

CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION AS A PREPARATORY RITE TO THE DIVINE SERVICE

adapted from a study done by Rev. Peter Mills

Lutheran Service Book (LSB) offers five (5) liturgical settings of her Chief Divine Service; each is begun by a preliminary rite deemed, "Confession and Absolution". Each setting pastorally extends an alternative response to the assembly's general confession of sin by either; a) a declaration of grace of the objective gospel, or b) an *en masse* indicative-operative "absolution".

Why will the response to the confession of sin at the beginning of the Divine Service be a Declaration of Grace rather than an Absolution?

The short answer is, the general Declaration of Grace is the traditional gospel response to the assembly's general confession. Since there are no specific sins being confessed to the pastor, no specific absolution is being given.

Why is an "absolution" employed to begin the Divine Service?

TLH's pg. sixteen (16) "absolution" (later continued in LSB), had its debut in 1941, a worship innovation, out of step with prior centuries of Lutheran liturgical practice. It came about due to private confession and absolution falling into disuse within the Church.

How does the Corporate Confession Rite relate to the Christian Liturgy, the mass (Divine Service) of the Lutheran rite?

We observe that the Confession Rite itself is not part of the Divine Service proper (beginning with the Invocation and Introit). The Confession Rite is pre-Service, adopted in the Missouri Synod during the latter half of the nineteenth century. When introduced, this Confession Rite utilized what is known as Melancthon's Declaration of Grace, a non-sacramental proclamation of the objective gospel appropriate to the visible congregation's assembly of believers, as well as unrepentant, under-discipline, and occasional unbeliever in attendance. It is this traditionally Declaration of Grace which this pastor announces following the congregation's "general confession", and not an indiscriminate public "absolution".

Why are sacramental (i.e., indicative-operative) words of Absolution better applied in individual/personal confession rather than corporate/general confession?

The key is to comprehend the nature of "sacrament", by which gospel forgiveness is applied (not generally and objectively, by preaching and declaration; but personally and subjectively) to individuals in their particular circumstance. Thus, the Absolution sought by individuals in the context of private confession is not co-ordinate to the pre-Liturgy's objective gospel proclamation and corporate purpose.

In the Liturgy of the Word, God's law and gospel, are Read and Preached generally, that is, the truth of our universal objective justification (forgiveness of all) for Christ's sake. This proclamation invites those who hear and believe to advance to personal sacramental reception of the gospel, that is, to Baptism (conversion), to Holy Absolution, and the Lord's Supper (for the baptized). Thus, the indicative-operative pastoral words of all sacraments are directed to individuals, received subjectively in faith by specific persons in their particular circumstances and spiritual condition.

In the case of Baptism, the words of personal application are: “I baptize you [singular]”. Before administering the Holy Absolution to an individual, the pastor must inquire, “Do you [singular] believe that my forgiveness is God’s forgiveness?”, and if the response is affirmative, the Sacrament is applied: “I forgive you [singular]”. And in case of the Lord’s Supper each communicant is served individually by an ordained man, with such words as: “(if name is known), take, eat/drink...this is for you [singular]”.

Are the pre-Service “Confession and Absolution” rites of TLH, LSB, etc. taught by Martin Luther from the Lutheran Confessions?

No. In this discussion it is important for discerning that the rite of public-general confession at the beginning of the Lord’s Day Liturgy is not the same confession of sins and Absolution taught in Luther’s Small Catechism as the Fifth Chief Article (LSB p. 362; pp 292, 3). Luther knew the indicative-operative words of Holy Absolution only in the context of the pastor-penitent relation, that is, in the context of private confession.

According to Lutheran liturgical commentator, Paul H.D. Lang, the rite of public-general confession prefacing our Liturgies entered Lutheran worship as a post-Reformation phenomenon via Calvinist associations, from the Reformed Church. The Reformed (as all Protestantism) eschews the Real Presence/sacramental means of grace understanding of the gospel. Thus, the Reformed altogether did away with an extra-Service Private Confession in the pastor-penitent setting, by transmuting the whole notion of “confession of sin” into the congregation’s worship.

