edition*, 50).” Even Luther himself said that “[private confession and absolution] cannot be proved from the Scriptures (AE 36, 86).”

Strictly Speaking the Christian Faith can Be Sustained without It

As I look back, my own pastor in my home parish was very loving and attentive in giving me pastoral counsel which included the means of grace in the form of teaching the Gospel and applying it to my situation (for example with the loving admonition to remember that in Christ I was forgiven). However, I had not received the means of grace in terms of the service for private confession and absolution since lining up in the 1st or 2nd grade or so when I was still a Roman Catholic taught by the nuns – as they prepared me to enter that intimidating confessional booth – what I would need to memorize and say, “Bless me Father for I have sinned, it has been [x amount of time] since my last confession.” Just for the sake of some background, I was baptized and received my first holy communion as a young boy in the Catholic Church, but then became inactive in church until being catechized and confirmed into the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod when I was 18 years old (having come to an LC-MS parish when I was 14 because of a young lady I was pursuing who gave me the law that I had to come to her LCMS church or her parents would not permit me to see her; and I was happy to comply not out of love for God, but interest in the romance...but this is another paper, perhaps on effective outreach in the parish). Years went by. Attending an LCMS university and then an LCMS seminary and while I was certainly made increasingly aware of the ancient practice of individual confession and absolution especially through the paper I’ve already mentioned, I was not personally engaged in the practice.

Associated with Roman Catholicism

For me, it was easy to justify my non-use since it immediately evoked memories of my Catholic experience. Indeed, it is the easiest thing in the world for a Lutheran to disregard private confession and absolution merely on account of the fact that it is associated with

Roman Catholicism. But this makes a humongous assumption: that the Lutheran understanding, confession, and practice is that of the Roman Catholic Church, but this is a *wrong* assumption. Our anxiety can be traced back to the council of Florence in 1439 when the Roman teaching put forth their version of confession in terms of a three-fold aspect: contrition, confession, and satisfaction (Lang, Paul, “The Exodus of the Practice of Private Confession from the Lutheran Church and its Implications – A Doctrinal, Historical, and Critical Study,” 27 October 1952, 4). It is easy to see how confession can become torturous and it is easy to see how it may lead to confusion by inferring that our proper work is required for forgiveness.

Real Differences on How Individual Confession and Absolution is Approached

Popular Catholic writer and professor Scott Hahn is elegant in his effort to convey grace alone while defending the Roman Catholic viewpoint and he quotes the Roman Catholic catechism (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*) which attributes the whole process to “God’s work (Hahn, *Lord Have Mercy*, 46),” but nevertheless Hahn does not hesitate to view confession in terms of “no pain, no gain (ibid, 3).” And while I will be the first one to admit that confession can indeed involve the expression of sorrow and pain, we mustn’t ever imply that this is somehow a contributing factor for our gaining forgiveness. There appears to be the popular tendency to put this back on us. Such a tendency does not sit well with our confession and practice characterized by “grace alone.” We get justifiably nervous the moment any aspect of our forgiveness begins to require our right work for anything. Unfortunately, Hahn himself reveals the fundamental reason that Roman Catholics and Lutherans still have real differences because in referring to our Lord on the cross he writes, “For an innocent man to be punished in our place would itself be a kind of injustice (ibid, 99).” Lutherans, however, hold to a radical Gospel that includes Jesus being a full substitute and as Luther said, “And all the prophets saw this, that Christ was to become the greatest thief, murderer, adulterer, robber, desecrator, blasphemer, etc., there has ever been anywhere in the world (AE 26, 277).”

All of this is to say that if your Gospel is lacking, then private confession and absolution must become more than it was intended to be; but if your Gospel is clear and complete, then private confession and absolution will not overstep its bounds and will serve the unique purpose of magnifying the personal application of the Gospel and the Gospel of Christ alone to those who confess their sins and seek the exclusive consolation of Christ's holy absolution.

The point for now, however, is that I was living testimony to the fact that one may have an intellectual awareness of this old form of Lutheran spirituality, while having no compulsion whatsoever to actually employ it. Private confession and absolution is certainly not something that we *want* to do. I suppose I had many reasons -- besides what I have already mentioned -- for not actually being involved with this gift of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. I was comfortable in completely neglecting this gift. I did after-all have what is now commonly referred to as "general" confession and absolution every Sunday morning in the Divine Service. Frankly, I just didn't see a need to make this "private" or "individual" before my pastor.

The Best Thing a Young Pastor Could Offer

This was where I was at when I was ordained and entered into the Holy Ministry at the age of 25. And then almost immediately after my installation at my first parish the Lord was gracious in ensuring me that my training was not over as He sent one of my brand-new parishioners who came to introduce her-self and welcome me to my new parish. The meeting, however, became her opportunity to pour out her tremendous struggles, discouragement, and hunger for help with the serious burdens she was carrying around every day of her life. There I was with the sudden realization that in spite of my ability to explicate the chief articles of the Christian faith that were essential to my call to proclaim Law and Gospel from the pulpit, that with this sudden confrontation of the most substantial and profound human struggles set before me in this personal forum, I still felt extremely incompetent. My mind raced to know what to do and to know exactly what I should say, and by the grace of God and by the grace of

God alone, I was led to say that the best thing I could do for this parishioner was to offer her private confession and absolution.

