

The 11th Article Of The Augsburg Confession*

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Article 11

It is taught among us that private absolution should be retained and not allowed to fall into disuse. However, in confession it is not necessary to enumerate all trespasses and sins, for this is impossible. Ps. 19:12, "Who can discern his errors?"

I. Introduction

The 11th Article of the Augsburg Confession bears the heading, "Confession," but it actually deals with private absolution. This is for a good reason, as a person can see in the 12th Article of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession. For it says there,

For we also keep [the practice of going to] confession, especially because of absolution, which is the Word of God that the power of the keys proclaims to individuals.¹

Our creeds do not hold going to confession to be necessary in and of itself, but necessary only because of absolution.

Going to confession is just a human arrangement in the church. This is God's clear word. Article XXV of the Augsburg Confession says:

The marginal note in the [Catholic writing] *De Poenitentia*, Dist.5, also teaches that such [going to] confession is not commanded by the Scriptures, but was instituted by the church. Yet the preachers on our side diligently teach that [going to] confession is to be retained for the sake of absolution (which is its chief and most important part), for the consolation of terrified consciences, and also for other reasons.²

The 11th Article of the Augsburg Confession is purposely put together in such a way that it mentions going to confession only in passing. It shouldn't come close to stepping on anyone's Christian freedom.

This comes out very distinctly, when a person looks at the way this topic was covered in the Schwabach and Torgau Articles, which, as is well known, are the writings the Augsburg Confession was based on. In those articles, Luther makes this confession:

XI. Private confession of sins should not be forced on people through laws, any more than baptism, the sacrament, or the gospel should be forced on people. They should instead be free. But people should know how absolutely comforting, saving, useful, and good going to confession is for troubled, erring consciences. It is that way because absolution is spoken there, and absolution is God's word and command. That's the part of going to confession that makes the conscience content and sets it free from

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Note on the notes: Except where the translator has cited from a specific contemporary translation, the notes are offered "as is" from the original article. In articles from *Lehre und Wehre* and other periodicals of the time the authors often cited from different versions of works than those available to us or from works that are not available to us at all. Luther and other fathers are often cited from secondary works. A.a.O.S., "*am angegebenen Ort Stelle*" means "ditto." *Ebend* means *ibid*. Editor.

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¹ Tappert, p. 197.

² Tappert, p. 63.

grief. Nor is it necessary to list every sin. Rather, people may announce only the sins which are biting at their hearts and disturbing them.³

According to this statement of Luther, every teaching that makes a law out of going to confession contradicts our creeds.

This is also the firm position taken in the frank and basic statements of Article 7 of the Augsburg Confession:

For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine word. It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by men, should be observed uniformly in all places.⁴

In accordance with this basic statement, our Article wants only to see that the church keeps practicing private absolution, that is, the gospel applied to the individual sinner. It does not, on top of that, lay down a sacred rule with its own binding ceremonies. This standpoint of our creeds is of great importance in protecting against those who want to be little popes in the Lutheran church.

But when you want to talk about this subject, these especially are the things that must be totally clear in your own mind. What is absolution? Further, what is private absolution? For what reasons should the church keep practicing private absolution? And, in line with that, in what way is private confession of sins a necessary thing?

II. Absolution is a rule that God made for the church. That makes it something that is unconditionally necessary.

Absolution is nothing other than using the power of the keys, passing on the gospel, whether it's for a group or for individuals. God has made peace in Christ. He wants to communicate his grace to the world. Therefore, he puts the riches of his mercy, the whole treasure store of his pardon, into the gospel. That is how sinners make it all their own.

Christ has entrusted to his church this commission to pardon people. The church is a church of forgiveness. In preaching, baptism, and the Lord's Supper, the church hands out the letter of pardon that was written with Christ's blood. God's Word says this to the church, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins," and so on. With that, he has granted the church the authority on earth to forgive sins. He has made her the custodian of the treasure store of grace. Whenever she opens her mouth, she has to speak an absolution. "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God" (Isaiah 40:1). That's where her tongue, to speak with the psalmist, "is the pen of a skillful writer" (Psalm 45:2). It writes on the sinner's forehead. It writes on the conscience of the person condemned by the law. It writes there the name of God and of the new Jerusalem and the new name of the Lamb (Revelation 3:12 and 14:1).

"So the gospel itself is an absolution for the whole congregation," wrote Luther to the city council of Nuremberg. That's why even every Christian child can administer absolution. For a child can speak a word of gospel comfort to the troubled sinner. And absolution is right there in the words of the gospel. It isn't something that only pastors have, some magic power that flows out of the fingers of whoever does the pastor's ordination. Accordingly, nothing is easier than to absolve someone. Every Christian has to speak absolutions. Faith gives speech to the spiritually mute. Then, as spiritual priests, they "declare the praises of him who called [them] out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9). As often as a Christian congregation sings a song that is full of the gospel, the church building resounds again with the absolution.

This absolution is no different from the one spoken by the preacher. The only difference is that the pastor has the public office to speak the absolution. (2 Corinthians 2:10, "And what I have forgiven ... I have

³ Seckendorf, *Hist. Luth.*, German version by Frick, p. 971.

⁴ Tappert, p. 32.

forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake.") He has the public administration of the means of grace. Therefore, he has a duty to distribute God's grace through preaching and the administration of the sacraments. But members of the congregation privately declare God's great deeds. The word of grace itself doesn't become stronger or weaker just because it's proclaimed in a different way. God's word remains God's word and remains certain and true, whoever speaks it or hears it. It doesn't work its power on the impenitent, but that isn't because something's wrong with the word or with the lips that spoke the word. That's only because of the malice and hard-heartedness inside the person listening to the word.

This is the absolution the whole congregation hears. It is unconditionally necessary. Without it, the church wouldn't last for an hour. It is the daily bread the church lives on and the air she lives in.