This change involved a theological sleight of hand; morphing Rome’s “priesthood” into corruption of Luther’s “priesthood of all believers of the Baptized” to effect a pastor-less “me and Jesus absolution” in the Liturgy. Of course, since the Reformed (and Protestants in general), do not understand ordination in the Lutheran sense, that the pastor’s forgiveness is God’s forgiveness in his place and stead, so that any “pastoral absolution” is superfluous. This minimalist view of the Pastoral Office supports a peculiarly Protestant notion expressed by the bromide, “everyone [i.e., his own absolving] a minister”.

In contrast to a Reformed corporate general confession, Luther’s Small Catechism (Fifth Chief Article) teaches only confession of sins which seeks sacramental Absolution dispensed in the context of private, that is, individual confession of sins. In the Fifth Chief Article, Luther taught how Christians should privately confess their sins before their pastor.

If our Lutheran Confessions do not teach a public confession and a corporate “absolution”; how did these enter the Lutheran Church and continue in her official hymnals?

Early in the life of the Missouri Synod, public-general confession was accepted as part of Lutheran worship. Theoretically, the Reformed novelty of public-general confession was never intended to replace private confession of sins, but to stand as a human institution in support of the church’s sacrament of Holy Absolution administered in private confession. After-all the Apology to the Augsburg Confession speaks of the sacrament of Holy Absolution in this way, “We also keep Confession, especially because of the Absolution. Absolution is God’s Word which, by divine authority, the Power of the Keys pronounces upon individuals.” (Ap. XII.99).

If public-general confession is permissible in “support” of private confession and Absolution; is it also permissible to employ a corporate “absolution” in the historic public Liturgy?

Prior to 1941, Lutheran pastors did not employ a corporate absolution, but extended a gospel Declaration of Grace as the only response to general confession, as follows:

“Almighty God, our heavenly Father, hath had mercy upon us and hath given His only Son to die for us and for His sake forgiveth us all our sins. To them that believe on His name He giveth power to become the sons of God and hath promised them His Holy Spirit. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved. Grant this, Lord, unto us all.” [Evangelical Lutheran Hymn-Book (1927), and Liturgy and Agenda (1916 & 1921)]

Note: this language does not employ sacramental verbiage, (“...I forgive you [singular] all your [singular] sins...”), reserving it only for individual application (Small Catechism, Art. V, para. 28, pg. 554 [Latin, “...*remitto tibi* [singular] *tua* [singular] *peccata*...” English, pg. 555] Concordia Triglotta edition).

Prior to 1941 Missouri Synod pastors announced the pre-Service gospel of forgiveness in the manner appropriate to a congregation’s corporate confession at the public worship, that is, by a Declaration of Grace (“...for His sake forgives us [plural] all our [plural] sins...”) conveying the gospel’s objective justification. But today, in LSB it is retained an optional alternative to an operative “absolution”.

All that was required to bring us to today was a quirk of grammar. By changing Luther’s singular pronouns (in the Latin/German) into English plurals, there is no change in sound. Nevertheless, between “you” [singular] and “you” [plural], there is all the difference in the world.

Why should the Lutheran Church reconsider her historic Liturgy and the practice of administering an en masse corporate “absolution”?

Such an indiscriminate “indicative-absolution”, if the words are believed, would effect the result of absolving, the impious, the impenitent, those under-discipline, and unbelievers. In order to avoid such an unintended application, it is necessary to imply a condition to the “absolution”, i.e., that it is only operative and indicative to penitent and conscience examined believers—all others thus “absolved” must continue in their sins. Such a conditional “absolution” corrupts the assurance of the gospel promises and undermines the integrity of the Holy Ministry which proclaims and applies them in the congregation.

A pastor is no more authorized to administer an indiscriminate-conditional “absolution” than he would be to Baptize by hosing down a room full of people in the Triune Name; or to send the Holy Communion among the pews.

[Jesus] breathed on [the disciples] and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.” (John 20:22-23) How is this to be understood in light of all explained above?

The very act of absolving sins is done when and where sins are confessed to the one doing the absolving. This cannot be done in the Divine Service. The pastor hears none of congregants’ thoughts unlike in private confession where specific sins receive specific absolution.