Pastors Must Know Their Limitations, but Individual Confession and Absolution is Easily Underestimated

Now as I continue to share my story, I want you know that this parishioner had the legitimate need for me to bridge and consult with other resources for her holistic care. That is to say, we must bear in mind that the Lord in His mercy has also supplied some wonderful professional counselors and therapists who also wear the masks of God in holy vocation. Most pastors are not also professional counselors. This is an insight that every pastor must learn early on and we are good pastors when we recognize the need to rely on other healers with training that most pastors do not typically possess. Having said this, however, the Lord put me in a position to discover just how much I had underestimated the power and the real help that comes in and through private confession and absolution. Even while missing the greater benefits of holy absolution, the noted psychiatrist Carl Jung viewed confession as having a deep and therapeutic value (Pacwa and Brown, *Go in Peace*, 54). For this particular parishioner whom the Lord used to lead me to lean on this gift of individual confession and absolution, I witnessed a profound healing in this parishioner over a period of several years; and witnessed that through the regular, frequent, and personal application of the Lord's holy absolution, that solid assurance of the Lord's forgiveness on her soul was causing a transformation in everything about her. She still struggled, she still confessed sin, but she gained a hope and a joy through Christ's absolution that she had never known before. I realized that I had been missing out on something very special for a very long time.

Pastor's Need Pastor's Too!

The whole experience had a deep impact on me not only as a pastor, but as a Christian man and this led to another significant change in my life. I have always been one to try to tackle

everything myself (a trait that still marks my sinful flesh). Not a trait to be proud of. I was working myself into the ground and headed straight towards burn out, but I rationalized the situation since I was – after all – doing God’s work! The fact of the matter was that as I was serving others and bearing their burdens, I was trying to do this by myself and the weight of this work was crushing. I could feel myself slipping into a mechanical and perfunctory approach to the holy ministry. That was when I started looking for a confessor. This was when I realized that the pastor needs a pastor of his own. To make a long story short, the Lord has led me over the years to two main confessors. The man who has served me and serves me again while in California and the man who served me while I served in Texas for over eight years were both heaven sent. They are LCMS pastors who have never been shocked by my confessions no matter how dark; they have never condemned me; they have never looked down on me; but they have loved me with the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ and they have been bold and clear in the application of God’s grace for me a poor sinner. They have also spoken to me constructively on how I can do better and they presented that counsel not as penance to complete forgiveness, but as the joyful response of one whose sins are washed away. I don’t know why I continue to be so amazed at how I leave those visits with those pastors. Every, single time I’ve seen them, I have walked away marveling at the liberating power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the hope it instills as I have gone forth in the Name of the Lord. And while we do not treat our emotions as confirmations of truth, the feeling of being reborn I believe is not antithetical to, but in fact consistent with the theological reality that the return to our baptismal rebirth is exactly what occurs in private confession and absolution.

A Balanced View: We May Cherish What Is Free

So we have come to an interesting combination of facts: private or individual confession and absolution is by no means a requirement of the faith, it is not a law of the Church, point blank: you never have to engage in it...ever. But all of this dear Christians is utterly beside the point since it is not a matter of the Law, but completely a matter of the Gospel because Lutherans value private confession and absolution precisely for that last word: “absolution”

which is the forgiveness of sins. The fact of the matter is that private or individual confession is a certain application of what God has indeed given to His Church namely the power of the keys which the pastors serving in Christ's office apply in the form of absolution upon hearing the audible confession of sins from those seeking absolution as clearly presented in John chapter 20.

From this biblical logic, Wilhelm Loehe wrote, *"Many a one doubts whether it is commanded in the Holy Scripture to make confession to a spiritual physician. However, even if confession were not necessary as far as enabling the confessor to pronounce absolution to the sinner, still the very exercise of the divine office of the cure of souls demands that confession be made to the pastor ("The Sacrament of Repentance," Una Sancta, Vol. X, 1951, No. 2, 3)."*

To say this, however, does not mean that we slip into any kind of legalism. Kenneth Korby explains, *"Does this mean that confession is a divine law? No! Confession is not a law, it is an offer of divine help for the sinner! Mutual brotherly confession, or confession to our pastor-priest, is given to us by God in order that we may be sure of the divine forgiveness. Therefore no one is to be forced to make confession (Korby, Kenneth, "A Suggested Program For The Reintroduction Of Private Confession And Absolution In Our Parishes," 19 April 1966, 13)."*

Such a gift is so valuable as to be integral for pastoral care. It may be argued that once the full value of this Gospel-gift is realized, that we quite simply come to understand that this gift is probably the best way (1) for a Christian to face that which they need to confess; (2) to ensure that the Gospel is personally received and personally believed in; (3) for granting an excellent way for the pastor to genuinely know the people he is called to shepherd; and (4) for the pastor himself to be cared for by his own father confessor so as to be able to persevere and grow in the pastoral ministry.