The Carlstadts, the Schwenkfelds, the Zwinglis, and all the charismatics may despise words that come from human mouths. They may cry out with the Jews, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?"⁵ But they don't know anything at all about the power of the keys. Scripture, however, shows us that God's ordinary way of absolving people is to use only human beings to do it. When you find a truly godly person living in any of the sects, there too that person's spiritual life can only have flowed out of the absolution that the whole congregation hears proclaimed in the words of the gospel. For this reason, we join our fathers in confessing to the charismatics, to all the Methodists, and to others who put their faith in their own feelings: According to Article XII of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, absolution

is the word of God that the power of the keys proclaims to individuals by divine authority. It would therefore be wicked to remove private absolution from the church. And those who despise private absolution understand neither the forgiveness of sins nor the power of the keys.⁶

These words were actually spoken about private absolution. Still, we are perfectly right to connect them to absolution in general.

III. Private absolution is not different from public absolution in essence, only in form.

There are modern-day Lutherans who want to do things the way the Pope does them. They put private absolution very high above the other means of grace. To them, the preaching of the gospel offers and announces grace to people, but it doesn't have any power in it at all to give that grace to people. They do say, however, that private absolution has the power to give out grace.

Their aim in this is not to show how splendid God's grace is, but to bring glory to the office of the pastor. They hanker after Rome. These pastors want to do things the Pope's way. They get themselves anointed and all greased up and then they can't keep from loving themselves. The poor laypeople are supposed to think their pastor is a go-between between God and humankind. That's because the man who ordained their pastor had special ointment on his fingers that he put on their pastor's head. It looks like the problem is that these men are going too far by claiming that private absolution is something only they can administer. But the real problem here is that the preaching of the gospel has been stolen from the people, who are being told that preaching cannot give them what it promises them.

Out of all this, you can see again how the Pope's religion is a close relative to the religions that put their faith in their feelings. The two seem to be irreconcilable opposites. "But the papacy is nothing but charismatic religion," Smalcald Articles, Part III., Article VIII, [because both of those religions put their faith in something besides God's word].

The preaching of the gospel is never an empty-handed announcement. Wherever the means of grace are, the treasure store of grace is. You can never separate them. The gospel is the power of God for salvation. It announces absolution in a powerful way. That is, when it announces absolution, it has the power to give out

⁵ Mark 2:7.

⁶ Tappert, p. 197.

absolution. In their essence, there is no difference at all between private absolution and the absolution the whole congregation hears in the gospel.

In Dr. Philippi's *Mecklenburg Church News* of April 18, 1877, we read these very beautiful words:

There is only one way that private absolution is different from the preaching of the gospel that the whole congregation hears. In private absolution, the forgiveness of sins is specifically spoken to the individual. It is the same as what happens in the sacraments, but without the sacraments' visible guarantees of God's promises. Our church has certainly not made a mistake in understanding the power of the keys to include more than just private absolution. Rather, in all the church, the power of the keys has been understood to include all the activity of the spiritual office as it discharges the powers of the means of grace. Not only in private absolution, but in the other means of grace, too, sins are forgiven or retained, loosed or bound, and heaven opened or closed. This is what Luther writes:

The binding and loosing keys involve the power of teaching and not only of absolving. The keys include everything I can do to help my neighbor [spiritually]. They include the comfort one person can give another. They include what happens when the congregation as a whole confesses its sins and when an individual goes to confession in secret. They include absolution and everything related to it. And, most of all, they include preaching. Here's why. Whenever a person preaches, "Whoever believes will be saved," there's unlocking going on; "but whoever does not believe will be condemned," there's locking going on.⁷

And he writes:

The Christian church distributes that kind of treasure store, not only in the word, through absolution and public preaching, but also in baptism and the Lord's Christ's Supper. For "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved." Also, when you believe that Christ's body is given for you and his blood is poured out because of your sins and, with that kind of faith, you receive the exalted sacrament, Christ's body and blood, then you also have the forgiveness of sins!⁸

Along these lines, in the Smalcald Articles, the keys are said to actually be an "office."⁹ Mueller explains this in his explanation of the Articles:

This is because the keys are nothing other than the office through which such promises are distributed to everyone who wants them.¹⁰

There are New Lutherans who see the gospel as something that only talks about grace. They have become just like all the people who put their faith in their feelings instead of in God's word. None of these people has ever been willing to admit that absolution has any power in its words to give people grace. When someone giving absolution says, "I forgive you," etc., these people get very offended. They see this as blaspheming God. They say, "How can a human being forgive sins?" As we have seen, they have that idea because overall they do not know what absolution and the gospel are.

The Venerable Bede died in 735. But already back then he had an answer for these people:

The Bible teachers speak the truth that nobody but God can exempt someone from being punished for sin. For it is God who exempts people that way. He does it through others to whom he has granted that power to make exempt.¹¹

Gigas (died 1581) warned in his sermon on the Gospel for the 19th Sunday after Trinity:

The deluded Anabaptists, Schwenkfelders, and other unstable people want to trap you and make you err. Do not let them! They speak very scornfully about holy absolution. They holler and write that we church

⁷ Erlangen, XV, p. 395.

⁸ A.a.O.S. VI, p. 296.

⁹ *Lehre und Wehre*, 1877, p. 175.

¹⁰ Mueller, p. 333.

