



The Sacrament of Holy Absolution

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Jesus institutes the Sacrament of Holy Absolution in the Matthew 6: [Jesus said,] “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”¹ St. Paul uses similar language in his letter to the Ephesians: “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”² When a Christian forgives, he can be sure that his Lord is there³ working on the hearts and minds of sinners by forgiving sin, strengthening faith, and providing salvation.

When it comes to numbering Absolution as a Sacrament, the Lutheran Church as a whole has long disagreed. This might be surprising to many who are either new to the Christian faith or have been lifelong Christians in the Lutheran Church. The Lutheran Church has always been unanimous when it comes to the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion, yet there has always been some apprehension when including Absolution to their number. Even more surprising is the fact that the *Book of Concord*⁴ is very willing to consider Absolution a Sacrament, while many theologians refuse. In his defense of Absolution editor Steven Mueller raises this common Lutheran question:

“I thought there were only two sacraments. Isn’t absolution [Roman] Catholic?” It is catholic – in the true sense of the word. Holy Absolution belongs to all Christians. Granted, there are differences between the Lutheran understanding and practice of Confession and Absolution, and the penance performed by Roman Catholics, but we retain the Christian practice of confession and forgiving sins. This is done corporately in worship, and it may be done individually in other contexts. It is significant that the Lutheran Confessions do not call *confession* a sacrament. They specifically focus on the application of the Gospel in *absolution*. It is the proclamation of the full and free forgiveness of sins in Jesus’ name that is sacramental.⁵

Notice that the weight of the Sacrament does not fall on the confessor. It falls squarely on the one proclaiming forgiveness. This is why St. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:

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.⁶

¹ Matthew 6:14, 15 | Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Henceforth marked as ESV.

² Ephesians 4:32 ESV

³ Matthew 18:20

⁴ Smalcald Articles III: 4:1 and Small Catechism: Brief Form of Confession

⁵ Ed. Mueller, Steven P. *Called to Believe, Teach, and Confess* Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene, OR 2001 pg. 321 (emphasis added)

⁶ 2 Corinthians 5:19-20

As the “ambassadors for Christ” a Christian then becomes the voice of Christ; the voice of a humble servant who loves their neighbor – not holding on to any pride, anger, or arrogance. For the Christian recognizes that they along with the confessor are sinners in need of forgiveness. Therefore, where a Christian confidently and clearly says, “I forgive you in the name of Jesus,” there is Absolution. That is what is required of this Sacrament: A Christian and the words of forgiveness.

In this model, the Word of God is indeed present and the visible element would be the Christian, who in that moment is the vessel of the Holy Spirit and the embodiment of the Church.⁷ Herein lies the most controversial part of this essay. Prominent Christian theologians of old have struggled with finding any basis (either Scriptural or from the Church Fathers) to support a visible element to this Sacrament. Most notably, Martin Chemnitz wrote:

Absolution indeed has one mark characteristic of the Sacraments, namely that the universal promise of the Gospel is applied and sealed individually to each believer through absolution. And in view of this mark, some are not wrong in that they number absolution among the Sacraments of the New Testament. But since no outward sign or element was ordained and instituted by Christ for its administration, it cannot properly be called a Sacrament in the way in which Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are called Sacraments. Yet wars about words are not therefore to be stirred up, provided the thing itself, taught in Scripture, is kept pure, as the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* teaches.⁸

Yet several years before, Philip Melanchthon wrote concerning Absolution with the strong implication that the Church facilitates these Means of Grace. From the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*:

If we define the sacraments as rites, which have the command of God and to which the promise of grace has been added, it is easy to determine what the sacraments are, properly speaking... the sacraments are actually Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and Absolution (the sacrament of repentance). For these rites have the command of God and the promise of grace, which is the essence of the New Testament.⁹

He continued later on:

God moves our hearts through the word [of Absolution] and the rite [of Absolution] at the same time so that they believe and receive faith just as Paul says [Rom. 10:17], “So faith comes from what is heard.”¹⁰

⁷ Absolution is given to the entire Church – which is properly made up of both pastors and the people, this is a gift that cannot be withheld from either part of the Church

⁸ Chemnitz, Martin (tr. Poellot, Luther) *Ministry, Word, and Sacrament: An Enchiridion* Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, MO 1981 | Question 219

⁹ Ed. Kolb, Robert and Wengert, Timothy J. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* Fortress Press Minneapolis, MN 2000 | Ap XIII 3, 4

¹⁰ *Book of Concord Apology XIII 5*

It was this implication that led me to the twentieth century Doctor of Theology, Norman Nagel, who wrote extensively about the importance of retaining Absolution as a Sacrament:

How to teach those in need of instruction the way of Confession (trimmed of the liturgical form) preceded by the Office of the Keys. This is the third Sacrament [Ap 12:41, 13:4]. In the Large Catechism there is further admonition to confess our guilt before one another and forgive one another before we come into God's presence to beg for forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer.¹¹

Later on, he links Absolution to the very origin of the Church, namely Christ:

There is no break or hiatus in the progression: Christ, church, disciples, pastors, Holy Absolution. No part may be excised, nor isolated out as dominant. All together are from the Lord. The church does not make itself church. The disciples do not make themselves disciples. Ministers do not make themselves ministers.¹²

What Melancthon implies, Nagel simply says. The Church is where you find Absolution. The Church is what gives Absolution. This leads us to conclude that Absolution truly converts, forgives, and reinstates the Christian – it is a means of grace. A means of grace that has a visible element – the person and voice of a Christian, who gives and proclaims Christ's very forgiveness. Nagel puts it simplest and best with, "The Church is where Holy Absolution goes on. Lose that and the Church is gone."¹³

Absolution at its very core is the proclamation of the gospel message of Jesus Christ – Absolution is the vocation of the Church. In the following pages, we will take a look at the history of Confession and Absolution and the different roles it plays in other church-bodies, the gifts that accompany Absolution, the arguments for the visible element, how the "Service of the Word" revolves around and finds its heart in Absolution, and where Absolution can be found both in the Church and in the home.

History and Practice of Confession and Absolution:

When it comes to the history of Absolution it is best to start with Jesus. Jesus is the one who showed a new way for believers to live, and that life is a life of forgiveness. Forgiveness first from God and then one another. In Matthew 6 we see Jesus teach prayer, "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors,"¹⁴ and then immediately follow it up with, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."¹⁵ The Christ-follower does exactly that. They forgive others as they have been forgiven by Christ Himself. They are not to be like the unforgiving servant of Matthew 18, who was forgiven a great debt

¹¹ Nagel, Norman "The Office of the Holy Ministry in the Confessions" *Concordia Journal* July 1988 pg. 283

¹² Nagel, pg. 287

¹³ Nagel, pg. 285

¹⁴ Matthew 6:12 ESV

¹⁵ Matthew 6:14-15 ESV

and then held a smaller debt against his servant. The proper obedience is to continuously forgive no matter the cost.