Individual Confession and Absolution Integral: Reason #1...It Helps Christians Face What They Really Need to Confess

In our *Confessions* we reject the enumeration of sins: *“Our churches teach that naming every sin is not necessary and that consciences should not be burdened with worry about naming every sin. It is impossible to recount sins, as Psalm 19:12 testifies: ‘Who can discern his errors?’ (AC XXV, Concordia 2nd edition, 50).* There are, however, some sins that plague the conscience. John T. Pless quotes Luther here (AE 29:209), *“For since it [the conscience] cannot change a sin committed in the past and in any way avoid the future wrath, it cannot escape being distressed and troubled, no matter where it turns* (Baker, Robert C., general editor, *“Confession: God Gives Us Truth,” Lutheran Spirituality*, 103).” These sins – which cause distress and trouble in the conscience -- are the ones that we are wise to address.

Loehe asks “How many a Christian heart has some secret anxiety, or is pitifully tormented by the remembrance of particular sins and does not know which way to turn. For such God has ordained His servants as a comfort, into whose lap we should in confidence throw all our anxieties and regard it as though we had personally uncovered it to God alone and laid it in His fatherly heart (*“The Sacrament of Repentance,” Una Sancta*, Vol. X, 1951, No. 2, 7-8).”

The need for such a ministry should not surprise us. Kenneth Korby recognized that the “primordial element in human experience is the reality of being excluded, of being cut out and held off from life...But far more dynamic...[is] the divine action of expulsion. Expulsion is one way to describe the ongoing reality of death in human life (Korby, “The Key To The Renewal Of The Church Is The Office Of The Keys,” 20 September 1975, 5).” How many people simply feel overwhelmed with the sense of being excluded; excluded from peace, confidence, hope, or joy? Korby mentions C.S. Lewis’ perceptive insight describing humanity’s passion to be “in,” to be in the “Inner Ring,” but as Korby states, people experience instead the universal sensation of being locked out or imprisoned (ibid, 6).

Consequently, Korby reminds us of God’s answer to this state of affairs, *“The practice of Absolution,”* – referring to it in the context of private confession and absolution – *“is therefore a service of the Church to disturbed souls* (Korby, Kenneth, “A Suggested Program For The

Reintroduction Of Private Confession And Absolution In Our Parishes,” 19 April 1966, 6).” When people experience the terrors of conscience that accuse them of being locked out of God’s grace and help, there is a tendency to hide sins, to keep hold of them in secret. Korby states that such a situation is untenable for healing to take place: *“Sin that is secret retains its power. Sin that is openly confessed [on the other hand] (not only secretly to God) but before the face, and into the ears, of a brother, loses the power it has in secret (ibid, 11).”* Furthermore, *“Confession helps to make sin concrete for the penitent, and delivers him from this futile imagination of not being able to put his finger on anything particular. Such vagueness about sin makes for weakness of humility and faith, strength of indifference and self-deception (ibid, 13).”* Private confession and absolution, however, removes the vagueness. In this instance we are permitted to move beyond the general nature of generic confessions which too often facilitate the retention of secret sin and consequently, secret doubt about forgiveness.

So let’s revisit Luther’s famous quotation from his 1520 “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” but this time we provide a more complete reference: *“As to the current practice of private confession, I am heartily in favor of it, even though it cannot be proved from the Scriptures. It is useful, even necessary, and I would not have it abolished. Indeed, I rejoice that it exists in the church of Christ, for it is a cure without equal for distressed consciences (AE 36, 86).”* Such a realization about the healing power of private confession and absolution helps us to explain Luther’s strong sermon to the Wittenbergers in 1522: *“Nevertheless I will allow no man to 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 often and long with the devil. Yea, the devil would have slain me long ago, if the confession had not sustained me. For there are many doubtful matters which a man cannot resolve or find the answer to by himself, and so he takes his brother aside and tells him his trouble (AE 51, 98).”*

Why this emphasis on private confession to the seeming exclusion of general confession? It is not to say that the absolution of the general confession is less an absolution.

Indeed, it is the same Gospel extended in both arenas, but it is to say something about the confession. In general confession, we simply do not name personal sins. Theodore Jungkuntz quotes Fousek who defends private confession and absolution as a remedy against sin reductionism: *“Lutheran stress on justification tends to neglect the seriousness of sin, especially when we keep acknowledging our sinfulness only in vaguest generalities which cut no one to the quick and bring no shame to anyone. To be a “miserable sinner” is something a good Lutheran acknowledges quite cheerfully. To admit one’s concrete sins to God alone, with only one’s own slanted perspective on them is a much easier matter than coming up to the brother...The discipline of hearing and making confession of specific sins on a regular basis is a wholesome medicine against taking the sinfulness of Christians, as well as grace [for granted] (Jungkuntz, “A 20th-Century Issue Seen from a 16th-Century Perspective,” *Concordia Theological Monthly*, Saint Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, Volume XXXIX, February 1968, Number 2, 109).”*

Ted Kober in his CPH-published book *Confession & Forgiveness: Professing Faith as Ambassadors of Reconciliation* boldly addresses the shortcomings of the general confession: *“when we recite these familiar words often enough, it is easy to rattle them off without examining our hearts or being disgusted about the ugly truth of our sinful condition (94).”*