¹¹ Lucius' *Explanation of the Magdeburg Centuries*, Basel, 1624, Century VIII, p. 125.

workers set ourselves up in God's place and take away from God his office as the only one who can forgive sins. They talk this way even though they have heard how we talk and they know very well that, when we absolve the penitent and make sinful men and women free and clear of their sins, we do not do that on our own personal authority, but by Christ's command and as his servants. By his own power, Christ forgives sins and speaks absolution. He is the Master of the estate. But we are his attendants and servants, acting in accordance with his instructions and with the note he left on the buffet. If you show yourself truly sorry for your sins, then we give you absolution, by Christ's command and upon his true word. Then, because Christ earned it for you, you are released from all your sins, just as David was absolved by Nathan and the tax collectors were by John the Baptist.¹²

Otho talks the same way:

The Anabaptists and Schwenkfelders annihilate the power of the preacher's office. They also consider the voice of the pastor, when you go to confession, to be only a useless noise. These people agree with the Reformed. They teach that the preacher doesn't forgive sins, but that the sinners have already been made exempt from punishment, so that the preacher only announces, informs of, and explains that fact ... No, they are wrong. Here God's power and the minister's office go together. This is a divine arrangement. It is impossible to split the two apart. It is indeed God alone who forgives sins. He is the one who makes the forgiveness happen. But he uses the church's minister for that, as his instrument and tool.¹³

For this reason, we sing with Nikolaus Hermann (died 1561):

The words which absolution give
are his who died that we might live;
The minister whom Christ has sent
is but his humble instrument.
When ministers lay on their hands,
absolved by Christ the sinner stands;
He who by grace the word believes
forgiveness, sure and sweet, receives.¹⁴

Private absolution is neither more nor less than the absolution the whole congregation receives in the gospel. Rather, it is nothing other than the gospel the whole congregation receives, specifically applied to the circumstances of the individual sinner. How can it even be anything else? Saint Paul knows only the law and the gospel. If private absolution is not law, then it must be the gospel. "What is absolution," writes Luther, "other than the gospel spoken to an individual human being, who receives comfort for it in regard to the sins he has noticed in himself?"¹⁵ He also writes:

There isn't a difference between these two things. The word is publicly announced in a general way to everyone in the preaching of the gospel. Then that same word is spoken in absolution to the particular people who want to hear it, whether one person or more. Christ set it up that this kind of preaching of the forgiveness of sins should go forth and ring out in all places and at all times, not just in a general way to entire households, but also to individual people, wherever such people are who need it ... Even if you didn't hear it when you went to confession, you would be hearing the gospel everyday anyway and that is the same as the words of absolution. Preaching forgiveness of sins means nothing other than absolving or acquitting people of their sins. The same thing happens in baptism and the sacrament.¹⁶

Martin Chemnitz writes:

¹² Beste, *Kanzelr.*, II, 10.

¹³ *Krankentrost*, p. 1339f.

¹⁴ *Christian Worship*, Hymn 308, vs.5-6, trans. by Matthias Loy, alt.

¹⁵ Walch XVI, p. 2178.

¹⁶ Erlangen XI, p. 294f.

Absolution is nothing other than the voice of the gospel, which announces that sins have been forgiven because Christ earned it for people.¹⁷

We have taught ... that absolution is nothing other than the voice of the gospel itself, which in a general way announces the forgiveness of sins free of charge because of Christ to all who repent and believe the gospel. The voice of the gospel is applied in private absolution to individuals who desire it, in order to give them more solid and more certain comfort ... In this way, absolution gives comfort to fearful and alarmed consciences, to keep them from doubting that the comfort of the gospel belongs also personally to them and that the good deeds of the Mediator, who is promised in the gospel in a general way to all believers, have been given and applied also personally to them.¹⁸

Private absolution is different from the absolution the whole congregation receives, but it is not different in essence, only in form. The Christian who is strong enough to take to heart the absolution he receives in church has received just as much as the Christian who is absolved in private. That absolution is only needed because of human weakness.

Christ himself used private absolution. "Your sins are forgiven," he said to the paralytic. Every herald of the gospel, both before and after Christ's birth, has used private absolution. When Nathan said to David, "The Lord has taken away your sins," or when Paul made sure to have the incestuous man in Corinth comforted—was that something other than private absolution? Our Lord said, "If you forgive anyone his sins." Already in those words lies the full power to apply absolution also to the individual.

Luther writes:

Our God is not so stingy that he would have allowed us only one absolution and only one word of comfort for the strengthening and comforting of our consciences.¹⁹

Chr. Chemnitz writes:

For his part, God has different mechanisms and means through which he offers people the body and blood of Christ. Name them? First of all, there is the word of the gospel. It offers us Christ's body and blood for spiritual eating and drinking, according to the Savior's words in John 6:53f. Then there is the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, which offers the same thing, but for sacramental eating and drinking.

In the same way, when you talk about absolution, there are two mechanisms and means through which God offers and distributes forgiveness of sins to human beings. Name them? 1. There is the word of the gospel that the whole congregation receives. 2. There is the word of absolution, which is, as it were, the word of the gospel made more specific.

... And indeed it is the same grace and the same forgiveness of sins, but it is offered and received through different means and mechanisms.²⁰

When you get to the bottom of it, it isn't simply different mechanisms. It is different recipients of God's grace. The absolution that the whole congregation receives sets many people free from sin. As Spener's *Catechism Tables* say, private absolution is "when a specific" (individual) "person, repenting of his sins, has someone tell him either that in general his sins are forgiven or that specifically this or that sin, which is particularly bothering his conscience, is forgiven."²¹

¹⁷ *Examination of the Council of Trent*, Genf. ed., 1614, vol. II, p. 197.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

¹⁹ S. Walther, *Sermons*, p. 320.

²⁰ *Brevis instructio futuri ministri ecclesiae*, cited in *Lehre und Wehre*, 1878, p. 79f.

²¹ Adapted by Starke, p. 285.

IV. Private absolution is not absolutely necessary. However, the churches should keep practicing it because of its unique advantages.

It is not absolutely necessary. The church can continue without it. The church can give out the same forgiveness in the absolution that the whole congregation receives. As Luther says, the keys are "chiefly preached." They are "the power to teach and not only to absolve." The New Lutherans disagree with this. Luther writes about it:

We consider private absolution to be very Christian and comforting. We think that the church should keep practicing it. However, we cannot and shall not load down the conscience so heavily as though there should be no forgiveness of sins except only through private absolution.²²

That is where Luther always stood.

