

# On Private and General Confession

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One of the encouraging signs of life in the Lutheran Church, is that most recently here, as well as in Germany, many questions that had vanished for so long are being asked again anew in view of the present stance of the Church with respect to private and general confession, the great advantages of the former over the latter, and the desirability of a return to private confession.

It would be even more encouraging if in response to these questions not only an ever more frequent participation among preachers and their hearers would occur, but it would be a healthy influence on the whole life of the Church, so that the number people in whom the powerful witness of the rich experiences of our forebears would increase and awaken a deep longing for the excellence of private confession, their having become acquainted with it by their own experience.

It must now first be demonstrated that in the best age of the Lutheran Church private confession alone had been the usual custom, with no general confession along with it, must less general confession being used exclusively.

Secondly, the reasons must be refuted which are raised for the retention of general confession along with it, as well as those raised against introducing private confession.

May the following remarks serve for a better understanding of what follows: In the witnesses quoted, they are almost always referring to private absolution and, indeed, as its most important part, has, as the actual goal of private confession, so that the mention of the former is employed almost exclusively for the availability of the latter.

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.

In the *Apology* article 12 (p. 181) it is repeated and stated at the beginning that private confession be retained for the sake of private absolution, "which is God's Word by which the power of the keys frees us from our sins." But the short but powerful, yes, no doubt the strongest witness against abolishing private absolution is laid down with the following words: "Therefore it would be to oppose God to remove absolution from the church" In the Latin original it says it even stronger: "*Impium est*", it would be impious, but the absolution is made even more specific by the addition of "*privata*". This sharp judgement was directly applied to the unreasoning initiatives of Carlstadt, who famously included it in the practices that were part of the leaven of the papacy, and wanted to completely abolish it, which is also how the adherents of the doctrine of Zwingli, for example in Switzerland and in Franfurt on the Maine, and other enthusiasts then heaped their added ridicule against the Lutheran Church, as they also frequently do now.

In the *Smalcald Articles* Dr. Luther begins with the following words: "Because the *absolutio*, or the power of the keys is also an aid and comfort against sins and an evil conscience, instituted by Christ in the Gospel, so not for one's life (Latin: *nequaquam*, absolutely not) should confession or absolution be allowed to cease in the church, especially for the sake of the dull conscience, as well as for the sake of the wild and reckless youth, so they are examined and instructed in the Christian doctrine." Then it goes right on to say: "Since *absolutio privata* proceeds from the office of the keys, it should not be despised, but rather held in great honor with all the other offices in the Christian church." Now if she does not desire it, can she be valuing it and holding in high regard?

One of the most concise and clearest proofs that private confession, and indeed the exclusion of the general confession, must be firmly held in the Lutheran Church, is the excellent instruction of Dr. Luther in his *Small Catechism*, which unfortunately most Lutherans do not know, treasure and employ, since for a long time now private confession has been squeezed out by the general confession. Every word of this instruction is

permeated with private confession and absolution, like receiving forgiveness from the (father) confessor, we should confess our sins before the father confessor that we feel in our hearts; going on to the address: Dear honorable sir, etc., the formula of the question addressed to the one confessing: Do you also believe that my forgiveness is God's forgiveness? Finally the imparted absolution according to the prescribed formula, – this all applies solely and only to private confession. Whoever reads through this instruction attentively and without prejudice will already be moved thereby to say that only private confession, but not general, is the Lutheran tradition. This conviction will only become stronger through the appendix of Luther's *Larger Catechism*, which is found in several editions of the *Book of Concord* that contains a "brief admonition to confession." Indeed this admonition doesn't have such a churchly perspective as the catechism itself, but nevertheless it has a consistently clear explanation of the article of confession and has been considered a warning against the abuse of the same. Right in the beginning are named therein the three chief benefits that we have received in view of confession through the reformation, that is "that we may not use it out of compulsion or fear, nor be burdened to enunciate every sin so exactly. In this we have the advantage that we know how one should use it blessedly, to comfort and strengthen our conscience." But in this admonition when it talks about "secret confession that only takes place from one brother to another," it says that certainly every believing Christian, with the prerogatives of the Christian priesthood has the right to absolve his brother desiring it, as this is done by the ordained servant of Christ. Only for the conclusion of this aforementioned text, as well as from the 14th article of the Augsburg Confession it is sufficiently illuminated that this secret confession (as received in an emergency) but when made publicly, in the church, only should be done by those "who have the ordinary call to teach and to preach, or to administer the sacrament."