This is why he argues, *“General confession of sins with the announcement of forgiveness during a worship service can be a most salutary practice, but it can also serve as a convenient but feeble substitute for individual confession and forgiveness...the general confession was never intended to replace the practice of individual confession and absolution. Individuals suffering from a secret sin miss the opportunity to name their sin out loud and receive God’s forgiveness for personal assurance and comfort (160).”* In time, such a state of affairs produces the tendency to minimize our status as sinners as we grow accustomed to hiding certain sins. Dietrich Bonhoeffer stated, *“The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal his sin from himself and from the fellowship. We dare not be a sinner. Many Christians are unthinkably horrified when a real sinner is suddenly discovered among the*

righteous. So we remain alone with our sin, living in lies and hypocrisy (Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, Life Together, New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1954, 110 [Kober makes this reference on p. 96 of his book]).”

Why would someone tolerate such a situation? Bonhoeffer offers a possible explanation, *“Why is it that it is often easier for us to confess our sins to God than to a brother? God is holy and sinless, He is a just judge of evil and the enemy of all disobedience. But a brother is sinful as we are. He knows from his own experience the dark night of secret sin. Why should we not find it easier to go to a brother than to the holy God? But if we do, we must ask ourselves whether we have not often been deceiving ourselves with our confession of sin to God, whether we have not rather been confessing our sins to ourselves and also granting ourselves absolution. And is not the reason perhaps for our countless relapses and the feebleness of our Christian obedience to be found precisely in the fact that we are living on self-forgiveness and not a real forgiveness? Self-forgiveness can never lead to a breach with sin; this can be accomplished only by the judging and pardoning Word of God itself (ibid, 115-116 [Kober refers to this quotation as well without the last sentence which I’ve added here]).*”

Self-forgiveness, however, is spiritually misleading. John T. Pless referenced Adolph Koberle (*The Quest for Holiness*, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1938, 216) to explain the great danger always lurking: *“Sin has its own hidden law of gravitation (Baker, Robert C., general editor, “Confession: God Gives Us Truth,” Lutheran Spirituality, 80).*” Pless elaborated and wrote, *“[Sin] pulls the sinner ever deeper into either denial or despair (ibid, 80).*” But Pless also knows the remedy against sin: *“But we are easily seduced into self-deception, and we evade the truth about ourselves. Thus one of the helpful features of individual confession before our pastor is that we actually name our sins. Naming our sins guards against what Herman Bezzel (quoted in Koberle, 214) described as a ‘general repentance’ that he called ‘the death of repentance.’ (Ibid., 81-82).*” Individual confession and absolution is not a “general repentance” which “acknowledges sin as a generic reality but fails to come to terms with the concrete reality of one’s own sins (Ibid. 82).” Instead, individual confession and absolution pin-points those exact

sins which try to block our peace and confidence that *all* our sins are forgiven and this “concrete reality” of sins puts us in the perfect position for the “concrete reality” of their forgiveness and so it is to the certainty of the absolution we now turn.

Individual Confession and Absolution Integral: Reason #2...It Ensures that the Gospel is Personally Received and Personally Believed in:

Perhaps the most common objection to individual confession and absolution comes through the lack of awareness and understanding of the relationship between the Atoning Work of Jesus Christ and the Means of Grace which include Absolution. That is, it is often not understood how the means of grace are necessary for salvation. The Lutheran position from Holy Scripture is that salvation is known in two respects; in two different aspects which are completely connected by God Himself. Luther explains in his essay “Against the Heavenly Prophets”: *“Christ on the cross and all his suffering and his death do not avail, even if, as you teach, they are ‘acknowledged and meditated upon’ with the utmost ‘passion, ardor, heartfelnness.’ Something else must always be there. What is it? The Word, the Word, the Word. Listen, lying spirit, the Word avails. Even if Christ were given for us and crucified a thousand times, it would all be in vain if the Word of God were absent and were not distributed and given to me with the bidding, this is for you, take what is yours (AE 40, 212-213).”* In other words while it is true that Christ won, achieved, and accomplished our forgiveness 2000 years ago through His saving life, death, and resurrection for us poor sinners, it is *also* true and necessary for our salvation that Christ distributes, gives, and applies His saving work to us in our lives today. This He does through the means of grace -- the Word in its various biblical forms -- including private confession and absolution.

Individual private confession and absolution, therefore, is a great and helpful resource for our lives in Christ precisely because it is a mean of grace. Christ is direct and clear in describing its power in Matthew 16, Matthew 18, and John 20. Through the words of God’s office-bearers in the holy ministry, the sins that are loosed on earth and forgiven on earth, are

loosed in heaven and forgiven in heaven. This is not the forgiveness and power of men, but the forgiveness and power of God through the Word of Christ which private confession and absolution places on the confessing sinner. So Luke 10:16 is quoted frequently in the *Confessions* since Christ said to His office-bearers pronouncing His holy absolution: “*The one who hears you hears Me* (Luke 10:16 the first part).” This explains why Luther in *The Small Catechism* is so bold to present this question and answer: “[Question] *What is Confession?* Answer: *Confession has two parts: the one is that we confess our sins; the other is that we receive Absolution, or forgiveness, from the confessor, as from God Himself, and in no way doubt, but firmly believe that our sins are forgiven before God in heaven by this* (Concordia 2nd edition, 341).”