In the year 1536, the theologians of Wittenberg and of Upper Germany met to draw up the Wittenberg Concord. This document dealt with absolution and going to confession. In Upper Germany, the practice of going to confession had fallen by the way. Concerning this, Seckendorf reports:

Bucer reported on absolution and going to confession. He said that they indeed recognize such practices as wholesome. In the beginning they were in common use. But they have since fallen out of use, because people had trouble explaining them. Now they diligently instruct the youth in the catechism and seek the reintroduction of these practices. To the same end, there is renewed instruction of the adults. Luther was content with this report.²³

One may therefore force private absolution on no Christian. Whoever is not driven to private absolution by his own desire for it may make use of the absolution the whole congregation hears. You would step on the toes of Christian freedom if you wanted to make it a matter of conscience for everyone to use exclusively private absolution. C. Dannhauer writes:

In the Article of the Augsburg Confession, private absolution is established, and then Christian freedom is also granted.

Fr. Bechmann:

Many churches of the Augsburg Confession retain in practice only the public confession of sins ... This is allowed. But as we do this out of Christian freedom, so in other churches of the Augsburg Confession going to confession in private is retained along with it.

Balth. Meisner:

None of our teachers has reproved or condemned the practice of an absolution the whole congregation hears ... as a godless practice. For, by God's grace, we know that the word of absolution, which the church's minister announces there in the name and by the authority of Christ to those confessing their sins as a group, is the same word which is applied in our church, not to everyone as a group but to each individual. Therefore we say that the group absolution is true and efficacious, but the individual absolution is not only true and efficacious, but rather it is also a more appropriate absolution.²⁴

So, when it says, in our article, "About confession we teach that one should retain *privatam absolutionem* and not let it disappear," that doesn't mean that you should force the reluctant into it with ordinances and laws.

A Christian congregation can certainly freely establish in its church by-laws the exclusive use of private absolution, but only as long as they agree on it. Also, they must not use this ordinance to put down every

²² Tenth Report to the Assembled Synod of Missouri, p. 37.

²³ A.a.O.S., 1532.

²⁴ cf. Walther, *Pastoral Theology*, p. 158.

objection brought forth against it. Rather, they have a duty to treat consciences considerately and even show leniency toward the weak when necessary.

Only by teaching how splendid private absolution is can you coax anxious consciences to come to you and get it. The gospel won't let itself be preserved by means of the law.²⁵ If preaching about the special comfort and benefit of private absolution isn't able to get the people coming, then it's laughable to try and help things along with church ordinances. Nothing comes out of that but dead, ceremonial shopkeeping, an *opus operatum* mentality, and hypocritical Pharisaism that disdainfully looks down on other congregations.

But, even if not absolutely necessary, private absolution is still so comforting that for this reason it is to be preserved in the church. Luther writes:

When you go to confession (n.b., private confession), you also have the advantage that the word is applied to your person alone. For in preaching it flies out to everyone in general and, although it goes to you also, you aren't as sure about it. But here it can't get to anyone but you alone.²⁶

In the absolution that the whole congregation receives, the riches of God's mercy are poured out onto the whole assembly. But in private absolution it is applied to each individual. Whoever takes hold of it, actually has just as much in one as in the other. But that is where the terrified conscience has trouble. Troubled people don't deny that the world may be absolved, but they cannot include themselves along with the world. That grace is too big for them. For they always have their eyes on their own unworthiness, and they build their comfort more on the condition of their heart than on the word of grace. Hypocrites are always strong enough to find themselves included with the absolution the whole congregation receives. Methodists and perfect saints need no props or crutches for their faith. Luther, however, writes:

I would have been overcome and strangled by the devil long ago, if going to confession this way had not preserved me.

Since we have to have a lot of comfort, because we should be fighting the devil, death, and hell—and even overcoming them—then we must let no weapon be taken from us. Rather we must make sure our armor stays whole: that the comfort of God stays in its place. For you do not yet know what kind of trouble and work it'll cost you to fight against the devil.²⁷

He often ran three times a day to Dr. Bugenhagen in order to get himself absolution from him. He wrote to the people of Frankfurt:

If a thousand worlds, and a thousand more, were mine, then I would rather lose it all than let this habit of going to confession drop off even the smallest little bit in the churches.²⁸

That private absolution is now so little desired is due primarily to the [false] security of these last days.²⁹ Nobody wants to be sick. The wounds don't burn: that's why we see so little desire for the medicine. The proper recognition of sin is missing. Luther writes in his letter of warning to the people of Frankfurt:

Those who say, "We do as the Spirit moves us," because they are secure and know nothing about sorrow and temptation, readily despise the medicine and comfort.

To troubled and tempted souls, this individual comfort from the gospel is highly necessary.

Because of that, no pastor may allow anyone to forbid that he administer private absolution. His office demands that he appropriate the full comfort of the gospel for each person who desires it. A congregation that would forbid such of him would, in so doing, relieve him of his office. After his fall, Peter was stuck in a great

²⁵ cf. *Luth. Wks.*, Vol. XI (St. Louis ed), par. 16.

²⁶ Tenth Report to the Assembled Synod, p. 37.

²⁷ cf. Walther, *Sermons*, p. 320.

²⁸ Seckendorf, *loco cit.*, p. 1343.

²⁹ cp. Walther, Sermon for the 19th Sun. after Trinity.

temptation, so the Lord also allowed him to be comforted individually. "But go, tell his disciples and Peter," the angel said to the women, Mk. 16:7. Peter no longer dared to count himself as one of the disciples; therefore, grace visited him all on his own. Here an example is given to us for how to carry out our ministries. We don't want to force private absolution on anyone, but neither should anyone bar us from it. Luther writes in association with Jonas and Melanchthon:

Although we won't let anyone be forced or pressured to go to [private] confession with their mortal sins,... still even less will we put up with someone who wants to forbid going to confession and thereby thrust absolution out of the church.³⁰

The antithesis of our article is directed against that kind of forbidding, as follows from a comparison with Article 11 of the Articles of Schwabach and Torgau.