In Matthew 7 we find Jesus teaching about judgment and forgiveness:

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!¹⁶

This situation assumes forgiveness, grace, life, and salvation is given to those who repent and ask for it from God our Father. It also assumes that this model runs deep into our history, predating our fallenness – even if it only remains toward our immediate family. Notice also that these gifts, both from God and others, are called good. You have to imagine that we gift good things while God gifts *good* things to those who ask Him. For a Christian, when forgiveness is asked they indeed are to give good gifts that echo and point to the *good* gifts God has given His chosen people. Clearly, we don't merit those given gifts, our own personal words don't do anything to create those gifts, but they are backed by the promise of God – we forgive because He has forgiven. By a Christian asking for forgiveness and a Christian speaking the words of forgiveness – you have two believers present in Christ's name, and Christ promises to give what's been asked for as Matthew 18:20 says.¹⁷ Peter himself made this conclusion, because he immediately asks Jesus:

“Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?”
Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.”¹⁸

By saying ‘seventy-seven times’ Jesus is essentially saying, “As many times as it takes.” Forgiveness in Jesus' name is a mark of the Church. Which is why Jesus also says in Luke 6:30, “Give to everyone who begs from you, and from the one who takes away your goods do not demand them back.” We not only beg for material goods, but we also beg for forgiveness from the ones we have wronged. If the person wants to take your forgiveness and immediately sin against you again – a Christian doesn't “un-forgive” them, they immediately put themselves back into the position to forgive again. While often easier said than done, this is often how family works. It can take time for wounds to heal, but over the course of time life is incomplete without the whole family being reconciled. The same also applies to friendships and the fellowship within the Church itself. However, this isn't to say that a Christian should willingly be the victim of physical, emotional, or spiritual pain – in fact, this is exactly when one should do

¹⁶ Matthew 7:7-11 ESV

¹⁷ “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

¹⁸ Matthew 18:21-22 ESV

as Jesus commands in Matthew 18 and seek help from the body of the Church. Consolation and comfort can only be found within the fellowship of believers. If the sin against the Christian is grievous, the Church has the responsibility to immediately involve the state. Apart from what the state has declared illegal and regulates with the justice system, the Confession and Absolution cycle simply asserts the fact that one will inevitably experience some form of abuse and wronging again and again and as such should be ready to forgive.

As an example of this, children will routinely cause their parents stress. Their parents are not to “forgive and forget” the stress their children cause, because that leads to ignoring your children, holding a grudge, or damaging the relationship in general. Instead, the parents should forgive their children and look for ways to teach them a better way, showing fruit from both their repentance and the parent’s forgiveness. In a more tragic scenario, if a wife is being emotionally or physically abused by their husband, the wife is to seek safety first. Following her safety, she then is encouraged to open the door for reconciliation in the relationship from contact with the husband, through a counselor, or through the declaration of the law. She should forgive her husband, but by no means does that mean she has to put herself in the position to be abused again by her husband or any other person. The reconciliation that comes from honest confession and gracious absolution is the foundation to all of our relationships.¹⁹

Scripture clearly shows that confession and absolution were routinely a part of the early church. Acts 19:18 says: “And many of those who were no believers came, confessing and divulging their practices.” Yes, Christians have been gathering and confessing their sins from the very beginning – both publically and privately. James writes in 5:16: “Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.” John writes in 1:8-10:

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he 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.

And the writer of Hebrews says in 12:14: “Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.” How does one strive for peace? By admitting that they have sinned and have hurt the body of Christ. How does one see the holiness of the Lord? By forgiving those who have confessed and welcoming them unconditionally. The Church is not a community that has a perfect façade that deteriorates once you become a part of them, simply because the Church is to be open and honest about their sin and rejoice in the fact that they are forgiven. That’s the beauty of the faith, humanity is broken, humanity is full of sin – and yet, Jesus still accepts and forgives them when they confess and seek him. The Church is the group of people who strive to be better people through the grace of God by admitting their faults and welcoming one another regardless of them.

¹⁹ *Called to Believe, Teach, and Confess* pg. 322

Luther summarizes the nature of confession within the Church well in the *Small Catechism*:

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 are forgiven before God in heaven.²⁰

For Luther, confession can never be separated from absolution. We agree. It is also important to note that confession does not have to be an enumeration of every sin that an individual has committed, for such a task would be impossible. This is where the differences between denominations begin to form today. The Smalcald Articles shows what repentance is, “Repentance teaches us to recognize sin: namely, that we are all lost, neither hide nor hair of us is good, and we must become absolutely new and different people. This repentance is not fragmentary.”²¹ Thus, the confession that we have failed to attain God’s righteousness becomes a “blanket confession” that has the goal of pointing us to Christ Jesus and giving his gifts. The emphasis is not on us, for we are weak, but on Christ who is mighty to save.

This is much different in the Roman Catholic church, where the emphasis is placed on the individual to enumerate all of their sins. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches thus:

Confession to a priest is an essential part of the sacrament of Penance: “all mortal sins of which penitents after a diligent self-examination are conscious must be recounted by them in confession, even if they are most secret and have been committed against the last two precepts of the Decalogue; for these sins sometimes wound the soul more grievously and are more dangerous than those which are committed openly.”

When Christ’s faithful strive to confess all the sins that they can remember, they undoubtedly place all of them before the divine mercy for pardon. But those who fail to do so and knowingly withhold some, place nothing before the divine goodness for remission through the mediation of the priest, “for if the sick person is too ashamed to show his wound to the doctor, the medicine cannot heal what it does not know.”²²

It’s plain to see that for Rome confession is the focus. One must confess all sin to a priest. If one fails to do so, then their confession is fragmentary as is their forgiveness. Luther writes of the terrors of conscious this causes especially for Christians who already know they are weak in the flesh and struggle against sin:

For the flesh in which we daily live is of such a nature that it does not trust and believe God and is constantly aroused by evil desires and devices, so that we sin daily in word and deed, in acts

²⁰ Luther, Martin *Luther’s Small Catechism* Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, MO 1991 pg. 26

²¹ *Book of Concord Smalcald Articles* 3:3 ¶35, 36

²² *Catechism of the Catholic Church* Question: 1456

of commission and omission. Thus our conscience becomes restless; it fears God's wrath and displeasure, and so it loses the comfort and confidence of the gospel.²³

Our flesh does not need more Law, it does not need more works to do, it does not need to be showcased before a priest – it *needs* the comfort of Christ and him crucified. The flesh needs the Gospel at this point, which it receives in the consolation of Absolution. Engelbrecht rightly notes, "When we, by sinning, damage or reject the relationship God desires to have with us, there is only one remedy: the forgiveness won by His Son on the cross."²⁴

However, the greater danger is Rome's lack of true Absolution. As we can read from questions 1459 and 1460 from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

Absolution takes away sin, but it does not remedy all the disorders sin has caused. Raised up from sin, the sinner must still recover his spiritual health by doing something more to make amends for the sin: he must "make satisfaction for" or "expiate" his sins. This satisfaction is also called "penance." The penance the confessor imposes must take into account the penitent's personal situation and must seek his spiritual good. It must correspond as far as possible with the gravity and nature of the sins committed. It can consist of prayer, an offering, works of mercy, service of neighbor, voluntary self-denial, sacrifices, and above all the patient acceptance of the cross we must bear.²⁵

Thus, for Rome Absolution is not complete until one does additional good works. This teaching is contrary to what the early church taught, Ignatius in the first century wrote, "To all them that repent, the Lord grants forgiveness, if they turn in penitence to the unity of God, and to communion with the bishop."²⁶ It is the work and word of Christ that is comfort not our additional works added to Christ's.