As this description lays out absolution’s heavenly and divine origins, it is small wonder that our *Confessions* in *The Apology of the Augsburg Confession* categorize absolution as a sacrament calling it “a Sacrament of repentance” and that which along with Baptism and The Lord’s Supper are “truly Sacraments.” (Concordia 2nd edition, AP, Article XIIA, 162 and Article XIII, 184).

Having this status as a Sacrament which unites us to Christ, we have a better understanding why the *Confessions* treat confession in such a praiseworthy fashion: “*Absolution, or the Power of the Keys, is an aid against sin and a consolation for a bad conscience; it is ordained by Christ in the Gospel [Matthew 16:19]. Therefore, Confession and Absolution should by no means be abolished in the Church...Since private Absolution originates in the Office of the Keys, it should not be despised, but greatly and highly esteemed, along with all other offices of the Christian Church* (Concordia 2nd edition, SA, Article VIII, 280).”

But if I may be a little crass in asking the critical question at this juncture: “What makes private confession and absolution so special?” The answer lies in the aspect of certainty and personal application, especially when compared to the general absolution, preaching, and teaching. Indeed, the personal application of individual confession and absolution is just as

direct as the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion which make the application of God's forgiveness as direct as direct can be: "I baptize **you!**" and "Given and shed for **you!**" even as the water is poured out on **your** head and the body and blood of Christ are put into **your** mouth. Private confession and absolution is like these: the pastor lays his hands on **your** head, etches the sign of the holy cross upon **your** forehead and pronounces the absolution of God upon **you**.

Lutheran Worship (1982) records this absolution in the service on pgs. 310-311 entitled "Individual Confession and Absolution". Just before absolution is given, the rubric states, "*The pastor lays his hand on the head of the penitent and says:*" – and then comes the absolution itself through these words: "Receive the forgiveness Christ won for you by his Passion, death, and resurrection. By the command of our Lord Jesus Christ I, a called and ordained servant of the Word, forgive you your sins in the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit." To which the penitent responds with "Amen." (311)

The *Lutheran Service Book* (2006) records an even simpler service also entitled "Individual Confession and Absolution" on pgs. 292-293. The rubric before the giving of holy absolution states, "*The pastor places his hands on the head of the penitent and says:*" – and then the hymnal here states holy absolution this way: "*In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and the + Son and of the Holy Spirit.*" To which the penitent also responds by saying "Amen." (293)

Recall, however, that as Lang states, "*confession is not something that is done for its own sake; it is essentially a seeking for absolution* (Lang, 4)." We are driven to this gift not to go through a ceremony to feel religious nor to make any attempt to merit grace. By no means! Instead we recognize within ourselves our thirst for Christ's forgiveness, so Lang reminds us that Lutherans stand by private confession and absolution on account of absolution (Lang, 7).

But again, this absolution is best served when it is applied not in a general, but personal way to a particular believer. *The Formula of Concord (Solid Declaration)* states, “For this reason Christ causes the promise of the Gospel not only to be offered in general, but He also seals it through the Sacraments. He attaches them like seals of the promise, and by them He confirms the Gospel to every believer in particular (Article XI, 607).”

This personal application is beautifully described by Ewald M. Plass as he elaborated on Luther’s teaching on absolution. Plass compares preaching to private absolution, “[P]reaching is like a man who is throwing coins into a crowd; whoever grasps a coin has one. But if a man were to send a servant to press a coin into the hand of a timid soul, we would have an illustration of private absolution. The human heart seems to find it easier to believe that the world is redeemed than to believe that this universal redemption applies to it personally. To this Luther often called attention (Plass, Ewald M., *What Luther Says*, 4-5).”

Needless to say such a private application of the forgiveness of sins explains the love Luther had for this gift. In *A Brief Exhortation to Confession* Luther wrote, “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...When I urge you to go to Confession, I am doing nothing else than urging you to be a Christian...In other words, as a deer with anxious and trembling eagerness strains toward a fresh, flowing stream [Psalm 42:1], so I yearn anxiously and tremblingly for God’s Word, Absolution, the Sacrament...(Concordia 2nd edition, 653).”