Indeed, it is not to be denied that our fathers wished to preserve universal use of private absolution. Prince George of Anhalt says in his first sermon for the Eighth Sunday after Trinity:

Besides this, neither can we praise those who do away with going to confession and private absolution in the church and don't want to give rise to it again, any more that we can praise those who ignore the abuses it brings with itself, because indeed the use and reform of these practices are very serviceable for the instruction and comfort of simple and troubled consciences. For what can be more comforting than when the father confessor, in God's stead, lays hands on you, absolves you, and says to you individually, *'Tibi remittuntur peccata tua,'* 'your sins are forgiven you? Similarly it is also useful and necessary that you and others are then individually warned against sins and urged to fruits of repentance. For, although it happens in a general way also in the sermon, it indeed is more moving in such Christian *private colloquio* and special conversations. For it grabs you much more strongly and assuringly when it is said especially to you as an individual.³¹

But when here, as in the Smalcald Articles, Part III, Art. 8, the examination of the youth and the instruction of the simple are counted among the advantages of private confession and absolution, then it should be noted that this aim is met among us also through communion announcement.

Where, as in many congregations, a confessional address precedes private confession, upon which the penitents push their way to the sacristy in order to recite the confessional formula and have themselves absolved, there an examination and a soul-nurturing conversation is hardly possible. For, as soon as someone stays in the sacristy longer than the usual time, a rumor starts up in the congregation. When, what is more, as in large congregations, the people have to sit waiting for hours, they lose their devotion and patience.

To that kind of private confession is still to be preferred a public confession of sins with preceding communion announcement. For then the latter gives occasion for a soul-nurturing conversation. There one can also in private layout the comfort of absolution and apply it to the troubled conscience, so that, even with confession of sins being done by the congregation all at once, private absolution is preserved. In this way, each year many more souls would partake of the comfort of private absolution than the statistical tables of the synodical reports give proof of. But our fathers didn't want the institution of going to confession if it were going to be handled in such a way that really frustrates its entire purpose.

May it be our earnest striving to bring back to the fore the institution of going to confession, which we received from our fathers and which gives occasion to spread out before the eyes of sinners all the riches of God's grace. But, after this same institution has once fallen into disuse—indeed that happened in part already in Reformation times, and then the forces of pietism and rationalism finished it off—there would be nothing more foolish than to want to introduce it again through church rules. In practice, that would be a commingling of law and gospel. It would lead, on one hand, to endless strife and, on the other hand, to Pharisaism and dead orthodoxy. Then the floodgates of destruction would really start to gush. For there is nothing more corrupting than when the devil enters in under the mask of orthodoxy, as is to be seen in the still-remaining ruins of the

³⁰ Walch XVI, p. 2177.

³¹ *Writings*, p. 233.

Grabau-ist synagogue. The only thing we can do here is use the preaching of the law to awaken a hunger for grace and use the preaching of private absolution's splendid comforts to coax the poor sinner to come for it. Whoever wants to come, come. Whoever doesn't want to come may let it be. We pass judgment on none on this account, for hypocrites force themselves into private just as well as public absolution. We only say this much about it: those who do stay away are only prejudiced against it because of how poorly they understand it.

**V. Private absolution presupposes private confession;
nevertheless, not a recounting of all sins.**

There exist congregations which have group confession of sins, whereupon follows absolution for the individuals. Sure, you can submit in good conscience to an ordinance like that, but only insofar as besides this the people practice personal announcement for communion. Still a situation like that is and remains abnormal. Private absolution requires private confession of sins.

All this is is the individual expressing a desire for the comfort of private absolution. Going to confession means, says Luther:

... wanting absolution. For this, it is enough even to confess you are a sinner, admitting and agreeing that makes you guilty. More should not be demanded nor be imposed, as far as recounting sins by name, all or some, many or few, unless you decide on your own that you want to talk about something that especially burdens your conscience and in which you need instruction and counselor special comfort. The young, simple people often need this, and other people, too.³²

Christ could absolve without the sinner expressing a desire for it, for he knew well what was inside human beings. Human beings, however, cannot see into the heart. That's why confession is necessary.

We admit that scripture doesn't expressly command it. Private confession of sins is never demanded in scripture. It is only assumed.

People won't come where they can get salvation unless temptation and anxiety over sin is driving them there. Thus the Jews confessed their sins to John the Baptist and then received baptism as an efficacious means of grace. No command, rather the hunger for grace, drove them to it.

The papists sought very eagerly for a place in Scripture which commands people to go to confession. Already the fourth ecumenical council, at Chalcedon (451 AD), wanted to cite James 5:16.³³ But our Apology answers, "But this does not speak of the specific confession to be made to priests but of the reconciliation of brethren to each other."³⁴ Sarpi reports about the Council of Trent:

If you wanted to prove the practice of going to confession from Holy Scripture, then you would try to collect all the places in the prophets and psalms in which the words *confiteor* and *confessio* are used. In the Hebrew language, these words denote as much as praise or rather a free confession of one's religion. From that, you misappropriate these words, if you use them to talk about the sacrament of making private confession to a priest. Yes, what is still more senseless, you don't pay any attention to whether the subjects match or not. Rather you look for allegories in the Old Testament and use them to prove that it taught going to confession. Whoever could collect the longest list of those was called the most clever.³⁵

Our Apology pokes fun at such asses:

It is really silly to transfer here the saying of Solomon (Prov. 27:23), "Know well the condition of your flocks." Solomon is not talking about going to confession ... By a marvelous transformation, our opponents make passages of Scripture mean whatever they want them to mean. According to their

³² Erl., Vol. XI, p. 295.