A passage from the *Formula of Concord* should prove a good conclusion to these witnesses, where it says this in the 11th article on p. 808: "For this reason also Christ does not only present the promise of the Gospel in general, as in preaching and in the general absolution after the sermon, but rather does the same through the sacrament that he has set as the seal of his promise and thereby affirms it to each believer specifically, as takes place in private absolution. Therefore we also retain private absolution as article 11 of the Augsburg Confession states, for it is God's command that we believe such absolution and hold it as certain that we are in fact atoned to God whenever we believe that Word, as if we had heard that Word from heaven, as the Apology states in this article." . . .

That the Lutheran Church at that time had held fast to private confession is also illuminated "from the many sorts of witnesses in the writings of Dr. Luther." The citation of such witnesses apart from those out of the symbolical books already shared (of which the first ones were expressly approved by Luther, but the others, with the exclusion of the last one, were composed by him), is not done as if the public confessional writings were not sufficient themselves, but rather because these writings themselves, and most especially frequently in the *Formula of Concord*, appeal to Luther's doctrinal and polemic writings with deepest respect. They thereby give his writings preference over those of all the other Lutheran doctors, which he also retains to this day and will continue to retain, since for all that they teach this is right and salutary, they have this unsurpassable master teacher to thank.

Luther had treated this doctrine of private confession and absolution in several sermons of his Church Postils, for example on the Gospel on Quasimodogeniti Sunday, on the 19th Sunday

after Trinity, on the Feast of Mary Magdalene, but besides that in special compositions, that is, in his *Pamphlet on Confession* (from the year 1521), and his *Sermon on the holy LORD's Supper against the Enthusiasts* (from the year 1526), but in the most concise and impressive way in his *Warning to Those in Frankfurt* (from the year 1533).

Dr. Luther bears witness how highly he prized and valued private confession in his 8th sermon that he preached in the year 1522 against Carlstadt's innovations, where he says this: "No one knows what holy confession can do but one who must often contend and battle against the devil. I would have been long since overwhelmed and slain by the devil if this confession had not preserved me. For there are many confusing and erroneous matters, with which a person is incapable of dealing alone, that still seize him."

Among the most compelling in this are the famous and excellent passages from his writing to those in Frankfurt: "If a thousand or thousands of thousands worlds were mine, etc." which passages still make quite an impression when they are considered in their context. That is, after Dr. Luther has spoken of the abuses which were previously taking place in confession, that threatened to ruin the soul, he proceeds: "Now that we have again encouraged this, the devil and his apostles want to strike it down again completely. But not me. Whoever does not want it for himself, let him go. Yet he must not take nor abolish them for us and for other pious people (who need it and understand its usefulness). That's called *qui ignorat, ignorat* (whoever wants to be ignorant, may he always be ignorant). – If a thousand or thousands of thousands worlds were mine, I would rather lose everything than to want to let the least aspect of this confession depart from the church. – Yes, I would rather put up with the papistic tyranny of fasting, observing feasts, clothing, shrines, plates, caps and whatever else that I could endure without damaging my faith, than that confession be taken from the Christian. For the Christian it is the prime, most necessary and useful school where one learns to understand and employ God's Word and his faith, which is not as powerfully done in public lectures and sermons." Just this one witness of Dr. Luther is more weighty than a host of witnesses of later teachers who spoke on behalf of private confession, and overwhelms the many 'if's' and 'but's' that have been screams against the same.

Now if a man like Dr. Luther so abundantly pours out from his mouth and pen what so filled his heart in such high praise of private confession, should not, therefore, every Christian not only employ it, if they would also be counseled and invited by him, but rather also give it a ringing endorsement out of love for his neighbor and for other Christians?