More dangerous than conditional Absolution is the absence of Absolution. While John Calvin has a high view of Absolution in his *Institutes of Christian Religion*²⁷ it has suffered under modern reformed church bodies. The majority of them²⁸ make no mention of the Sacrament of Absolution in their public confessions and few make use of them during their worship services. Not more can be said about this, but the entire Church should lament that this jewel is being misused and abandoned in so many congregations.

²³ *Book of Concord Large Catechism: Fifth Petition* ¶189

²⁴ Ed. Engelbrecht, Edward A. *The Lutheran Difference: 500th Anniversary of the Reformation* Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, MO 2014 pg. 395

²⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* Questions 1459 and 1460

²⁶ Ignatius of Antioch *Letter to the Philadelphians* 8

²⁷ Calvin believed not only in the once and for all forgiveness granted in the crucifixion of Jesus, but also in a "continual and unceasing forgiveness of sins even unto death." Ed. McNeill, John T *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY (1559 translation edition)1960 pg. 1306

²⁸ Southern Baptist Convention, United Methodist Church, Pentecostal Church of God, Presbyterian Church of the USA – just to name a few

Absolution was instituted, put into practice, and commanded by Jesus. St. Cyprian also points out that St. John himself writes in his first epistle the fact that we should entreat God for our sins and that we should obtain mercy when we do so.²⁹ As if those reasons are not enough, the Lutheran Church maintains that Absolution must be retained in the Church because it gives the very Words and very forgiveness of Jesus himself.

The Gift of Absolution:

The Sacrament of Absolution is given to the Church. The first thing that Christians must know is that the Church is made up of the pastor and the people. This traditional Lutheran view is specifically laid out by Engelbrecht, “Christ gave the Keys to the Church. Pastors exercise the Office of the Keys publicly. Christ also calls Christians to forgive one another personally and privately.”³⁰ The pastor is the called and ordained servant of Christ who administers the Sacraments, preaches the Word, and guards Christ’s flock from those who would destroy it. He has the Office of the Keys (i.e. Words of Absolution) in a public way for the people. He should be the epitome of selflessness, never letting his own ego or feelings get in the way of the forgiveness that he dispenses to Christ’s people. The people are also given the Office of the Keys, but in a private way. They are the missionaries and witnesses of Christ who are able to go out to those they know and encounter and bring them the forgiveness of Christ. Mueller discusses the importance this Sacrament:

While private confession and absolution are “unnecessary,” they are a helpful gift that God has given to us. We know that God has forgiven us all our sins, but Christians frequently are troubled by specific sins. They need reassurance and confidence that they are really forgiven. Satan constantly tempts us to doubt our forgiveness and salvation. Private absolution gives us a powerful weapon and reassurance as we hear a fellow Christian embody Christ’s commission to forgive. They forgive us for specific sins in a concrete way.³¹

Mueller tongue-in-cheek puts unnecessary in the quotes simply because a Christian’s heart might skip a beat when it comes to confessing their sin to another Christian, but if one thinks hard about how often this takes place they will see how often it occurs. A child may say, “Sorry I kicked the soccer ball through the window, I won’t do it again,” to which the parent replies, “I forgive you.” Or a husband will sheepishly approach his wife and say, “I overreacted about your mother coming over this weekend, forgive me?” to which the wife will say, “I forgive you.” Not a day goes by where a Christian doesn’t apologize and ask for forgiveness, and not a day should go by where a Christian doesn’t speak the words, “I forgive you.” Peters describes how this forgiveness is valid when a Christian forgives:

²⁹ Ed. Oden, Thomas *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament Volume 11* InterVarsity Press Downers Grove, IL 2007 | Cyprian *The Lord’s Prayer* pg. 172

³⁰ Engelbrecht, pg. 404

³¹ *Called to Believe, Teach, and Confess* pg. 322

When ‘we forgive our debtors,’ we know ourselves mighty to apply God’s eschatological work to our debtors; when we request forgiveness, we know ourselves important and needed the eschatological work of God. That interaction of impotence and power of the Christian reveals itself for the post-Pentecostal community again as a legitimate path.³²

Through Jesus’ body (the Church) has been allied to and grafted into Christ and has been enabled to become a partaker in the Word of God. Scripture shows this in that Jesus is called the “mediator of God and humanity,” and from the apostles’ saying that “in him we have access through faith in the hope of the glory of God.”³³ Christians, through the power of the spoken Word of forgiveness, are healed of diseases of the soul and receive forgiveness of the sins which they formerly committed.³⁴ A Christian speaks not their own words, thus denying themselves, they speak the selfless words of Jesus to their neighbor.

This attitude of denying oneself is especially to be true of fathers for their households. They are specifically called out by St. Paul in Ephesians 5 to typify Christ. That is, be selfless, be forgiving, and lay his life down for not only his wife but also his neighbor. The father, more than anyone else in his household is to know that God has promised everyone that everything can be forgiven, yet on the condition that one also forgives their neighbor.³⁵ “I forgive you,” those are the words of Jesus, and the father is responsible for instilling them into his family and practicing them towards his neighbor. These words, Confession and Absolution, should be in the daily vocabulary of all Christians.