³³ *Magdeburg Centuries*, vol. VIII, p. 118.

³⁴ Art.12, Tappert, p.198.

³⁵ *History of the Council of Trent*, ed. Rambach, vol. III, p. 310.

interpretation, "know" here means to hear confessions ... "flocks" means men. "Stable," we think, means a school whose members are this kind of doctors and orators.³⁶

So then it is still true "that such confession is not commanded by the scriptures, but was instituted by the church."³⁷

The church's practice of going to confession arose out of the public confession lapsed church members made. They told how penitent they were, and then they received public absolution.³⁸ In other words, those who had let themselves be led into the sects, had denied Christ in the persecutions, or had fallen away in some other grave manner, when they wanted to be reconciled again with the church, had to stand in a certain spot at the place of assembly, openly confess their sins, and keep crying and imploring until the church announced the reconciliation. Upon the intercession of martyrs and confessors, the time of penitence would be shortened some. In order to probe the uprightness of the person's penitence, acts of penance would commonly be imposed on the penitent. Tertullian writes about this public confession of sins:

This act is usually expressed and named with a Greek word, *exomologesis*, confession. Through it we confess our sins to the Lord. This is not as though our sins were unknown to him. Rather we confess because satisfaction is determined by what is confessed, so that out of our confession springs up penitence (i.e., external acts of penance), penitence which appeases God. That way, the *Exomologesis* is a human discipline. You throw yourself down and are humble and, at the same time, you try to attract God's mercy by your way of life. Also, there are strictures on clothing and nourishment. Namely, the penitent should lie in sackcloth and ashes. This unfriendly treatment of the self robs the body of its beauty, troubles the soul, and changes the attitude of the parts that sinned. In general, the rule is food and drink only in their simplest form. The penitent is to nourish the soul instead, but more so to feed prayer through fasting, to sigh, to weep, to moan to the Lord day and night, to throw himself down before the priest and to kneel down before his dear God, and finally to place his petition before all the brothers for their intercession...³⁹

Eusebius reports some cases of this public confession of sins.⁴⁰ Among others, he mentions a sectarian bishop Natalis, whom one night an angel is supposed to have so violently scourged and thrashed that in the early morning he ran to the Roman bishop Zephyrinus in order to register for the *Exomologesis*.

But this practice of public confession of sins couldn't be kept up for long. Already Tertullian complains:

Many shun this work. And when they do submit to it, they shun even having their registration for it publicly announced. Or they put it off from one day to the next, as I suppose, they are more mindful of the shame than of salvation. They are like people who contract an ailment in a private part of the body, don't want to expose it to a doctor, and thus go to the grave together with their modesty.⁴¹

Besides when the fallen made their public confession of sins to the church, another self-explanatory custom persisted, "that those whose consciences were made anxious by any kind of matter would ask for counsel from the saints and the people experienced in spiritual things and would be absolved by them."⁴²

Already early on, in an unevangelical way, they seem to have made this voluntary practice of going to confession into a conscience-binding requirement. At least it is commended in the Pseudo-Clementines in *epist. I ad Jacobum*:

If by chance envy or unfaithfulness or anyone of the ailments that we have mentioned above has secretly crept upon someone's heart, then let him not be ashamed, if he suffers concern for his own soul, to confess such to whomever presides over him, who can heal him through God's word and wholesome

³⁶ Art.12, Tappert, p. 197-last sentence is Triglot, p. 283.

³⁷ A.C., Art. 25.

³⁸ cp. *Magdeburg Centuries*, vol.II, p. 89f & Melanchthon's *Loci Communes*, Augusti ed. 1821, p. 151ff.

³⁹ Of Contrition and Penance, ch. 9, *Opp.* Deutsch by Fr. Ant. Of Bernard, vol.II, p. 32f.

⁴⁰ *Church History*, Book V, ch.28, and Book VI, ch. 34.

⁴¹ loc. cit. II, p. 33.

⁴² Melanchthon, loc. cit., p. 154.

counsel. Then, through unwounded faith and good works, he can escape the punishment of eternal fire and gain the reward of lasting life.

Peter gave order that a person should watch over the dealings of his life at every hour and have God before his eyes in every place. When evil thoughts come near his heart, he should, steadfast in Christ, at once knock them to pieces and reveal them to the priest of the Lord.⁴³

To be sure, Peter didn't teach that way. Plus, the Pseudo-Clementine letters are much too muddy of a source to prove things from. But it does go to show this much: that already in an earlier time they strove to make it a law for people to list their sins. They reached the point where they gradually changed the *Exomologesis* into a private confession of sins and expanded the obligation to go to confession, no longer only for gross, public sins, but also for secret ones. They still had a public confession of sins in front of the congregation, but only for people who had been excommunicated and were coming back penitent.

Already in the third century, private confession was pronounced to be necessary. So reports *The Magdeburg Centuries*:

That private confession was customary, in which one confessed offenses as well as bad thoughts, becomes evident just on the authority of Cyprian,⁴⁴ where he expressly says—even in little sins that did not make a person godless—it was necessary that one come to *Exomologesis*, and he commands that it should happen frequently.⁴⁵

Those who confessed slight sins in this way would then have their lives examined, to judge whether they had done correct penance. This comes out in Cyprian, too.⁴⁶ From the same,⁴⁷ it becomes evident that there were standard acts of penance imposed on each person in proportion to the offense. Also Tertullian thought the same thing in his book on repentance:

After that, they would be absolved through the bishop and clergy laying on their hands and be granted communion privileges.⁴⁸

Out of the fourth century Sozomenus reports about the confessional rites introduced in many Western churches:

They (the priests) appoint one to be an elder. He is the one whose manner of life is the best. And he is also discreet and intelligent. To him those priests who have sinned should go and confess what they have done.⁴⁹

But at Constantinople, Bishop Nektarius, in the year 391, completely abolished the confessional because of a crime committed by a deacon at private confession and a scandal that resulted.