Luther so often and seriously recommended that private confession and absolution be steadfastly maintained by and for every Christian for this very reason, that is, out of love for the whole church of Christ. For example he takes this up in his advice for the meeting in Smalcald which he had composed in the year 1531 and in which he also justified the practice of private absolution with the example of Christ who had usually only absolved individuals. Thus he writes: "There must be a formation and grooming in the church which will not be able to be retained without confession. And it is certainly good counsel when people are not used to confession to give attention to their sins and to patiently anticipate absolution or forgiveness, for in the course of time if absolution and forgiveness should be forsaken, the whole thing will be perverted and the people will run to the sacrament as if it were from their own devotion like they did before. So the comforting, free Gospel must also be given an opportunity to be declared to individual people as well as to many at a time. But what else is the absolution but the Gospel told to a single

individual person, who receives thereby comfort for the sins he confessed? So notice here Christ's example, Mt. 9, where he absolves the paralyzed individual and in Lk. 7 he absolves the sinful woman, also, individually."

Dr. Luther also speaks of how very valuable private confession and absolution are in many passages, of which we shall only be sharing a few. Both of them should be, especially for every Christian, an exercise in both the chief parts of Christian doctrine, the law and the Gospel. He shows this in his letter to those in Frankfurt with the following words: "So we now employ confession as a holy practice. In the first we employ the law, in the second the Gospel. For in the first part we learn the proper use of the law (as St. Paul says), that is, to know and to hate our sins. In the second part we apply the Gospel to ourselves, learn to rightly grasp God's promise and comfort, and thus apply what is preached from the pulpit. For although the preacher in the pulpit also teaches the law and the Gospel, he lets it go at that, he applies, inquires, explores no one as to how he grasps it and also cannot see where it's not, whom he should further comfort or rebuke, because he has no particular person before him to whom he can apply it. And although the hearers hear all of both in the sermon, he grasps much more powerfully and surely whatever is addressed to him as an individual person."

Now Luther teaches that even for this reason every Christian should seek comfort in private absolution in his House Postil for Quasimodogeniti Sunday: "Now so that faith would become firm that sins are forgiven you and me, Christ has ordained that one is not baptized nor does he go to the Sacrament for another, but rather each should do so personally. So also each individual should hear the Word, and seek and desire the absolution, if he might not find sufficient comfort in the common sermon. For he must not doubt as he hears the Word of forgiveness of sin in the Name of JESUS that thus his sins are taken away from him and he has been loosed of them even in heaven and in the eyes of God." In another place Dr. Luther speaks briefly, powerfully and comprehensively (in the sermon on the Sacrament from the year 1526) of the three fold benefit of private confession, that is, that it serves as the verdict of innocence, instruction and comfort of every single Christian in particular, by which he immediately notes that only a pious Christian is able to rightly confess, but they should not so much pay attention to their confession as to the Word of absolution as foremost. It says specifically: "In the secret confession is much that is comforting and useful. First, the absolution, that your neighbor declares you free in God's stead, that is, just as if God had declared it himself, so that should certainly be comforting to us. If I knew that God were at a certain place and wanted to declare me freed, I would not want to be there just once at that place, but as often as I could I would return to the same. Now this is what he has placed into a person's mouth, which is why it is so comforting to return there often, especially to a troubled conscience. Secondly it is a service to uneducated children. For while it is for most folk an annoying thing to ever hear a sermon and they learn nothing, and this is also true in households that no one puts what's preached into practice, therefore even if it served no other purpose it would still be good for people to be instructed and heard, to see how they believe, pray, learn, etc." (Such instruction is necessary these days even for the so called educated people, since these days even amongst the educated the ignorance of the *Catechism* is great. In Dr. Luther's time a child of seven years knew what the church is, but today even many grown people don't, even those who go to the sacrament.) "That's why I've said," Luther proceeds, "the sacrament must not be given to anyone unless he give notice as to what he's receiving and why he's going. Now this can be most

appropriately done in confession. But thirdly, a comfort is therein for whoever has an evil conscience or who had some other oppression or need and would like to have counsel so he can ask for advice. Therefore we could not despise confession, for there it is God's Word that comforts us and strengthens us in faith and also instructs and teaches us what we're missing and also gives counsel in afflictions. Therefore no one can even do this confession rightly but pious Christians. For it must be that such people feel that they would gladly get counsel and comfort. But where this goes wrong is when people have diverted their attention from the absolution, to our own work, how well or purely one confesses, and also wanting to innumerate sins, which no one can do, which is too much and too great a work for hearers."