A Christian must recognize that no matter how great their sin, God offers full and complete forgiveness³⁶ and that unless God constantly forgives, they are lost.³⁷ It was for this reason that God gave the keys of forgiveness to the Church. The gift of forgiveness begins with recognizing that you are a sinner and have committed acts against God and your neighbor. Sin, in itself, is never a “mistake.” Sin, is also not simply a wrong that is done to your neighbor. Sin is rebellion against the almighty God and the breaking of his holy and perfect law. Therefore, it follows that forgiveness must come from the one who has been offended – God himself.³⁸ Through his Church, God proclaims his Word, his whole Counsel – Law and Gospel. Engelbrecht rightly points out:

³² Peters, Albrecht *Commentary on Luther’s Catechisms: Lord’s Prayer* CPH, St. Louis, MO 2011 pg. 148

³³ Ed. Oden, Thomas *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament Volume 9* InterVarsity Press Downers Grove, IL 2007 | Origen *Commentary on Song of Songs 3.2* pg. 157

³⁴ Ed. Oden, Thomas *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament Volume 3* InterVarsity Press Downers Grove, IL 2007 | Cyril of Alexandria *Commentary on Luke, Homily 12* pg. 92

³⁵ *Book of Concord Large Catechism: Fifth Petition* ¶93

³⁶ Engelbrecht, pg. 399

³⁷ *Book of Concord Large Catechism: Fifth Petition* ¶91

³⁸ Engelbrecht, pg. 395

God's Law causes a person to repent. Absolution, which is simply a declaration of forgiveness through Christ, takes away sin and consoles the repentant heart. As a result of God's forgiveness, Christians naturally amend their lives.³⁹

The church father Andreas writes:

If we acknowledge our sin and confess it, he will forgive it, and not only one but all our sins. For when a person repents and is baptized into the name of Jesus Christ, God forgives all his sins which he has committed both against himself and against heaven.⁴⁰

Forgiveness is simply in God's nature because he publically portrayed it in Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection. God desired all nations to be saved by the name of his Son. Therefore, he created a community to gather around his Word. That community – the Church – has been grafted into him and proclaims his Word. That's what makes the forgiveness given in Absolution so profound. It is the free word of forgiveness of Christ given through his Christians. Ambrose talking about Luke 5 says thus:

But the Lord, wanting to save sinners, shows himself to be God both by his knowledge of secrets and by the wonder of his actions. He adds, "Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Rise and walk?'" In this passage he shows the full likeness of the resurrection. Alongside of healing the wounds of body and mind, he also forgives the sins of the spirits, removes the weakness of the flesh, and thus heals the whole person. It is a great thing to forgive people's sins – who can forgive sins, but God alone? For God also forgives through those to whom he has given the power of forgiveness.⁴¹

A Christian does not have to do various good works to receive forgiveness, they do not have to have a manipulated emotional experience, they do not have to showcase some new revelation of the Holy Spirit, they do not have to do anything but hear God's Word. A person hears that they have sinned, they are convicted by the Holy Spirit, they confess their sin, and God graciously accepts and forgives them.

Naturally, this leads to the question, "Do I need to perpetually confess and ask for forgiveness?" In short, the answer is yes – which is why Jesus tells Peter to give unlimited forgiveness. If the heart of the question is, "Do I need to confess each sin before I die?" The answer is then no. Peters addresses this in his commentary on the Lord's Prayer:

[The Fifth Petition] also was prayed in the light of the resurrection of Jesus and the sending of the Holy Spirit through the generations day by day. Hereby the fundamental baptismal grace updated over and over again and simultaneously the little everyday life of the community is brought into the broad horizon on the Last Day. Thus the 'here and now' coalesces out of what

³⁹ Engelbrecht, pg. 399-400

⁴⁰ *On James, Peter, John, and Jude*, Andreas Catena pg. 172

⁴¹ *On Luke*, Ambrose *Exposition of the Gospel of Luke* 5.12-13 Page 92, 93

the petition releases from the lips with the eschatological ‘tomorrow and there’ into an indissoluble union.⁴²

Absolution has an intimate connection to Baptismal identity. The baptized Christian who received faith becomes a vessel for Absolution. In the words of forgiveness, the promise that was given and work that was begun in Baptism continues to grow.

The Visible Element:

The undeniable hurdle in speaking of Absolution as a Sacrament is whether or not there is a visible element. When reading Scripture and the church fathers writings about Scripture, a visible element begins to appear. The visible element is the Christian who has been grafted into Christ by Holy Baptism. Where this specifically and overwhelmingly appears is Jesus’ words from John 15:

[Jesus said,] “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”⁴³

In this rich passage you have the complete picture of Absolution. It all begins with God the Father who sends his Son Jesus to bring life to the dead bramble. Those who hear his word are grafted into not only the faith, but Jesus himself. When Jesus speaks about the “bearing of fruit” he is doing nothing more than referencing what he has already said: “Forgive, and you will be forgiven.”⁴⁴ Luther keys into this in the *Large Catechism*:

If you do not forgive, do not think that God forgives you. But if you forgive, you have the comfort and assurance that you are forgiven in heaven – not on account of your forgiving (for he does it altogether freely, out of pure grace, because he has promised it, as the gospel teaches) but instead he has set this up for our strengthening and assurance as a sign along with the promise that matches this petition in Luke 6:37, “Forgive, and you will be forgiven.” Therefore Christ repeats it immediately after the Lord’s Prayer, saying in Matthew 6:14, “If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you,” ... Therefore, this sign is attached to the petition so that when we pray we may recall the promise.⁴⁵

If you forgive, God will prune you in order to bear more fruit. If you do not forgive, God will remove you from the forgiving branch of life – which leads to what actually does the forgiving, Jesus’ Word. Jesus says that through his spoken word his disciples are made clean, and then

⁴² Peters, pg. 147

⁴³ John 15:1-5

⁴⁴ Luke 6:37

⁴⁵ *Book of Concord Large Catechism: Fifth Petition ¶195-96*

grafted into him by this cleanness. What else could this be than the words of forgiveness spoken in Absolution? The emphasis remains always on Jesus. His Word through his Church is what brings in more branches to continue spreading his Word. Mueller hits on this great commission by writing about Confession and Absolution:

We do confess our sins directly to God. Yet God has also commissioned us to confess to other Christians and to pronounce his forgiveness to them. We may confess and receive absolution from any Christian (James 5:16) or from a pastor (2 Corinthians 5:18, John 20:23), and they should respond by declaring God's forgiveness to us.⁴⁶

There is an intimate link between a Christian and the speaking of forgiveness. A Christian, as a temple of the Holy Spirit and grafted into Christ, has the authority to loose the sins of those who confess and bind sins of those who are unrepentant. Origen illustrates this in his commentary on the fifth chapter of John:

Consider the person inspired by Jesus as the apostles were and who can be known by his fruits as someone who has received the Holy Spirit and became spiritual by being led by the Spirit as a son of God to do everything by reason. This person forgives whatever God forgives and retains sins that cannot be healed, serving God like the prophets by speaking not his own words but those of the divine will. So he, too, serves God, who alone has authority to forgive.⁴⁷

From both Scripture and the testimony of the church fathers it is clear that Christ's Absolution was tied to Christians speaking Christ's Absolution. For them, it was as if they were the vessel that carried God's work and Word, much like how water carries God's work and Word in Holy Baptism and how bread and wine carries God's work and Word in Holy Communion. Tertullian simply states, "The Church has the power of forgiving sins. This I acknowledge and adjudge."⁴⁸

A Pastor's Role in Absolution:

As will be seen below, the pastor is most clearly the public vessel of God's forgiveness for his Church. For this reason, Luther accentuates this point in the *Small Catechism*:

