

# Absolution: History of its Application in the Church

December 16, 2012

Tradition of Penance vs. the divine institution of Absolution

(continued from last week....)

### 3. What was the state of penance up to the Reformation?<sup>5</sup>

That in the best era of the Lutheran Church private confession was practiced exclusively is illuminated by the frequent and unanimous witness of her public confessional writings.

In the 11th article of the *Augsburg Confession*, that especially treats confession, it says this: "On confession it is also taught, that in the church private absolution is to be retained and must not be allowed to be discontinued." With the latter two expressions the charge of the papists was being refuted that Lutheran doctrine was producing purely harmful innovations, since it was generally known then that Carlstadt had rejected confession which Luther had completely purified. To the contrary, the Lutheran Church bore witness with those words that she wanted to hold fast (*retinere*) to private absolution and the model of the ancient Christian church. For traces of the same are even found in the 3rd century, and, indeed, it was carried out at the desire of the congregational members. From the 5th century on this means came more and more to be the custom especially through Leo the Great and, by the 7th century, it had been introduced almost everywhere, whereupon later, of course, it became very leavened with more and more false doctrine that changed a medicine for the conscience into a torture of the conscience, under the name "auricular confession." The latter half of the 11th article of the *Augsburg Confession* protests against this with these words: "Although it is not necessary to state all transgressions and sins, since that is not even possible. Ps. 18: Who knows all his transgressions?"

In the 25th article of the *Augsburg Confession* reasons are also given for private confession and absolution, but it even treats more extensively and specifically the abuses that had insinuated themselves. It even says right in the beginning: "This part of confession is not abolished by the preachers, for the custom is retained among us that the sacrament is not distributed to those who are not previously examined and absolved." That latter, often recurring expression could only and exclusively be referring to private absolution, since only this and none other was known and customary in the Lutheran Church at that time. At the conclusion of this article it is proved to the spiritual opponents in the papacy that confession is not commanded in Scriptures, but rather is an institution of the church, but this is also added to this: "Yet this part is diligently taught by the preachers, that confession is to be retained for the sake of the absolution, the chief and foremost benefit being the consolation of troubled consciences, and also for a few other reasons."

In the defense of the aforementioned 11th article of the *Augsburg Confession* (*Apology* p. 159) this is one of the things said: "If the people all run at once at a certain time (as was previously done) to the altar, they would not be able to be so thoroughly examined and instructed as they have been instructed by us." Just after that it is noted that it would be good if the preachers train the people "That they should name several sins that bother them so they can be more easily examined." This also cannot be understood as any other custom, for example, the unusual practice of announcement for confession, much less general confession that was unheard of at the time, but rather only of private confession.

Absolution: In the reformation it is seen as a purely one on one bestowal of grace in two contexts that will be seen throughout.

1. For instruction in the individual's faith. (Sanctification meaning both forgiveness and growth in Christ and his Word).
2. As a preventative to peoples' unworthily communing (examination of their faith).

Please note how in sanctification faith, growth in understanding of both sin and Christ's grace, and the LORD's Supper, that is communion in Christ and unity of faith/love for one another, are woven together. We will be blessed to investigate Pr. Keyl's article and how it relates to the discussion of the practice of penance in the first year or so of the LCMS's existence.

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<sup>5</sup>E.G.W. Keyl, "On Private and General Confession," *Der Lutheraner*, Vol. 4; issues 2,3,5; 20 September, 1847ff. Pp. 15ff

4. Going on to Luther (See the Keyl article) . .

Did he justify the use of the General Absolution????

In the controversy of 1539, when Andreas Osiander refused to use a formula for general absolution being used at the time, and claimed that it was illegitimate and wrong, Luther wrote that this practice was not unchristian, for forgiveness is not so narrow that it's given only privately and to individuals, but also in general, especially so, when the Gospel is preached to many at a time in a sermon. He goes on to write that Osiander must not condemn others for using the general absolution, and that others should not force him to use it because it was against his conscience nor say he was sinning by refusing to use it (do you hear the doctrine of Christian Freedom here being rightly applied by Luther). BUT HE COMMENDS BOTH SIDES OF THE CONTROVERSY TO DIRECT ALL OF THEIR MEMBERS TO PRIVATE ABSOLUTION. . . .

On the other hand....For in the articles of the consistory in Wittenberg, composed by Luther and other theologians in the year 1542, it says this: "You must see to it that the parish pastors retain a uniform ceremony and order in confession and that each person as he laments of his sins, be imparted individually a Christian absolution. And lest in isolated places it were practiced that a parson let those who had planned to commune the next day arrive in a group and declared to them a corporate absolution, this must never be allowed to take place." Finally here is also proof in ...

The Lutheran agendas, and, indeed, up until the year 1739, that the general confession and absolution has been decisively disapproved and never approved. For although in individual southern German congregations the ceremony took place, which the second Pommeranian Agenda from the year 1563 – originating from Dr. Bugenhagen – allowed for the parson to read aloud a general absolution, yet even there the absolution was done privately every time, so that after the confession was made the confessor individually came to the confessional chair in order to, when necessary, be instructed and comforted particularly by a Word of God, whereupon, then, each one individually would be imparted the absolution under the laying of hands. May the following passages serve as proof of how strictly the general absolution was forbidden, even threatening one's being removed from office, from the Pomeranian Agenda just mentioned: "Therefore the parsons must be most seriously forbidden to absolve people corporately in groups, so the superintendents in *synodis* must pay serious attention to this, so that no one declare absolution over those he does not know in a group out of greed, to please the people, or out of laziness, because he is overwhelmed by the task, whom, after the superintendent has been warned and not stopped doing it, he must depose from his preaching office as an unfaithful hireling.<sup>6</sup>

Similar prohibitions of the general absolution are also contained in other agendas, for example of Gotha, Magdeburg, Ulm; but the following passage from the Braunschweig - Luneburg Agenda from the year 1739 shows that these are also repeated in more recent agendas: "The *Pastores* should absolve the simple people individually and not two, three, or more at the same time as is sometimes experienced, for that should not be tolerated." **The subsequent departures from this salutary order always had their foundation in the falsifications of the pure doctrine, and the more this got the upper hand the more universally it occurred that the general confession was not only allowed alongside private confession, but rather it was allowed to almost entirely exclude the existence of the latter. Namely, the pure Lutheran doctrine of private absolution would be falsified by unionism, pietism and rationalism; through unionism, since to please the Reformed, more and more manifest concessions to their opposition to it were given; through pietism, since through the perversions of the nature of repentance they brought forth, the whole use of the same become despised; through rationalism, since the preachers and then, naturally, their hearers also denied that they were repentant sinners and in need of penance, but especially that the servants of Christ would have the authority to forgive sins.**

The evil fruits of this abdication were a lot of regulations among which, no doubt, the one that is first and foremost was issued in electoral Brandenburg in the name of Friedrich I in the year 1798. It would thereby indirectly abolish private confession, in that it made of it a 'scruple of conscience (?)', or made it allowable for one who had not led a manifestly offensive life style to go to the holy LORD's Supper even without private confession. Such needed only to register eight days before with the preacher and then take part in a general admonition to penance, at which neither confession nor absolution took place. Similar orders appeared more repeatedly and forcefully until finally salutary private penance vanished completely, especially in the last third of the last century.

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<sup>6</sup>Naturally this is not a proof that in itself it must be rebuked if the general confession is retained, if in the order of the congregation it is given legitimacy. So it is only worthy of rebuke when, as in the case being referred to, a salutary Church order that has already been received is broken.

Ed.