"Two reasons should incite us to willingly and gladly confess. The first, the holy cross, that is, the scandal and shame of a person willingly denuding himself before another person to charge and accuse one's self. That is a precious part of the holy cross. O if we only knew what chastening such a willing shameful blush would bring, and how it would make such a gracious God, as a person thus denigrates and humbles himself to his glory, we would exhume confession from its grave and travel over a thousand miles to get it. . . The other reason and motivation to willingly confess is the precious and noble promise of God in the four passages: Mt. 16.19: What you loose shall be loosed; Mt. 18.18: What you loose shall be loosed; John 20.21: Whose sins you forgive, they shall be forgiven; Mt. 18.19,20: When two or three agree together on earth, whatever it is, it shall be done for him by my Father who is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my Name, there am I in their midst. Whomever such lovely and comforting Words do not move, must obviously have a cold faith and be a dismal Christian. (In the *Pamphlet on Confession*.)

Because of the perfect Scriptural agreement of this doctrine of the Lutheran Church even the greatest and most significant portion of the Reformed Church had at that time become convinced and accepted the same, while only just previously many of these preachers had declared their opposition to it with mocking and ridicule. Among the three chief articles of doctrine, that is, in those where the Reformed and the Lutherans united (in what is usually called the *Wittenberg Concord* of the year 1536), besides on the two sacraments, was also absolution, about which the following was set down in writing: "Here all wish and desire that private confession be retained in the church, not only for the sake of the comfort the conscience finds therein, but also since in every way this discipline by which the people are heard and misunderstanding is instructed, is beneficial to the church in many ways. So it will also benefit coarse and ignorant people in every way so they are questioned and spoken to. Yet the old, papistic confession with its enumeration of sins is to be neither justified nor required, but rather the kind of cordial instructing and counseling questioning should be retained for the sake of absolution and for the sake of instruction."

Unfortunately the Reformed soon destroyed this legitimate union, yes, even a majority of the Lutherans also later apostasized from the doctrine of Dr. Luther and made an illegitimate union with the Reformed. Melancthon had authored a powerful witness against such falsifications of the article of private confession and ones like it in the so-called *Wittenberg Reforms* of the year 1545, though already at that time he was showing his very strong leanings towards the side of the Reformed. This reformation had been signed by Luther and other Lutheran theologians. But the relevant passage says this: "For since all who are informed know that just this article (on repentance and confession) must be

purely and faithfully taught and explained in our Churches, and it is an absolute necessity in the whole of Christianity that it be retained in its purity, we will not and cannot consent to or allow any alteration, darkening, or patch work on the doctrine of the article. – and although the recent jugglers have painted, ruminated and sought new shaded in which to paint the old heresies so they could rebuke our doctrine, yet everyone who has understanding knows that this article, in all its aspects, is taught by us rightly and beneficially. So we are ourselves determined to retain confession in its true Christian form, to instruct the people in this, to examine them, that this understanding remains and this witness of the church that the holy Gospel, the forgiveness of sins, is certainly proclaimed, in general and in particular– and if a salutary reformation is to be undertaken it would be especially necessary to preach and to put into practice the whole article on repentance and the doctrine of confession, private absolution commensurate with the faith, as we now have often reported in a detailed and Christian manner.”

In all this Dr. Luther was still far from wanting to force such a wholesome reformation upon anyone. He writes: “We force no one to go to confession, as all of our writing have born witness. . . Our doctrine is practiced by those who are serious about their salvation, etc. (In the *Letter to Those in Frankfurt.*)

Yet among those who had accepted Dr. Luther’s catechism and doctrine, private confession and absolution was so universally introduced that without it no one would be admitted to the holy LORD’s Supper, so that this, as well as the reason for this, is seen in a second passage of the just mentioned writing which says this: “Since we plan to bring up Christians and to leave them behind us, and in the sacrament we distribute Christ’s body and blood, we will not and cannot give this sacrament to anyone unless he is first examined as to what he has learned from the *Catechism* and if he wants to depart from his sins that he has sinned against it. For we do not want to turn Christ’s church into a pig sty, and let every unexamined person run to the sacrament like pigs to the trough. We will leave such a Church to the enthusiasts.”