I believe that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, in particular when they exclude openly unrepentant sinners from the Christian congregation and absolve those who repent of their sins and want to do better, this is just as valid and certain even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us himself.⁴⁹

A pastor is a man above reproach. One who shepherds his congregation to the fullness of the Gospel and the whole Counsel of God. However, nowhere is this responsibility more clearly laid out than in John's gospel:

⁴⁶ *Called to Believe, Teach, and Confess* pg. 322

⁴⁷ *On John*, Origen *On Prayer* 28.8 pg. 364

⁴⁸ *Tertullian Repentance* 10:21

⁴⁹ *Small Catechism* pg. 29

Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' He said to him, 'Feed my lambs.' He said to him a second time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' He said to him, 'Tend my sheep.' He said to him the third time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' and he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep.'⁵⁰

A pastor is a man who does not let any stumbling block get in the way of accurate, clear, and patient teaching of God's truth. Even when these stumbling blocks appear helpful (e.g. social ministry, ministry programs⁵¹) and especially when these stumbling blocks are treacherous (e.g. death, fear, sin, war). He is someone who proclaims the Word of the Good Shepherd to his flock.

The pastor's primary responsibility is to love Jesus and listen to His Word. He cannot deceive himself into thinking that he can lead Christ's flock without being a member of it himself. He needs to daily be reading, marking, and inwardly digesting Scripture. He needs to daily be in prayer at least for himself, his family, and his congregation. He also needs to inculcate the same virtues within his own household. If he cannot nurture those in his household, he will have an increasingly difficult time nurturing and inculcating these virtues in his own congregation.⁵²

The pastor's primary role, then, is to be the shepherd of his calling congregation. He is called and ordained by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit by means of the Church. He is installed to a congregation to "kill" sinners, "resurrect" saints, and guide the congregation by means of Scripture and our accurate Confession. The pastor is the man who is in the Preaching Office, meaning that he is to dispense the proclaimed Word of God and properly administer the Sacraments, which is truly feeding Christ's sheep. Engelbrecht describes this duty:

We are baptized by another's hand, we receive the Lord's Supper in the communion of saints, we hear Absolution from our pastor's lips. The Office of the Keys, or the authority to forgive and retain sins, serves as *the* key to Christian life.⁵³

He also protects the flock from all false teaching and spiritual dangers, which is truly tending Christ's sheep. He does this through preaching, teaching, and especially visiting his flock where they need him most (e.g. homes, hospitals, and graves). He also seeks out stray members of Christ's flock whether they are erring or lost members in the world. While this is an Office

⁵⁰ John 21:15-17

⁵¹ The Church must remember that its primary call is to proclaim Jesus and give God's gifts. While accomplishing social justice and having solid programming can both aid this proclamation, the Church must be wary that it does not replace Jesus as the center of its mission.

⁵² 1 Timothy 3:1-7

⁵³ Engelbrecht, pg. 401

unique to him, he must remember that he is still a member of the Church with the members of the congregation.

While the pastor has many other responsibilities and roles in a congregation, he must above all remember that he is accountable to Christ, the Lord of the Church, before anyone else. Like Peter, he is placed in the unique role as pastor by Christ and as such must make Christ's commands the focus of his preaching. While he may be given other administrative or teaching tasks, the proclamation of Christ must take precedence, because it is an Office instituted by Christ for that reason. Everything hinges on Christ and Him alone, and to be a part of the Body of Christ there must be a pastor and a congregation. Cyril emphasizes this point:

Christ says that he sent the apostles even as the Father had sent him, that they might fully comprehend their mission: to call sinners to repentance and to minister to those who were caught up in evil, whether of body or soul. In all their dealings on this earth, they were not in any way to follow their own will but the will of him who sent them. They were also called to save the world by their teaching, so far as was possible.⁵⁴

A pastor has the unique calling of always "being" the voice of Jesus for their people publicly and privately in their time of need.

Absolution Among God's People:

The people then have the unique calling of always "being" the voice of Jesus for their neighbor in their time of need. Christ has commanded Christians to forgive perpetually. Christ has also commanded that all people confess their sins and come to him. In the same manner, He has revealed His desire that Christians go forth and proclaim the forgiveness won by Christ on the cross to all nations.⁵⁵ When this happens, Christians should never doubt that, by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, they are speaking for God, who assures them that, "the one who hears you hears Me," (Luke 10:16).⁵⁶ Besides John's gospel account, Christians are also encouraged by St. Paul who wrote in 2 Corinthians that Christians are to be "ministers of reconciliation":

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, 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. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ *On John*, Cyril of Alexandria *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 12:1 pg. 360

⁵⁵ Matthew 28:20

⁵⁶ Engelbrecht, pg. 403

⁵⁷ 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

Hilary of Poitiers, commenting on the text, writes:

Since all things are reconciled in him, recognize... that he reconciles all things to the Father in himself, which he will reconcile through himself. Compare the entire mystery of the evangelical faith with these words [5:17-19]. He who is seen in him who is seen, he who works in him who works, he who speaks in him who speaks is the same one who will reconcile in him who reconciles. Accordingly, there is the reconciliation in him and through him, because the Father himself, who remains in him through the identical nature, restored the world to himself through him and in him by this reconciliation.⁵⁸

The Church, pastor *and* people, have the keys. However, that does not make confessing sin to one another easy. In fact, the brotherly method of mutual confession and absolution can be rather frightening at times. It means opening oneself up for criticism and judgment, but that is not to be the way of a Christian. A sinner should not fear or shrink away from declaring their sin to their neighbor and seeking their forgiveness. Instead, they should openly accuse themselves so that their brother cannot make a claim against them. To the one who says, “Before you and the Lord I accuse myself,” should be immediately forgiven as a true Christian.⁵⁹

It can be remarkably easy when someone confesses a sin specifically against you to lord your position of strength over their position of weakness. This happens in the world each and every day. It’s how corrupt regimes take control. It’s usually described as blackmail and there have been a great many television shows and movies based on its premise. Scripture also has a particular parable dealing with this “lording over” fellow Christians, perfectly placed this parable is what Jesus teaches after telling Peter that there is no limit one should forgive:

[Jesus said,] “Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he

⁵⁸ Ed. Oden, Thomas *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament Volume 7* InterVarsity Press Downers Grove, IL 2007 | Hilary of Poitiers *The Trinity* pg. 251

⁵⁹ Origen *Homilies in Leviticus* 2:4

should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”⁶⁰

Jesus specifically lays out how his previous teaching (i.e. if you do not forgive, neither will my Father in heaven forgive you⁶¹) appears in practice to the Church. Christians have been forgiven immensely by the Father through the words and work of Jesus, and Christians are to always look to Jesus as their example. It is always the correct course of action to dispense the gospel to a confessing brother, lest you receive the greater wrath from God. Luther writes:

We now want to return to the gospel, which gives guidance and help against sin in more than one way, because God is extravagantly rich in his grace: first, through the spoken word, in which the forgiveness of sins is preached to the whole world (which is the proper function of the gospel); second, through baptism; third, through the holy Sacrament of the Altar; fourth, through the power of the keys and also through the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters.⁶²

When confronted with sin, even if it is grievously against you, a Christian should always be running to the cross for their own salvation and bringing their erring brother or sister with them. The focus is always to be on the gracious gifts of God.