At Rome, however, the confession of sins in front of the congregation had survived alongside private confession. It was Leo the Great (d. 461) who first ordered that from then on only the private confession should be kept. He wrote:

Out of fear of God, some do not shrink to blush in front of men. This shows their abundant faith and it seems praiseworthy. But although not all sins are such that one would be afraid to do in public what penance requires, yet such an unpleasant (*improbabilis*) custom should be abolished. Abolishing it will not take away much of penance's saving power. That which is done either by the shame or by the fear of revealing one's deeds to one's enemies: apart from all that, the decree of the law can still level the person

⁴³ *Magd. Cent.*, Vol. III, p. 84.

⁴⁴ Sermon 5, *de lapsis*, and cf. third epistle, 14 and 16.

⁴⁵ vol. V, epistle 3.

⁴⁶ cf. 3, epistle 16.

⁴⁷ Sermon 5, *de lapsis*.

⁴⁸ *Cent.* III, p. 89 A. f.

⁴⁹ *Cent.* IV, p. 238f.

to the ground. It is enough, that is, if every confession which is offered to God is then offered also to the priest, who takes his stand as intercessor for the offences of the penitent.⁵⁰

About this time, it already started to get very dark in the church. Repentance—and already people meant by that mostly the outward acts of penance—was looked upon as the second plank the shipwrecked person had to clamber onto after loss of the first plank, the grace of baptism. All this was what Jerome taught. Going to confession was required not on account of absolution, but in itself, as a good work.

Even Augustine, the great preacher of grace (d. 430), builds on the foundation with a lot of hay and straw. So he writes:

Through going to confession, what was a criminal (*criminale*) act becomes pardonable. And if it is not also at the same time made pure, what was mortal when committed indeed becomes forgivable (*venial*). For the one who, subduing his modesty, denies to God's messenger nothing of that which he has committed, has offered much toward making satisfaction.⁵¹

So great is the power of going to confession, that if there is no priest, one should make confession to his neighbor. For it is often found that the penitent cannot come before a priest because neither time nor place exists for those who desire this. And if the one to whom he will make confession doesn't have the power to absolve him, because he wanted to make confession to a priest, anyone like this who confesses to his companion the baseness of his offenses is worthy of grace.⁵²

There, then, he lays everything on the work of going to confession.

In other places, indeed, Augustine also speaks the other way. "It is good to confess sins, when you get healing afterwards, too," he writes in one place, "for what use is it to discover the sickness but not to apply the medicine?"⁵³ Here he openly lets going to confession mean something only on account of absolution.

But recognition of this fact declined more and more in the church. Going to confession would more and more keep developing into papistic auricular confession. The priest was no longer doctor, but judge. For he was to judge between pardonable and unpardonable sins and keep imposing acts of penance according to the severity of the sins, instead of acting as the one sent by God to impart grace upon grace out of Christ's inexhaustible treasury of indulgences. Self-evidently, as judges, the priests needed to have people list their sins to them, so that they could pass proper sentence.

True, in the sixth century, Olympiodorus spoke his mind against people having to list their sins too specifically.⁵⁴ But his testimony is still only like the voice of one preacher in the wilderness. From the time of Gregory the Great (d. 604) on, it became incumbent upon the monks to hear confessions.⁵⁵ Now the darkness keeps getting thicker. Gregory himself was already so blind that he confused justification with the priest's acquittal of confessed sins.⁵⁶

Also, counterfeit miracles, signs, and wonders must have assisted in entrenching the people's faith in the unconditional necessity of going to confession. Thus, Philibert, in the seventh century, prayed that indeed the tongue of his deaf-mute brother might be loosed, wherewith he could go to confession—and it happened.

Thus also, the Venerable Bede (d. 735) reports of a man who had to visit hell in great terror, because he had stayed away from confession too long.⁵⁷ In the eighth century, it was already custom that all sins had to be confessed.

The Gallican synod at Cabillon of the year 813 reported in its conclusions, ch. 32:

⁵⁰ *Epist.* 13 b. Cf. Buddeus: *Instit. theol. dogm.* II, p. 1275f.

⁵¹ *Opp. ed. Erasmi* IV, p. 744.

⁵² *Ebend.*, p. 745.

⁵³ *Vol. III*, p. 748.

⁵⁴ *Cent.* VI, p. 115.

⁵⁵ *Cent.* VI, p. 165, and VII, p. 74.

⁵⁶ *Cent.* VI, p. 139.

⁵⁷ *Cent.* VII, p. 324.

Some, when they confess their sins to the priests, don't do it completely. But as it is certain that the human being consists of two substances, namely of body and soul..., so, through careful investigation you must search out specific sins in order that you may give a full confession about both substances; namely, so that you confess the sins your body committed just as well as the sins committed by your thoughts alone.⁵⁸

"Whatever evil a person remembers having done, let him disclose it to the priest by going to confession," writes Rhabanus Maurus. (d. 856)⁵⁹ Raymo (d. 853) makes the gloss at Psalm 31:

Although God absolves the sins, ...you must indeed confess to the ministers of the church, because, if you don't go to confession, you are damned on account of your own disobedience. This is shown by Lazarus, who, after he was resurrected, still needed to be loosed.⁶⁰

In the ninth century among the Franks, going to confession before communion, as well as before going to war, was usual.

