

# Absolution: History of its Application in the Church

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Tradition of Penance vs. the divine institution of Absolution

1. The form of penance has changed with church tradition/practice as a matter of freedom; but the absolution connected with penance is a divine institution....

Mr. Mulfinger writes: "We can prove that neither the apostles nor the original church, in her purest and best days, practiced or claimed this authority, since neither the apostles nor the first servants of the church ever absolved people in God's place."....

First, the Lutheran Church also teaches that penance, even if we find it being practiced in the Scripture, is still, a free, human order. So it's hard to understand why, when he wants to relate the history of the development of absolution, Mr. Nast does not talk about absolution, but penance. Either Mr. Nast himself is not clear on this, or he wants to confuse and muddy the waters for his readers to make his case.

The second thing to consider is that even Lutherans never assert that the manner and form by which absolution is delivered by him is commanded by God himself and, therefore, has been received in the church of God for all ages. **We Lutherans know that it is not a command of God that even those who have committed no public sins and have not offended the church, or who have not had an especially sorely afflicted conscience must be served with the comfort of absolution on a regular basis. Further, we know that it is obviously not commanded by God that each and every time one wants to go to the holy Lord's Supper, he must have an absolution from a servant of Christ. Finally, we know it is even much less a command of God that every such absolution must follow an enumeration of one's particular sins. We do not deny that all of this is a form that's come from tradition and, therefore, is part of human orders that the church itself has the right and prerogative to institute and to change according to her circumstances.** Therefore if Messrs. Mulfinger and Nast cannot find the form and tradition used in the absolution now employed and given in the Lutheran church in Biblical and church history in the first age of the Christian church, they should not think that's strange. We have never asserted that the form and tradition the Lutheran church employs in her use of the Keys of the heavenly kingdom is one that has been in constant usage nor commanded by God. We only go so far as to say that the church of God on earth has always had and still has the authority to forgive sins in the Name of the Lord, and that her forgiveness has also been as valid and certain in heaven. It still is.<sup>2</sup>

2. How has the Church dealt with differences in "Local Custom" w.r.t. confession/absolution?

Finally, Heinrich Mueller writes in the appendix to his *Enlivening Hour*: "One is not bound by the institution of the confessional chair to deny a person Communion as a bad thing if he has not first appeared for confession, especially such people who had come from evangelical places where (private) confession had not been practiced, and thus, as he was being raised as a member of the church in this way, he could not yet be prepared to do this, for then such an institution would turn the confessional chair into a compulsion of conscience, even when private confession itself does not have a divine but a human institution and is not universally instituted, but only in part of the church. Even so, thoughtful people, in order to prevent offending in any way the untaught and the weak, are also showing kindness by also being prepared to admonish such people so that they first attend to the confessional chair. For wherever private confession is practiced and is confirmed through church law, **it is also binding on a person who comes there from a foreign place, insofar as he desires to be received in good standing as a member in fellowship with that Church, for these incidental, local, officially adapted rules of the church are no less binding on the conscience than any other laws, to be conformed with,** and what Augustine writes in Epist. 86 therefore applies here: "In those things that have not been firmly established in the holy Scripture, **the customs of the people of God or the institutions of the ancient church are to be regarded as law.**" We would also add what the church father, Augustine, offers in regard to this point in another place, when one of the things he writes to Jannarius is: "When my mother followed me to Milan, she found that the congregation did not fast on the Sabbath. She began to be disturbed by this and was confused as to what she should do. Indeed, this did not bother me, but for her sake I asked Ambrose, of blessed memory, for some counsel about this, who told me: Whenever I go to Rome, I fast on the Sabbath. When I return here I don't. So in whatever congregation you enter, you should observe their customs if you don't want to offend anyone and what they do should not then be regarded offensive by you."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Baseley, J.R., Walther, C.F.W. "Holy Absolution Rescued from the Blasphemes of the Methodists." *Missouri Synod in Formation (1844-'47): Essays of the Founding Fathers.* (Mark V Publications, Dearborn, MI. 2012). Pp. 200f

<sup>3</sup>Baseley, J.R., Walther, C.F.W. "Does Old Lutheranism Lead to Rome?" *Missouri Synod in Formation (1844-47): Essays of the Founding Fathers.* (Mark V Publications, Dearborn, MI., 2012) p. 273

3. What was the state of penance up to the Reformation?<sup>4</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>4</sup>E.G.W. Keyl, "On Private and General Confession," *Der Lutheraner*, Vol. 4; issues 2,3,5; 20 September, 1847ff. Pp. 15ff