As noted above, Luther places Absolution in-between the traditionally accepted Sacraments. This is no coincidence, for Absolution is usually the first and last Sacrament that a Christian receives. While in the womb, a child is able to hear the saving message of Jesus Christ as their parents attend their church, pray together, and speak the words of forgiveness in their household. As one approaches death, a similar thing usually happens. One is unable to perform the necessary movements to receive Holy Communion (and obviously one cannot be baptized a second time), yet they are able to be surrounded by their family in Christ and again receive the words of forgiveness. Christians are always to give voice to Jesus’ words.

Christians are to trust those whom God has put into their lives to relay God’s message. For this reason, Christians should always be quick to confess any wrongdoing or sin that may plague them. Jerome gives this stark warning:

If the serpent, the devil, bites someone secretly, he infects that person with the venom of sin. And if the one who has been bitten keeps silence and does not do penance, and does not want to confess his wound... then his brother and his master, who has the word of Absolution that will cure him, cannot very well assist him.⁶³

The simple fact is that each and every one has been bitten by the serpent in some way; yet, in Absolution the focus is always on what Christ has done, summarized by Gregory the Great:

⁶⁰ Matthew 18:23-35

⁶¹ Matthew 6:14

⁶² *Book of Concord Smalcald Articles III: 4:1*

⁶³ *Jerome Commentary on Ecclesiastes 10:11*

The Father sent his Son, appointing him to become a human person for the redemption of the human race. He willed him to come into the world to suffer – and yet he loved his Son whom he sent to suffer. The Lord is sending his chosen apostles into the world, not to the world's joys but to suffer as he himself was sent.⁶⁴

The focus on Christ is visibly seen in those who are grafted into Christ, namely Christians. How this great message is delivered by the Church will be explored below.

The Service of the Word:

The Service of the Word is centered completely around Absolution. The liturgy is a dialogue between the pastor and the people as all receive God's gift of forgiveness life and salvation. It is important to note that only pastors should be leading the Service of the Word, as it is their call from both God and their congregation. It is not about the man, it is about his message, as Nagel writes, "Pastors are anonymous, interchangeable instrumentalities. It is good that we cover them up with vestments, and not pay attention to them but only to what they have been given to preach and teach and do."⁶⁵ Chrysostom adds that there is power in the called pastor's words, "What priests do on earth, God ratifies above. The Master confirms the decisions of his servants. Indeed, he has given them nothing less than the whole authority of heaven."⁶⁶ The Office of the Keys is given to both pastor and people, but not corporately in the Service of the Word. The pastor alone bears the responsibility and the calling to lead his congregation through the Service of the Word.

Invocation:

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

Amen.⁶⁷

The service begins with a remembrance of our baptism, where the participants are encouraged to cross themselves to remind them of who they are marked by. Maschke writes:

The gathered guests have assembled and now hear and recall the name of Him who promises to be with us always... the Invocation confesses that God has put His holy name on His people in Holy Baptism and so has promised to remain with them, especially where two or three are gathered in Jesus' name, according to the Father's will. Christians use God's name properly by speaking the words of the Lord, receiving His gifts, and praising Him in worship and prayer.⁶⁸

The invocation is simply us asking God to be faithful to what he has said in his word, namely, to be present for us as we gather to receive his gifts.

⁶⁴ *On John*, Gregory the Great *Forty Gospel Homilies* pg. 360

⁶⁵ Nagel, pg. 285

⁶⁶ *On John*, Chrysostom *On the Priesthood* 3.5 pg. 363

⁶⁷ The Commission on Worship of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod *Lutheran Service Book* Concordia Publishing House. St. Louis, MO 2006 pg. 151 (Henceforth: *LSB*)

⁶⁸ Maschke, Timothy H. *Gathered Guests* Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, MO 2003 pg. 117

Confession and Absolution:

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

But if we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Silence for reflection on God's Word and for self-examination.

Let us then confess our sins to God our Father.

Most merciful God, we confess that we are by nature sinful and unclean. We have sinned against You in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved You with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We justly deserve Your present and eternal punishment. For the sake of Your son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us. Forgive us, renew us, and lead us, so that we may delight in Your will and walk in Your ways to the glory of Your holy name. Amen.

Almighty God in His mercy has given His Son to die for you and for His sake forgives you all your sins. As a called and ordained servant of Christ, and by His authority, I therefore forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.⁶⁹

The corporate, public confession and absolution liturgy is a relatively modern addition to the Service of the Word. However, confession has always been a part of the Church, as the *Didache* teaches:

Confess your sins in church, and do not go up to your prayer with an evil conscience... This is the way of life, on the Lord's Day gather together, break bread, and give thanks, after confessing your transgressions.⁷⁰

Corporate confession was added for multiple reasons: first, as transportation became easier, people began to live further and further away from their congregations, making the drive more difficult apart from days of worship; second, congregations became larger and it became daunting to hold private confession and absolution for five hundred people on a Saturday afternoon; third, the frequency of receiving the Sacrament of the Altar increased in many congregations; and fourth, we cannot deny the influence of American culture and its belief that no one stands between an individual and their God. Thus, corporate confession and absolution became more prevalent and an integral part of our liturgy.

The important aspect of confession is that people acknowledge that they are sinful and by nature unclean – they realize that by themselves they are apart from the God who created them. Discussed earlier was how other denominations approach this, but as confessional Christians it is important to note that each sin does not have to be confessed in order to be

⁶⁹ *LSB* pg. 151

⁷⁰ *Didache* 4:14, 14:1

forgiven. The confession spoken by the Church is a broad sweeping confession that covers the multitude of sins that an individual or the community commits. However, a brief moment of silence is provided, which gives a Christian ample time to confess any specific burden that has been causing them grief.

As stated above, there can be no Absolution without confession, and in the liturgy Absolution is indeed proclaimed over God's people. Kinnaman summarizes this in a fantastic way:

Our Lord declares through the mouth of His servant, the pastor, that by His grace and mercy our sins are forgiven. The Absolution speaks the Gospel into our ears in a personal way. Through the Gospel words we receive the salvation earned by Christ upon the cross of Calvary; every sin is covered by His blessed death.⁷¹

Everything that had been confessed (i.e. our deficient nature, our actual sin, the desires of our heart, etc.) has been absolved and forgiven by the very Word of Jesus Christ coming out of his servant. Luther wrote:

Absolution is nothing else than the preaching and proclamation of the forgiveness of sins, which Christ here commands us both to preach and to hear. But because it is necessary to preserve such preaching in the church, absolution, too, should be retained.⁷²

Absolution is pronounced on the confessing congregation and remains the highlight of the entire Service of the Word, leading up to the Service of the Sacrament or the Lord's blessing and benediction at the end of service.