That the Lutheran Church at that time had steadfastly held fast to private confession and absolution and especially in her Praxis, is finally also proven in the Lutheran Church Orders and Agendas that are still extant.

The number of these publicly confirmed church orders and agendas runs into the several hundreds and it would become too tedious to relate their pattern from the very extensive sections that would have to be quoted. Therefore let the reader be satisfied that the true result of the survey is that in all these pure Lutheran Church orders, from the first one written by Dr. Buggenhagen in Braunschweig in the year 1521, up to the so called lower Saxon agenda from the year 1585, and therefore specifically in the time period when the Lutheran Church was still pristine, that is, up until Luther’s death, only private confession and absolution was customary, and had been introduced through these ecclesial prescriptions for preachers and congregations in all those places without exception, that it was valued, not, indeed, as necessary for the sake of the conscience and salvation, but as good, as in all church traditions, for the sake of discipline and good order, as then St. Paul also admonishes all Christians: Let all be done decently and in good order (1 Cor. 14.40) and St. Peter: Be submissive to every ordinance of man for the sake of the LORD. (1 Pet. 2.13)

Now even if since that time (1585) into the centuries since (1750) each church order and agenda would often be altered in successive editions, yet these alterations were usually for isolated

circumstances, but specifically the earlier prescriptions regarding private confession and absolution remained unchanged and stood constantly until the time when the apostasy from the pure Lutheran worship became more open and widespread.

These passages quoted from the symbolic books, the writings of Dr. Luther and the pure church orders express sufficient proof that the Lutheran Church had held fast at that time to private confession and absolution in her doctrine and practice. . . .

Proof, that in the Best Times of the Lutheran Church Public Confession was not Practiced along with Private Confession, much less Exclusively.

The symbolic books mention not a single syllable about this public absolution. Whoever only looks for himself will be convinced. Indeed, in the Small Catechism the “general” confession is mentioned just once, only obviously this is understood in context of the universal customary churchly penance that the individual presents to his father confessor. According to that the answer to the question of what the symbolic books teach about the general confession must be given: They teach nothing explicitly about it. And had they approvingly mentioned it, they would thereby have been contradicting history as well as her own doctrine; history, because in the Church of the papacy up until the time of the reformation only private confession alone was practiced. So when the Lutherans declared in the 11th Article of the *Augsburg Confession* and in other places that they in no way were departing from this lovely Church practice, but rather wanted to resolutely hold fast to it, this was the only way they could disprove the charge that they were innovators. But had they sought to institute such a completely unknown ceremony into the Church, which is what general confession was at the time, then the charge of being innovative could certainly be made against them. But the symbolical books would also have been contradicting their own doctrine. For they expressly teach that confession be retained for the sake of the absolution, by which the authority of the keys specifically frees each one from sins, announces what is preaching in the Gospel to each one specifically, that each one specifically be examined by his father confessor and should be advised and comforted (see the instruction for confession in the *Small Catechism*), and that it would ultimately be godless to abolish private absolution from the church. They would have contradicted this doctrine had they ascribed the same value to the general confession as they had to private confession just as the general confession cannot be justified from out of the symbolical books as an ancient ceremony of the church, but even so little in the writings of Dr. Luther, in which, indeed, he speaks a few times of “public” confession, only refers to what is done with our offended neighbor before God in the LORD’s Prayer, in contrast to the secret confession, or private confession before one’s father confessor.

Yet in the works of Dr. Luther a composition issued by him and his colleagues to the Council of Nuernberg about general and individual absolution from the year 1539 appears to state their perfect assurance that he had actually affirmed the custom of public confession right alongside private confession. Only with a closer consideration of all of the circumstances involved it is revealed that this interpretation has many important reasons lined up against it, which might allow one to practically completely dismiss this idea. But even if one admitted this were actually true, it would still be wrong to conclude from this particular case that it applies to the whole Lutheran Church in all times and places.

Now, in connection with this writing of Dr. Luther this must now be clearly proven, but first the occasion and the main contents of the same will be briefly presented.

