

More and more, broken sinners are finding God's peace and healing through private confession and absolution.



There is a quiet reformation going on in many Lutheran congregations. It is nothing less than a return to the Reformation understanding of repentance, forgiveness, and the Holy Ministry.

People are coming individually to their pastor to confess their sins and receive the forgiveness that Jesus died to win for them. Pastors are seeking fellow pastors to serve as father confessors. Some congregations have scheduled hours specifically for private confession.

Is private confession a Lutheran practice?

Yes! Our Augsburg Confession states that "private absolution should be retained and not allowed to fall into disuse." The Apology to the Augsburg Confession calls Holy Absolution the "voice of the Gospel," and states that "we must believe the voice of the one absolving no less than we would believe a voice coming from heaven." Dr. Martin Luther included a short liturgy for private confession in the Small Catechism to teach and encourage people. He also commended the practice highly from his own personal experience. Confession was known and practiced by the apostles (James 5:16, 1 John 1:9) and is established on the authority of Jesus Christ to forgive and retain sins which He entrusted to His Church and exercises publicly through the Office of the Holy Ministry (Matt. 16:18-19, 18:15-20, John 20:19-23). Our Synod's founding president Dr. C.F.W. Walther strongly encouraged the practice, along with every leading Lutheran theologian since Luther.

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Isn't private confession a "Roman Catholic" practice?

Yes and no! Roman Catholics do practice private confession, but not everything "Roman Catholic" is necessarily wrong. The Lutheran reformers did not set aside private confession. Instead, they reformed it (Scripturally corrected it) so that Christ's free, grace alone, forgiveness was the center and focus.

How then is private confession and absolution practiced by Lutherans?

It is private in that it is a confidential conversation between a pastor and a penitent. Our Lutheran Service Book Agenda rightly suggests that private confession take place where people regularly receive the Lord's Supper. A short liturgy of confession is used.

There are regular, published hours for private confession. Let there never be a doubt, your pastor will always be ready to hear confession and speak absolution at any time it is needed. In preparing for confession, particularly helpful are the 'penitential Psalms' (Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, & 143) and the Small Catechism.



What sins do I confess? Before God, we confess everything we have done and everything that we are as utterly and totally sinful. But before the pastor, we confess those sins that particularly trouble us. In particular, sins that keep us up at night, burden us, and habitual sins we struggle with. Remember that God's forgiveness is always complete and perfect; while our confession will always be partial and incomplete. God's work of absolution is not based on our work of confession but on the finished work of Christ's sacrificial death.

But can't I simply confess my sins before God alone?

Absolutely! Indeed you must! Jesus teaches His disciples to pray daily for forgiveness in the Our Father, and St. John says, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." But the real question is: How is the forgiveness of sins applied to you when you pray to God by yourself? A sinner who is alone often may not "feel forgiven" and may not be consoled by reading/remembering verses from the Holy Scriptures. St. Paul wrote that "faith comes by hearing," and so it is for the creating and strengthening of our faith that God has provided for Christ's forgiveness to be spoken into our ears by the mouth of another, in particular, His called servant!

Must I go to my pastor? That's a Law question!

You are blessed by going to your pastor! He is your Lord's gift to you (Eph. 4:11). This entire practice is gift from God. As God sent him, scripturally, treasure your pastor as he is Christ's ears and mouth for you. He is bound by a solemn vow in his ordination never to disclose to anyone what he has heard in confession. Your sins are as far from his lips "as the east is from the west."

The "Confessional Seal"
What is privately confessed to your pastor may never pass through his lips...ever!

What if I'm too ashamed to confess to my pastor?

Rev. Loehe, a Lutheran pastor of the 19th century, wrote: "Yes, be still more ashamed; for you were not ashamed to sin, and yet you are ashamed to confess it for your welfare? Sins you performed without being shy; but now you are shy to utter it? Be ashamed - but confess!" We all share in the same condition. Nothing will come as a shock to your pastor. And he certainly will not think 'less' of you for disclosing those sins you struggle with: yet, he is Called by Christ to apply Jesus' healing balm of forgiveness to you.

What is the benefit of individual confession?

Just as a good shepherd tends his flock both as a group and each sheep individually, so a good pastor applies the blood bought gifts of Christ to His people as a whole and to each member, individually. In fact, individual confession is a key manner to administer this gift. Here the pastor can apply accurately the healing balm of Jesus' blood to those troublesome and annoying sins that may not have been reached by the sermon or the general absolution. Confession humbles us and keeps us as beggars at the receiving end of Christ's gifts. We learn to speak like the brokenhearted publican

instead of the self-righteous Pharisee. Many a troubled Christian has been greatly helped by disclosing the awful secret of his or her sin to a pastor only to hear Christ's sweet word of forgiveness. Individual confession is also a very potent weapon in the struggle against habitual sins! Do not overlook this benefit. The most important benefit is that we are given to hear a clear, external, objective word from God that applies the saving merit of Jesus' death to us personally and individually.



So why even bring up private confession?

As Christ has placed your pastor to be your shepherd, as His servant, and instrument to you - to guide, teach, tend to your spiritual welfare, this is done purely in love to you in the Gospel of Christ. In the stead and by the command of our Lord Jesus Christ. He cannot do otherwise.

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In summary

Private confession & holy absolution is a great and precious word of forgiveness to the troubled sinner. The forgiveness of sins spoken by the Pastor to a penitent sinner in Jesus' Name, truly gives the forgiveness of sins with the full authority of our risen Christ (Matthew 16:19; 18:18; John 20:21-23).



This word of forgiveness is to be heard and believed as the word of Christ Himself speaking to us (Luke 10:16).



Celebrating the Unchanging Truth of God's Word and Holy Sacraments.

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Private Confession & Absolution

WHY?



Does Jesus give this authority to pastors?



Who tells us to do this?

DO I NEED IT?

SHEPHERD OF THE SPRINGS LUTHERAN CHURCH