

CONFESSION

Sometimes, one hears people admiring confession in the Catholic Church and then asking why confession is not used in the Lutheran Church. This probably stems from the fact that little is said about confession and apparently, it is used even less. Confession, however, does belong to and is part of the doctrine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Among Conservative Laestadians, confession is practiced, and it is spoken of in sermons.

The believer's endeavor is a battle against the enemy of the soul, the world and one's own flesh. In this warfare, we suffer losses and are wounded. Sin attaches and wounds the conscience. To help us, God has given confession wherein we can free our conscience from exhausting burdens and to salve our wounds. "Let us set aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us" (Heb. 12:1). Confession is for remaining in faith, not for entering faith, as the original Lutheran formula for confession teaches.

WHAT IS CONFESSION?

At the end of the Large Catechism there is, "A Brief Exhortation to Confession." In it, Luther discusses confession broadly. He condemns the Catholic Church's confession practices. Therein confession was a work forced onto a person under threat of falling into a mortal sin. By this confession one merited forgiveness. The primary emphasis was to give as detailed an account of one's sins as possible. For his part, Luther emphasized the voluntary nature of confession. Force or fear does not drive us to confession. We confess of our own will, because we feel confession to be a gift given to us by God. It comforts and encourages our consciences. According to Luther's understanding, absolution already is confession, although it may not include any special confession of sins. He emphasizes, especially, that the preaching of forgiveness and hearing it are the most important part of confession.

Regarding confession the Smalcald Articles teach: "Since absolution or the power of the keys, which was instituted by Christ in the Gospel, is a consolation and help against sin and a bad conscience, confession and absolution should by no means be allowed to fall into disuse in the church, especially for the sake of timid consciences and for the sake of the untrained young people who need to be examined and instructed in Christian doctrine." The Augsburg Confession states, "About confession, our congregations teach that private absolution is to be preserved in the congregations, although the enumeration of all sins is not essential in confession. It is even impossible according to the Psalmist: 'Who can discern his errors?'" (Ps. 19:12) [Literal translation from the Smalcald Articles in Finnish].

According to the Small Catechism, confession consists of two parts, "One is, that we confess our sins. The other is that we receive absolution or forgiveness from the confessor as from God himself, by no means doubting but firmly believing that our sins are thereby forgiven before God in heaven." In addition, the Small Catechism teaches that before God, we should acknowledge that we are guilty of all manner of sins, even those of which we are not aware. We do this, for example, in the Lord's Prayer. Before the confessor, however, we should confess only those sins of which we have knowledge and feel in our heart.

According to Luther, general confession takes place when the congregation confesses its sins together. This takes place at a worship service and in communion. A confession of love is what takes place when we ask forgiveness of our neighbor for our offenses, whether word or deed. The third form of confession is public confession. In it, we confess our transgressions publicly and ask for forgiveness from the congregation. The fourth form is private confession, in which we confess our sins to a confessor-father privately and receive absolution. When we speak of confession, we generally mean private confession.

SCRIPTURE AND CONFESSION

Confession has firm foundations in Scripture. In Psalm 32, David describes his experiences when he had fallen into sin, “Blessed is the man unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile. When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me: my moisture is turned into the drought of summer. Selah. I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin” (Ps. 32:2–5). When he confessed his sins, he felt that he was before God and not before men. David also experienced the blessing of confession: the Lord no longer reproached him of sin, but there was joy and peace in his heart.

James teaches, “Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed” (James 5:16). John writes, “If we say that 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 our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:8,9).

While discussing confession, *Christian Doctrine* (CD 71) points to the place in the Gospel of John, where the resurrected Savior appears to His own and gives them the office of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the forgiveness of sins (John 20:22–23). The most important part of confession, absolution, links confession to the office of the Holy Spirit. True confession can take place only in the living congregation of God. The most important characteristic of a confessor-father is that he is a believer.

PRIVATE CONFESSION AND PUBLIC CONFESSION

Sometimes one hears the argument that public confession is more effective than private confession. However, the matter is not so, because the main emphasis in confession is not in the confession of sins but in the absolution of sins. The gospel of the forgiveness of sins is just as powerful and effective in private confession as in public confession. With the wrong emphasis, we make confession into an accomplishment, by which a person attempts to earn merit before God. The shame connected with public confession adds to the merit seeking. The gift changes into a requirement.