In the year 1539 there arose a division among the Lutheran pastors because Andreas Osiander refused to employ public absolution for a number of reasons as it was used by Wenzeslaus Link and his other colleagues, since he insisted upon the exclusive use of private confession. Upon asking his counsel, Dr. Luther with his colleagues now composed a theological opinion in which he says the following: "Although we regard private absolution as very Christian and comforting, and that it should be retained in the church, . . . yet we cannot and will not so harshly burden the conscience, as if there should be no forgiveness of sins except exclusively through private absolution." To prove this he offers the saints of the Old Testament, who would have preserved themselves by the general promises of the Gospel, as those must also do who can have no preacher. He goes on to teach: "The Gospel itself is a general absolution, for it is a promise that all and everyone in particular should receive from God's command and order. Therefore we could not forbid nor condemn the general absolution as unchristian since it still also serves to remind the hearer that each one should receive the Gospel, that it is an absolution and belongs also to him, as your formula is of the form of such a reminder." At the charge that the absolution must not be declared to a group since there might be found therein such people as belong to the binding key, Dr. Luther replies that the later (the ban) would only be applicable to manifest sinners, but secret sinners would be bound, as is the case with the office of preaching. "So the sermon binds all unbelievers and then again, at the same time, gives forgiveness to all believers. . . . That also that absolution is *conditionalis* (conditioned), is otherwise also the case for a common sermon and each absolution. Both the common and the private has faith as its condition (*Bedingung*). For without faith it does not free them but is not thereby a faulty key." Finally Dr. Luther gives this advice: "Osiander must not be forced to use the public absolution, as this would be against his conscience, but he should also not attack others who use it, for the sake of freedom, and, on the other hand, he should remain unassailed by them, and both parties alike should admonish the people to private absolution. In this writing not a single word is mentioned of either private confession nor public, but rather it speaks throughout only of the absolution; there is also nothing about the sacrament or of communicants, but rather only of hearers. Even just for that reason, no conclusive proof can be made from this that this has general confession in mind. This also does not prove that Dr. Luther had regarded public absolution as being just as good as private absolution. For he had declared that the latter was "very Christian and comforting," he desires that both parties should admonish the people to it; but only says of those who use it in public that he could not forbid and condemn it as unchristian. His chief goal is obviously this, that the conscience not be so severely burdened as if there should be no forgiveness of sins without, but only through private absolution, which was just what Osiander asserted. But here this is not a matter of what a conscience deems as what must be necessary, but rather of holding fast to a church usage that has been practiced for centuries, not as an exception, but as itself the rule. But that Dr. Luther was not counseling that the public absolution be retained forever is specifically illustrated in a letter to Osiander in which he wants the same to know he should only retain the same "until in

this matter souls can be again mildly encouraged to stop doing it without thereby causing any offense."

Apart from these internal reasons there are also external reasons at hand that stand in the way of accepting that Dr. Luther is saying anything in that writing about general confession. Namely, he mentions a customary formula for public absolution among the pastors in Nuernberg, only such is not to be found in the Agenda of 1533 used there, which does contain two formulas for private absolution. On the other hand, at the conclusion of the admonition to the communicants before the holy LORD's Supper a "reminding" formula of absolution is presented, which are perhaps the very words that Dr. Luther may be referring to. Seckendorf suggests that this controversy might have arisen over an absolution declared from the pulpit after the sermon, only no trace of any such custom is found in the whole Nuernberg church order. It may easily be possible that this famous history detective may have known of such a specific formula, or had drawn from other sources this closer verification of the nature of the controversy. This and similar uncertainties hinder any extensive proof by the evidence from this writing that Dr. Luther had counseled the retention of any general confession.

But even if it were granted that this might have been done in connection with the congregations of Nuernberg, it would still in no way follow that this theological opinion could be seen as a rule and norm for other Lutheran congregations. For this composition speaks only of one exception while, on the other hand, the symbolical books speak of the rule. This writing contains wise counsel in a controversy arising in isolated congregations, and, indeed, only until it was further resolved, but the symbolical books, on the other hand, contain the public confession of the whole Lutheran Church.

So it is impossible that this writing of Dr. Luther could be decisive if it is asked if retaining general confession along side private confession would be in keeping with the ceremonies of the Lutheran Church up to that time.