It appears that Luther speaks this way on account of the high degree of personal certainly derived from the gift of absolution. Loehe is picturesque in describing its distribution and reception as something that is actually “handed” to you. He wrote, “[one] needs a comforter and physician of souls through whom the comfort and medicine of the Holy Spirit can be handed him from the Word of God (“The Sacrament of Repentance,” *Una Sancta*, Vol. X, 1951, No. 2, 4).” God hands us absolution in this gift. Its simplicity is matched only by its power to relieve. Loehe is masterful in his elaboration on the subject:

It is no doubt true that in Holy Scripture the forgiveness of sins has been written, and that it is preached in...some pulpits, and that untroubled, secure souls have enough in that. But when one's eyes are opened and, after a long period of security, he sees himself suddenly beside a chasm, wandering up a narrow ascent, hovering in the greatest danger; when his sins and their wages, impending eternal death and God-forsakenness, are showed to him, (St. Matt. 27:46), what then? In such terrors a person is not skilled enough to choose what has been written in Holy Scripture for him. At such a time he applies all the threats and punishments of God to himself, for, according to his reason, blinded by anxiety, only these seem to fit his soul. Similarly, in sermons he finds only the applicable to him which, like a cutting sword, confirms his poor heart still more in the thought that he is lost, and there creeps upon him I know not what a terrible passion to press the curse of God into his soul, to see his heart bleed, his hope die, and to lie in such a distress a preacher in the pulpit might preach grace or forgiveness ever so powerfully; the person might imagine what a blessing lies in this message, but the spirit of distress teaches him from this very Gospel to draw real spiritual torment; he considers the preached Gospel as a beautiful paradise – but, when he has pictured this before his eyes in all its loveliness, he says to himself: “A paradise, but not for me! I am lost!” – So, the pulpit, as a rule, wherever God's special grace is not here and there in operation, it is too high for those who sit under it, and the word of the sermon is too general and, as a rule, goes over their heads. On the other hand, when an upright heart reveals itself to the father confessor, then there is opportunity to demonstrate from the Word of God, under the conviction of the Spirit and power, that the Gospel has been given precisely for crushed hearts. Then all unbelieving objections of a self-torturing spirit can be put to death with the sword of the divine Word. Then also a person can least resist the divine comfort with a melancholy spirit, must finally surrender, and overcome, fall upon the breast of the blessed Saviour and say: “Lord, Thou hast overcome me! Now I am Thine, and Thou art mine!” Truly, then a child of God has been born, lovelier than a dewdrop in the rosy dawn, and there is nothing more beautiful than the humility and shame of a sinner with the absolution and brought to peace (Loeche, Wilhelm, “The Sacrament of Repentance,” *Una Sancta*, Vol. X, 1951, No. 3, 13-14).“

What Loeche describes saves us from the compromising and dangerous means of grace reductionisms out there in the post-modern church. Furthermore, Korby warned that “there is far too much Schwaemerei and sentimentalism, a kind of ‘if you are sorry for your sins, and if you believe, you will be forgiven,’ sort of proclamation. Or, we are exhorted, ‘Ask God to forgive you and believe that He will.” Yes, but the question must be raised: ‘How does He in fact forgive?’ In the Gospel proclaimed and heard and believed. Repentance and forgiveness is not

(1) feeling sorry and (2) being excused...Rather, repentance is being 'skinned alive' and forgiveness is being reclothed. Repentance is turning away from death and being restored to life in Christ; it is being crushed and broken and being raised up by the God who remembers sin no more ("A Suggested Program For The Reintroduction Of Private Confession And Absolution In Our Parishes," 5)." Korby goes on to explain, "The whole past of [the penitent's] life is seized by the Word of forgiveness; the whole future is grasped by the faithfulness of God. In this act of justification by grace alone, man believes, man loves, man hopes (ibid, 14)...[and this] man in Christ is a new creature; the word of Absolution is that creating word. Ever and anew this creating Word must come to me, creating me anew in Christ Jesus, restoring in me the act which happened to me at Baptism when I was raised with Christ from the dead. Thus alone should I walk in newness of life (ibid, 15)."

These statements are consistent with the *Confessions* to say the least. As the *Apology* Article XIII Repentance (*Concordia 2nd edition*, 163) lists in respect to the benefits of Absolution: 1) faith is conceived and strengthened; 2) faith is enabled to stand against the terrors of sin and death; 3) the Power of the Keys and the Sacraments increase in worth; and 4) Christ's benefit is illuminated and we are taught to make use of Christ as Mediator and the Atoning Sacrifice.

In such a gift, forgiveness cannot remain solely in the past, it is ushered into "today" whenever God speaks presently, "I forgive you," and for that matter such a verdict readies us even further for our salvation in the future: "The sainted Gerhard Forde liked to explain," – as Pless explains – "that in the Absolution the verdict of the Last Day slips out ahead of time. In other words, when we hear the Absolution now in time, we are hearing what all believers in Christ will hear on that final day when He returns to judge the living and the dead ("Confession: God Gives Us Truth," 96)."

Individual Confession and Absolution Integral: Reason #3...It Grants An Excellent Way For The Pastor To Genuinely Know The People He Is Called To Shepherd

Allow me to immediately qualify what this third reason for private confession and absolution is *not* saying. It is *not* saying that the *only way* to be close to your people is through private confession and absolution. Of course this is not the case. Furthermore, this third reason for private confession and absolution is *not* dismissing the difficulty in re-establishing or perhaps establishing for the first time this practice in the Lutheran parish. Just because we *ought* to do something that is good and salutary does not mean that it will come easily! There are many reasons why it may be difficult to introduce the practice. As has already been stated, some parishioners will assume that it is not a Lutheran practice; secondly there are a host of practical considerations. One of them is the pre-existing quality of the relationship the pastor currently has with his people. To put the concern simply to the pastors here today: do your people consider you approachable? In their minds and hearts, if they come to you, will your typical parishioner believe that you truly care about them and love them unconditionally, or do they view you as judgmental and hard-to-reach? But this is only one side of the equation. Where are your people at theologically? To the laity here today: how do you view the office of the holy ministry? The Pop-American Christianity view is that pastors are teachers and motivators who do their thing from afar, they may stand behind a pulpit, speak to you on DVD, touch you on a blog, or reach you in a book, but what they are *not* is one who cares for and oversees the condition of your soul, one who walks with you through life, one who personally prays with you, one who knows you by name and shares in your life. Do you keep your pastor at arm's length? If you do, how can he ever be pastor to you?