The effect of confession does not depend at all on whether it is done privately to a confessor-father or publicly before a congregation. The effect of the confession is in the word of absolution, which is proclaimed by an individual person or by an assembled congregation together. In both instances, the question is of the same word of the Holy Spirit, that enlivens and gives strength. Jesus has said of this, “And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 16:19).

Among Conservative Laestadians, it has been understood regarding public confession that matters are corrected as to the extent that offense has been caused. In private confession, matters may come out that we correct more broadly. The gospel preached by the confessor-father conveys the power of forgiveness to correct the matters. This takes place when, for example, one has caused an offense against another person or the government.

CONFESSION CONSISTS OF TWO PARTS

Luther teaches, “As I have often said, that confession consists of two parts. The first is my work and act, when I lament my sin and desire comfort and restoration for my soul. The second is a work which God does, when he absolves me of my sins through a word placed in the mouth of a man. This is the surpassingly grand and noble thing which makes confession so wonderful and comforting” (*Large Catechism, A Brief Exhortation to Confession*).

Day6L2R04_ *Confession, The Treasure Hidden in a Field*

The danger exists that the emphasis will shift to our confession and to a precise enumeration of our sins. Then the absolution, God's response, goes almost unnoticed. Confession becomes our own accomplishment by which we become better Christians. Without noticing, we fall under the Law. When we do not feel joy and freedom after confession, we think that our confession was not sufficiently detailed and that it should be expanded. Thus, we get into a confession spiral, with the result that the freedom and joy of a Christian disappear from our lives. Our gaze is no longer directed toward Christ, the initiator and finisher of our faith, but inward into our own selves, from which we seek the foundations of faith. However, they are not found there.

Again, if the word of absolution proclaimed with the authority of the Holy Spirit by the confessor-father remains the most central and most important part of our confession, we experience freedom from the sins that have oppressed our conscience. Confession is then the gift of God and the grace privilege that He has intended it to be.

The section in the Augsburg Confession explaining confession concludes: "Nevertheless, confession is retained among us on account of the great benefit of absolution and because it is otherwise useful to consciences" (XXV). The mention of sins is part of confession because we want to be freed of the sins which burden our consciences. We know that we are before the face of God and we do not want to deceive or embellish matters. In spite of everything, our confession is always imperfect. However, the absolution is perfect: all of our sins are forgiven and our consciences are freed from their burdens.

WHAT KEEPS US FROM CONFESSING?

Although I know that confession has been given to assist me, it is not easy for me to make a confession. The reason can be found in my supposed honor. It feels that no one else could have fallen into sins of this nature. If I speak of them, the confessor-father will not understand me and will not consider me as a believer after that. And what if I do not speak to anyone about my fall, but attempt to believe the matter, that especially weighs upon my conscience, forgiven from the general preaching of the gospel? From my own experience, I can say that one does not receive peace and freedom by this means. No matter how much I have tried to believe, that known matter has always reminded me of its existence. It has been like a stone in my shoe, making travel difficult. Then, when I have spoken of the matters pressing upon my conscience to a confessor-father, I have been surprised. First of all, the confessor-father has understood, and nothing implied that he did not consider me a believer. When, in God's behalf, he has proclaimed all sins forgiven in the name and blood of Jesus, I have experienced liberation. The faults, which gave me pain, no longer rose accusingly to mind. The stone has been taken away, and the travel feels easy. I have only regretted that I have carried burdens on my conscience in vain.

I have been a confessor-father, also. The believers, who have related about their matters and whom I have been able to comfort with the words of release, have become close and dear. I have not considered them poor in their endeavor. I have learned to know them as Christians, for whom the matter of faith is important and who endeavor to retain faith in a good conscience. I also know, that as a confessor-father, I have an unconditional responsibility to remain silent.

Therefore, confession is a God-given gift to us, that helps us in our endeavor of faith. We go to make confession just as much a believer as when we return. The word of absolution, that belongs to confession has simply freed our consciences from heavy burdens. The performance of confession does not cleanse our consciences, but belief in the word of absolution. God does not cleanse our hearts by confession, but by faith (Acts 15:9). Luther concludes the above-mentioned exhortation to confession thusly, "Therefore, when I urge you to go to confession, I am simply urging you to be a Christian."