Even that being said, according to two passages from the *Instruction to Visitors* from the year 1528, § 53 and § 68, which treat this, it does not mean that the private confession must be left, as merely an option, to each person and that those well instructed would be allowed without any confession to the holy LORD's Supper, from which it would follow that for that reason the ceremony of general confession would be even more necessary. Only in both passages it is speaking of freedom of conscience in contrast to previously being forced in the papacy, and even for that reason no reference is made of this counsel of Dr. Luther in any Lutheran church order.

Now even if in this writing and in both of those passages which have, for the most part, the appearance of certainly justifying the general confession, that old saying applies, looks are deceiving. So on this topic there are a host of others, already in the first excerpt of the passages mentioned, that collectively address the sole use of individual confession, that so overwhelmingly refutes this and even through Dr. Luther's last and decisive explanation, and by such sheer volume that there can obtain absolutely no further doubt of his thinking on this matter. – For in the articles of the consistory in Wittenberg, composed by Luther and other theologians in the year 1542, it says this: "You must see to it that the parish pastors retain a uniform ceremony and order in confession and that each person as he laments of his sins, be imparted individually a Christian absolution. And lest in isolated places it were practiced that a parson let those who had

planned to commune the next day arrive in a group and declared to them a corporate absolution, this must never be allowed to take place.” Finally here is also proof in ...

The Lutheran agendas, and, indeed, up until the year 1739, that the general confession and absolution has been decisively disapproved and never approved. For although in individual southern German congregations the ceremony took place, which the second Pommeranian Agenda from the year 1563 – originating from Dr. Bugenhagen – allowed for the parson to read aloud a general absolution, yet even there the absolution was done privately every time, so that after the confession was made the confessor individually came to the confessional chair in order to, when necessary, be instructed and comforted particularly by a Word of God, whereupon, then, each one individually would be imparted the absolution under the laying of hands. May the following passages serve as proof of how strictly the general absolution was forbidden, even threatening one’s being removed from office, from the Pomeranian Agenda just mentioned: “Therefore the parsons must be most seriously forbidden to absolve people corporately in groups, so the superintendents in *synodis* must pay serious attention to this, so that no one declare absolution over those he does not know in a group out of greed, to please the people, or out of laziness, because he is overwhelmed by the task, whom, after the superintendent has been warned and not stopped doing it, he must depose from his preaching office as an unfaithful hireling.<sup>1</sup>

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

The evil fruits of this abdication were a lot of regulations among which, no doubt, the one that is first and foremost was issued in electoral Brandenburg in the name of Friedrich I in the year 1798. It would thereby indirectly abolish private confession, in that it made of it a ‘scruple of conscience (?)’, or made it allowable for one who had not led a manifestly offensive life style to go to the holy LORD’s Supper even without private confession. Such needed only to register eight days before with the preacher

and then take part in a general admonition to penance, at which neither confession nor absolution took place. Similar orders appeared more repeatedly and forcefully until finally salutary private penance vanished completely, especially in the last third of the last century.

Indeed, general penance took place earlier in a few southern German congregations, and later in Denmark, Sweden and Holland. Only this does not prove that this was taking place in the golden age of Lutheranism, but much rather partly under the influence of crypto-Calvinism, and partly, even chiefly, that these are only isolated exceptions, standing in contrast to the model of the overwhelming majority of Lutheran congregations. Now when, as was previously said, it is, on the one hand, easy to explain that with the increasing falsification of the pure doctrine salutary ceremonies like private penance came more and more into disuse, and, on the other hand, general confession could gain more and more prestige in the Church so that it almost completely displaced private penance, so on the other hand for the sake of its many benefits which private penance has over general penance, this is a compelling appeal to all Lutheran preachers to get to work through teaching and instruction, so that the use of the same would become more and more universal. This worthy effort will meet many obstacles on the way which will seem insurmountable; only faithful preachers and willing hearers will be all the more convinced at length to the contrary. Now for their sake in the installment that follows the chief reasons for retaining general confession and against the introduction of private penance will be refuted.

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<sup>1</sup>Naturally this is not a proof that in itself it must be rebuked if the general confession is retained, if in the order of the congregation it is given legitimacy. So it is only worthy of rebuke when, as in the case being referred to, a salutary Church order that has already been received is broken.