These are issues we have to work out and you all know that anything worth doing often takes a lot of quality time and effort. That's ok as we wait on the Lord for good things. Private confession and absolution is worth striving for. The good news is that while it is always wise and prudent to catechize and advertise, get backing from the gate-keepers in the parish, etc., it is also something that most often comes about quite naturally in the context of genuine pastoral ministry. The Lord sends the parishioner to you. They are in distress. They are hungry for the comfort and consolation that comes through the Gospel. The table has been set for you even without a thorough catechesis and advertisement program. We are blessed to have a hymnal

and a catechism that presents the teaching and practice in broad daylight. The pastor should confidently take the time to listen to his parishioner in all compassion, and then introduce the service to his parishioner right then and there. There will be times of course that you will sense that the parishioner – for whatever reason – is not quite ready. That's fine, give them time, but more often than not, the Holy Spirit opens a door of opportunity and the Lord does the rest.

But let me be more precise about why we become so close in this practice. And before I state this, let me offer a qualifier: the pastor does not proceed in the use of this gift with a warped sense of curiosity; and he also strives constantly, esp. when it comes to holy absolution, to live in the spirit of his ordination vows: he will become the tomb where the sins confessed are buried and forgotten. Thus, the pastor develops the attitude of not making any kind of effort to *remember* what is confessed. At the same time -- and this is the point about closeness -- the Holy Spirit leads us to take with us what we need to know to better serve our people. Bottom line we become more considerate of our people's weaknesses and temptations and when we are committed to walking with our people through life and death, then we strive to contour our ministry to them according to their special needs.

I realize that I've described a paradoxical situation: forget and remember at the same time. Let me do my best to explain: in respect to the law that includes judgment, blame, separation, loss of trust, accusation, suspicion, these things must die because they were buried in the absolution. But in respect to the gospel that includes love that flows from the absolution, we want to do everything in our power to be more effective in our ongoing service to this parishioner with their particular sins and weaknesses. But this dynamic – the litmus test as to whether we know this balance or not – does not estrange us from our people, but endears us towards our people. We don't get further apart, we get closer. There is a bond of trust that develops. The parishioner can reason: "My pastor knows all about me, and he loves me more than ever before."

Loeche was very clear about this priority of the pastor knowing his people facilitated through confession and absolution: “If he is to care for and guard the souls of the flock entrusted to him, yes, even to give account according to Heb. 13:17, then he must know them, that is, I dare say, especially their sins, weaknesses and temptations (Una Sancta, Vol. X, 1951, No. 2, 4).”

In addition, private confession and absolution leads the pastor to genuinely know his people because the practice provides wonderful opportunities to back-up the absolution with personalized instruction on how to live in the forgiveness received. I am not saying that this is a necessary part of our service in private confession and absolution. It is not. The service in fact ends with the absolution and final blessing. However, there is often the natural doorway that is opened to instruct and fortify God’s people with the teaching of God’s Word on practical insights on how to go forth in the ongoing battle with the flesh, the world, and the devil. Such personal instruction with personal application invariably fosters a closer relationship between pastor and parishioner. Loeche wrote, “Private Confession offers the best opportunity to instruct people...[the pastor]...can instruct each one in Law and Gospel according to his need. Also, a person understands easier and retains better what is told him alone on such a hallowed occasion than what he hears publically preached (ibid, 6).”

Furthermore, the gift of private confession and absolution places the pastor in the position of humility...and when God’s people see their pastor humbled, he is more attractive and trustworthy. In this view, they want to know him as their pastor and they want to be known by someone they trust. They do not come to him because they think he has all of the answers, but they come because they know that their pastor will love them with the love of Christ and serve them with the Word of Christ. All of this assumes that we want to be closer and puts us in the position to actually become closer, and also assumes that we know *how* to be closer in the appropriate manner. Korby was astute in his view, “But if the pastor is to care for these peoples, he must know where they are! He must listen to them with humility, knowing that he is not wise enough or strong enough to help them, but confident in the Word

and command of Christ that He is present to help both penitent and pastor...Also [parishioners] must be taught by us that we want to listen, and know how to listen, and without shocking our righteousness, or tickling our curiosity, we can listen as an ear of Christ and speak as the mouth of Christ, truly directing people to Him Who is our Help ("A Suggested Program For The Reintroduction Of Private Confession And Absolution In Our Parishes," 9)."