Introit, Kyrie, and Hymn of Praise:

In peace let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy.

For the peace from above and for our salvation, let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy.

For the peace of the whole world, for the well-being of the Church of God, and for the unity of all, let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy.

For this holy house and for all who offer here their worship and praise, let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy.

Help, save, comfort, and defend us, gracious Lord.

Amen.

⁷¹ Kinnaman, Scot A. *Worshiping with Angels and Archangels: An Introduction to the Divine Service* Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, MO 2006 pg. 11

⁷² *What Luther Says* pg. 3

Glory to God in the highest, and peace to His people on earth.

Lord God, heavenly king, almighty God and Father: We worship You, we give You thanks, we praise You for Your glory. Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the Father, Lord God, Lamb of God: You take away the sin of the world; have mercy on us. You are seated at the right hand of the Father; receive our prayer. For You alone are the Holy One, You alone are the Lord, You alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit, in the glory of God the Father. Amen.⁷³

Following the entrance music (the Introit) the congregation participates in the most historic part of the liturgy – the Kyrie. The short prayer, “Lord have mercy,” has been a part of worship in the faith from the very beginning, and actually finds its roots in the prayers found in the Psalms of the Old Testament. The phrase, “Lord have mercy,” is used by the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:22, blind Bartimaeus in Mark 10:46-47, and the ten lepers healed in Luke 17:12-13. Kinnaman writes, “It is a cry for mercy that our Lord and King hear us and help us in our needs and troubles.”⁷⁴ Our King indeed hears us as Maschke elaborates:

The present form of the Kyrie serves as a congregational acclamation of praise as Jesus is present with His people. The prayers focus on the desire of true peace, which Christ alone gives. Each petition asks for a dimension of peace, beginning with salvation and concluding with peace among those assembled as God’s gathered guests.⁷⁵

The Kyrie is an integral part of the worship service where the congregation identifies Christ Jesus as the only one who can bring peace, unity, help, salvation, comfort, and defense from sin, death, and the devil.

The Gloria in Excelsis (or the Hymn of Praise) is a response to our confidence that the Lord is indeed merciful and will grant what we have prayed for in the Kyrie. It begins with the hymn of the angels from Luke 2:14 as they announce the birth of Jesus and continues as our response to the fact that Jesus dwells also with us in this service.

Salutation and Collect of the Day:

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Let us pray.

Blessed Lord, You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and take them to heart that, by the patience and comfort of Your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life;

⁷³ *LSB* pgs. 152-154 | The standard “Gloria in Excelsis – Glory to God in the Highest” is the preferred choice when the Lord’s Supper is not celebrated in the Divine Service. If the Lord’s Supper is celebrated, the preferred Hymn of Praise is “This is the Feast” found on page 155 in the *Lutheran Service Book*.

⁷⁴ Kinnaman, pg. 14

⁷⁵ Maschke, pg. 124

through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.⁷⁶

The Salutation reinforces the special relationship between the pastor and his people.⁷⁷ This is no prayer, instead, it is a greeting of mutual love and respect – far stronger than the traditional: “Good morning! How are you?” “Morning, fine.” That one would typically find in most places. It shows that both the pastor and the people are baptized children possessing the Holy Spirit, are members of the Church, and are present for one reason – to receive God’s gracious gifts.

The Collect of the Day typically is an ancient prayer, often over 1500 years old,⁷⁸ which connects the main theme of the lessons into one prayer. In many ways these prayers connect us with the entire Church – past, present, and future – and the congregation makes them their own with the great Hebrew word “amen” – which means, “Yes, yes, this is most certainly true.”⁷⁹

Readings, Hymn of the Day, and Sermon:

The readings are set up in a lectionary. There are many different lectionaries that are available to use, but the important thing to note is that the three readings are all woven together to make the one universal point – Jesus is Lord – in a unique way from week to week. The readings are most often compiled from the Old Testament, an Epistle from the New Testament, and a Gospel Narrative. Again, all of them are there to point to Jesus as the only Lord and Savior of creation.

Following the readings is the Hymn of the Day (also known as the Sermon Hymn). It was chosen by the pastor based on the three readings, the unique theme he drew from them, and the sermon that he is to preach. The hymn helps the congregation to focus on what the theme of the readings is and prepare them for the preaching of God’s Word.

The Sermon is where the pastor crafts a message from the readings that convicts his congregation with God’s Law and forgives his congregation with God’s Gospel. This can be done in a variety of ways, the one important aspect to remember is that the pastor has a divine call on proclaiming the entire Counsel of God. Sermons are not meant to be touchy-feely messages about life experiences, anecdotes about popular movies, or strict moral teachings from the Bible. The Sermon is the pinnacle of the Service of the Word, it is where Absolution is brought to the people directly where they are in their lives, as such its focus is to be on Jesus

⁷⁶ LSB pg.156 and pg. 265 | The “Collect of the Word” is the default Collect of the Day, unless the appointed Collect of the Day matches with the theme that will be preached in the sermon.

⁷⁷ Maschke, pg. 125

⁷⁸ Kinnaman, pg. 18

⁷⁹ Kinnaman, pg. 18

Christ and him crucified. If the pastor is not preaching Christ and him crucified – he is not doing his job.

The entire Service of the Word is aimed at the Christian confessing their sin and the Christian receiving the overwhelming and all-encompassing gift of forgiveness through the Sacrament of Absolution.

Private Confession and Absolution:

While sin is forgiven during the Divine Service not only by the words of Absolution but also by the Lord's Supper, there may yet be guilt and remorse for certain grievous sins that one has committed. An example of this could be a man who has committed murder, come to faith by the proclamation of the Gospel, yet feels like he cannot escape his sin. Another would be a woman who has had an abortion, has heard God's Counsel of Law and Gospel, repented and believed the Words of promise, yet retains guilt of her previous decision. They should seek out their pastor to confess their sin and receive Absolution. The pastor is called by God and the Church to a congregation to serve as the person who forgives repeatedly, always comforting those who desire grace. In fact, those individuals should be commended for their private confession and others encouraged to make such private confessions, as St. Cyprian says:

Of how much greater faith and salutary fear are they who... confess their sins to the priests of God in a straightforward manner and in sorry, making an open declaration of conscience... I beseech you, brethren; let everyone who has sinned confess his sin while he is still in this world, while his confession is still admissible, while satisfaction and remission made through the priests are still pleasing before the Lord.⁸⁰

Tertullian also encourages private Confession and Absolution, going so far as to add a warning to his teaching:

Regarding confession, some flee from this work as being an exposure of themselves, or they put it off from day to day. I presume they are more mindful of modesty than of salvation, like those who contract a disease in the more shameful parts of the body and shun making themselves known to the physicians; and thus they perish along with their own bashfulness.⁸¹

Bede makes a differentiation between small sins and grievous sins committed against one's neighbor:

We must use our common sense in applying this commandment. As far as small, everyday sins are concerned, we ought to admit them to one another and believe that we are saved from them by praying for each other. But if we have sinned in a more serious way, then we ought to

⁸⁰ Cyprian *The Lapsed* 15:28

⁸¹ Tertullian *Repentance* 10:1

follow the principle of sharing our leprosy with the priest and do penance for it as much and for as long as he thinks is right.⁸²

When it comes to the comfort of one's soul, Christians should seek out forgiveness from everyone they can. They should seek out the person they wronged and receive forgiveness. They should forgive those that ask them for forgiveness. If they still bear the guilt of their sin, they should absolutely seek forgiveness from God's servant – their pastor.

While it might be uncomfortable to open yourself up to a man, even a pastor, it is important to remember that forgiveness is explicitly what makes Christians, Christians. The pastor has a duty that he was called to perform when he was ordained into the Office. Luther describes the pastor's specific duty to his people and Christians to each other:

It should be thus: the congregation chooses a suitable person, who administers the Sacrament, preaches, hears confession, and baptizes. To be sure, all of us possess this power; but no one except him who is chosen by the congregation to do so should presume to practice publically. In private I certainly may use this power. If for instance, my neighbor comes and says: My friend, I am burdened in conscience; speak a word of absolution to me. Then I am at liberty to do so. But in private, I say, this must be done.⁸³

It is clear that Christians are encouraged to privately confess and commanded to forgive by their Lord. This practice occurs both within the Church and within the home.

Within the Church:

When a Christian goes to a pastor to receive God's forgiveness there is a standard liturgical form used. The standard Order of Private Confession and Absolution is as follows:

Pastor, please hear my confession and pronounce forgiveness in order to fulfill God's will.

Proceed.

I, a poor sinner, plead guilty before God of all sins. I have lived as if God did not matter and as if I mattered most. My Lord's name I have not honored as I should; my worship and prayers have faltered. I have not let His love have its way with me, and so my love for others has failed. There are those whom I have hurt, and those whom I have failed to help. My thoughts and desires have been soiled with sin.

What troubles me particularly is that... (This is only included if there are specific sins that are weighing on the heart of the sinner.)

I am sorry for all of this and ask for grace. I want to do better.

God be merciful to you and strengthen your faith.

Amen.

⁸² *On James, Peter, John, and Jude*, Bede Concerning the Epistle of St. James pg. 61

⁸³ *What Luther Says* pg. 5

Do you believe that my forgiveness is God's forgiveness?

Yes.

Let it be done for you as you believe. (The pastor places his hands on the head of the penitent and says the following.) 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 of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Go in peace.

Amen.⁸⁴

It should be noted that the pastor has also vowed to keep any and every confession heard during the Sacrament confidential.⁸⁵

The rubric for Private Confession and Absolution that is found above is preferred but it is not the only way it can be done. What the Christian must know is that they can always go to their pastor and receive forgiveness and that his forgiveness is Christ's forgiveness. A Christian can always leave in good cheer with the knowledge and certainty that their sin is forgiven and they are in right standing with God.

Within the Home:

As Christ has given the Keys of the Kingdom to the entire Church and the entire Church is made up of both the pastor and the people, a Christian can be certain that when their mom or dad says "I forgive you" they are forgiven as if by Christ himself. When a son or daughter says "I forgive you" a Christian can rest assured that they are forgiven as if by Christ himself. Engelbrecht notes, "Forgiveness is essential even to healthy relationships. Since all people are sinners, we cannot have a healthy relationship without forgiveness."⁸⁶ He continues, "We can strengthen, repair, and renew strained or broken relationships by willingly forgiving and demonstrating our love for those who have hurt us."⁸⁷ This practice has been the center of fellowship between Christians from the beginning as Aphraahat writes:

You, then, who are disciples of our illustrious physician [Christ], you ought not deny a curative to those in need of healing. And if anyone uncovers his wound before you, give him the remedy of repentance. And he that is ashamed to make known his weakness, encourage him so that he will not hide it from you. And when he has revealed it to you, do not make it public, lest because of it the innocent might be reckoned as guilty.⁸⁸

As you can see, Confession and Absolution indeed exists outside of the church walls. It is the focus of our relationships with one another and nowhere is this more important than in the

⁸⁴ *LSB* pgs. 292-293

⁸⁵ This confidentiality also applies and holds in the courts of the United States, should the pastor be subpoenaed in the case of grievous sin.

⁸⁶ Engelbrecht, pg. 395

⁸⁷ Engelbrecht, pg. 399

⁸⁸ Aphraahat the Persian *Treatises* 7:3

marriage. The husband and wife’s relationship is founded upon Jesus. As such, their communication is focused on forgiveness. The sooner confession takes place, the sooner forgiveness comes, and the sooner reconciliation takes root.

Luther writes, “We, too, truly want to forgive heartily and to do good gladly to those who sin against us.”⁸⁹ We know that Luther was primarily focused on the family in the *Small Catechism* and this excerpt is also applicable. If children are seeing their parents struggle in their relationship, confess their sin, give free forgiveness, and reconcile – could a stronger message of faith and selflessness be shown? That helps children to not only grow up in a healthy home, but also grow in their faith and Christian living.

This Confession and Absolution also takes place within our friendships. Since the Church is not limited to one’s relationship with the pastor or one’s relationship with their own family, Christians should be confessing and forgiving each and every neighbor they have wronged or that asks for forgiveness. This does not have to be a thoroughly detailed account of every time that they have wronged their neighbor, as Bravlio states:

Since it would be a long and unpleasant task to reveal my sinful ways to you and to tell you everything in detail, it must suffice for me to reveal to your most holy mind that I am not what you believe, though I beg you to pray to God that he might make me what you believe.⁹⁰

Confession can be general or specific, but the emphasis is always that Absolution is always all-encompassing and absolute. Confession is exactly what a Christian is meant to be – selfless. Absolution shows exactly who God is and what his followers are to be – forgivers. This is simply the way all Christians are to be in every situation, and when they are – they are living as Christ commands.

To absolve is to do nothing more than what is commanded by Christ himself. Christians, as being members of Christ’s body who are grafted into him by the waters of Baptism, are now vessels of this Gospel message – dispensing God’s Absolution to the masses.

⁸⁹ *Book of Concord, Small Catechism 5th Petition*, pg. 358

⁹⁰ *On James, Peter, John, and Jude, Bravlio of Saragossa Letters 44* Page 61