Finally, to be permitted to serve a parishioner private confession and absolution is to be able to make more of the closer relationship the Lord grants. The pastor is now in a better position to defend his parishioner against those things which threaten their spiritual lives. Quite frankly, the parishioner is more apt to listen to his or her pastor when there is already established a clear path for dealing with their struggles against sin and temptation. If warnings and admonitions come from afar, however, it is easier to suspect that the pastor is out of touch with their actual needs. This is why Pless warns that neglecting the gift of private confession and absolution can create a vacuum that is often filled with secular substitutes ("Confession: God Gives Us Truth," 101), some of which can be quite harmful to the parishioner's spiritual life.

I can go on with the theological considerations, but let me conclude this section by simply stating my experience. By God's grace – and like the other pastors here – I love and pray for all of those the Lord has called me to serve, but I can also testify to the great reward of this gift, esp. when you see your own people benefiting so much from it. One of my parishioners that I have served for many years has given me permission to quote her today. She is LC-MS Deaconess Linda Seward. She has permitted me the great honor of not only being her pastor, but also her confessor. It is exciting to share with my sister-in-Christ the Lord's gift of private confession and absolution to His Church and Linda has been a great reminder to me about why this gift can be so precious. These are her words:

"We come to know God's forgiveness in a more personal way...[and] there is a closeness and intimacy...receiving from [the pastor] what God gives to me...I feel more known by God

(phone interview, March 13th, 2012).” And in the process, we have only grown closer as pastor and parishioner. Private confession and absolution has been nothing but a blessing in helping me serve Linda as her pastor. In fact, I cannot think of a singular instance with any parishioner (and there have been many) in which I’ve used this gift that the result was not a positive one.

Individual Confession and Absolution Integral: Reason #4...When the Pastor is Himself Cared for by His Own Father Confessor, the Pastor is Enabled to Better Persevere and Grow in the Pastoral Ministry

J.G. Goesswein wrote in his “*The 11th Article Of The Augsburg Confession*”: “If going to private confession and doing it right are to become commonplace, then we pastors must be the ones to start it. Who needs it more than we do? Where does temptation more dearly love to live than in the parsonage? And how can you emphatically advise everyone to take a medicine, the healing powers of which you haven’t experienced yourself? If going to confession is a school unfamiliar to us, how can we initiate others into it?”

But we are not talking about merely setting a good example. We are also speaking of deriving the power needed to persevere in the holy ministry. Several years ago, I was struck by a cover in *The Lutheran Witness* (June 2001, Vol. 120 No. 6), entitled, “Why Some Pastor’s Quit”...an alb and stole is draped over the chair of the pastoral study, but he is gone. It looks as though he was raptured in one of Tim LaHaye’s *Left Behind* novels! But of course, this could not be since Lutheran pastors don’t teach that version of the “rapture”! The point is, however, is that pastor’s *do* quit. I’ve already shared my little public confession for the day: I was trying to do it all and when I finally faced the fact that I was headed for total burn-out, something clicked in me, “I don’t have a pastor.” The thing is, however, is that all of them are typically booked up on Sundays, so the resource that was left for me was – you guessed it – private confession and absolution which by the way is the best way to prove that pastors work on days other than Sunday!

I will share with you my personal testimony at this juncture and say in the most simplistic terms: I was given a new lease on life and a new lease on the pastoral ministry. Someone was sharing my burdens. More importantly, someone was absolving them! And these pastors were also – lovingly and patiently – challenging some of my bad habits. More importantly, the confession was breaking them, the absolution was realigning me, and time with good pastoral care has been healing ever since. Oh there is no question that I still struggle, but hope is now exceedingly more commonplace than despair, though I remind myself that despair is never too far away which is why I keep going back to private confession and absolution.

Korby who in my estimation was the latter-part of the 20th-century Lutheran master of this subject also struck me in his “Key To...Renewal” essay with these questions: “Who is your Nathan and to whom are you Nathan? When the sinner has fallen into sin, and in true adamic fashion deceives himself by hiding behind fig-leaves or accusing a fellow creature; or like David, hopes by works of charity to cover his crime, who is his Nathan? Who says the truth to him so that he hears it and has his deception unmasked? Who is your Nathan? To whom are you Nathan? (3).” There was a time when I had no Nathan. I realized that I needed a Nathan.

Nowadays when I am given the opportunity to minister to younger men in the ministry I will tell them about what I’ve learned on how to care for oneself as a pastor: 1) develop a daily spiritual discipline; 2) take a day off every week; 3) use your vacation time to get away from it all; 4) have a hobby or hobbies in which you are reminded that you have a life beyond the ministry; and 5) seek out and find a confessor and see him on a regular basis. The benefits of this last aspect for caring for oneself in the pastoral ministry cannot be overestimated as Korby once again explains but this time in his “A Suggested Program” essay: “Confession and Absolution present a double kind of help for the pastor. (1) On the one hand there is the release, strength and joy which God gives as the benefits of Christ: He is thus sided in his personal life and is free to carry his pastoral burdens; (2) on the other hand, a great deal of

pastoral wisdom from the Word of God is passed by a good confessor to his penitents. Here is one of the finest training grounds for the pastor (17).”

+ Soli Deo Gloria +