In the tenth century already, they were giving prominence to the idea that the priest, by the power of his spiritual fatherhood, took the sins of the penitent onto himself.⁶¹

Then they no longer thought they needed proof from Scripture. They knew how to make everything believable through playing with allegories. It seems laughable to us. So Anselm (d. 1109) writes:

You must come to the priests in order to seek absolution. By it, those who have already been purified before God, will also be proven as pure before human beings through the decision of the priests.⁶²

The good man was only born some 1100 years too late for his words to be heeded. It would have been even better had he said that those who are justified before God are reassured of this justification by going to confession. But Hugo of St. Victor (d. 1141) pushed it farther, even maintaining this:

All hope for grace and mercy is in going to confession. No one can be justified of a sin, unless he has previously made confession for it. That's where each man begins to be righteous, where he becomes his own accuser.⁶³

This may be said forever about confessing sins to God. But it is terrible enough to ascribe the Holy Spirit's entire work of grace to our work of going to confession. For such people, the words, "Who can discern his errors?" aren't even in the Scriptures. At this time, going to confession before communion became universal. Richard of St. Victor could already say,

Anyone who went to communion without going to confession and receiving absolution from the priest, ate and drank judgment on himself, even though he mourned ever so much over his sins.⁶⁴

If something was still lacking to make going to confession into the conscience's most terrible torture rack, then Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) added it. That is, he ordered that not only every sin, but also the smallest detail about every sin, be confessed to the priest. No wonder that the French king St. Louis IX made a confession that lasted a whole six hours. If parsons are magistrates, then there is really nothing to object to regarding this papal decree, for a court case must be investigated down to the last detail. Otherwise, at least up to this time, you could still choose your father confessor for yourself, someone you had confidence in. Then came the decretal of the Fourth Lateran Council, 1215, in which confession of every sin became universal,

⁵⁸ *Cent. VIII*, p. 188, *IX*, p. 130.

⁵⁹ *Cent. IX*, p. 72.

⁶⁰ *Cent. IX*, p. 167.

⁶¹ *Cent. X*, p. 91; *XII*, p. 257.

⁶² *Cent. XI*, p. 85.

⁶³ *Cent. XII*, p. 250.

⁶⁴ *Cent. XII*, p. 361.

irrepealable church law. After that, each person had to confess his sins once yearly to the pastor who was appointed caretaker of his soul.⁶⁵ From this time on came no essential further change. The highpoint of clerical presumption had been reached.

In the Reformation period, our fathers abolished this martyrdom of consciences. Going to confession should be "free."⁶⁶ Indeed, they did not on that account throw out going to confession. Luther writes:

For although, strictly speaking, it is not a part of repentance and also is not necessary or commanded, so it indeed serves for this, that one receives absolution.⁶⁷

To be sure, in isolated areas going to confession was completely abolished. Nevertheless, Luther and his coworkers were very unhappy to see this happen. They rebuked it, but without crossing the line of Christian freedom. Seckendorf commented on a papistic lie that in later times Luther and Melancthon had held going to confession and giving account of one's sins to be necessary:

Luther never demanded the recounting of sins at confession as something necessary. Nor did he teach that those who suppressed confession were darkening the doctrine of forgiveness of sins. Nor did he rebuke other congregations that, instead of having communicants go to confession privately, introduced a preparation service to revive the communicants' repentance and faith. These congregations had the same aim as Luther did, but carried it out in a different way.⁶⁸

Our fathers rebuked in earnest only the religions that put their faith in their feelings, those who go so far as to declare, "What is not bidden is forbidden." It is then completely correct when, to the question, "Is going to confession like this absolutely necessary for the forgiveness of sins?" Spener answers:

No, because we have no express command about it. But it serves the preachers, so that they may better decide how to do their work of revealing the forgiveness of sins to the penitent. So in our evangelical churches it is held to be a useful ceremony.⁶⁹

Consequently, going to confession has a completely different aim for Lutherans than for papists. The papistic bishops sit on the judge's seat to do this. Therefore the offenders have to lay themselves completely open before the bishops' eyes. The *Catechismus Romanus* is completely correct when it concludes,

The Holy Tridentine Synod has wisely reminded us that there can be no true judgment of a matter nor can righteous moderation be observed in the punishment demanded for crimes, unless the matter is fully known and examined. Therefore it follows from that that all sins be individually revealed to the priests by having the repentant go to confession.⁷⁰

Their only question is who gets to be their judges. But the keys of heaven's kingdom are no judge's sword. They are the office of the gospel. They make those who bear them not into judges, but into stewards of God's mysteries.

When someone objects that a judge must hear a case before pronouncing a sentence, that is irrelevant because the ministry of absolution is about blessings or grace, not about judgment or law. For God is the Judge, who has committed to the apostles, not the office of judges, but the administration of grace, namely, to acquit those who desire it. In addition, they bind and absolve us of sins we do not remember; therefore absolution, which is the voice of the gospel forgiving sins and consoling consciences, does not need an investigation. (Apol., Art. XII)⁷¹

⁶⁵ See the chapter *Omnis utriusque sexus* in Buddeus' *Instit. th. dogm.*, II, p. 1276, and *Cent.* XIII, p. 251.

⁶⁶ Torg. Art. XI.

⁶⁷ E. A. XI, p. 294.

⁶⁸ A. a. O. S., 1772.

⁶⁹ *Simple Explanation of Christian Doctrine*, 1709, p. 690.

⁷⁰ Pt. II, ch. V, quarto XLL, Leipzig, 1856, p. 232.

⁷¹ cp. Tappert, p.197, and Triglot, pp. 281, 283.

To be sure, in a certain sense the one hearing confession might be called a judge. For he should not give dogs what is sacred and should judge to whom the loosing and to whom the binding keys are to be applied. M. Chemnitz writes about this:

Since the keys are not to be used without passing judgment whether to loose or to bind, so the pastors work their way to this judgment in their private conversation with their listeners, whether they are properly self-aware... You lead them to observe their sins. You see if they are earnestly humbled by their sins, if they fear God's wrath and desire to escape from it, if they have a plan to improve. And if you believe they are stuck in specific sins, you question them, too.⁷²

But that is not judging the severity of the sins or deciding which punishments fit them. Rather it is the judgment of a doctor about which medicine to administer. One could then object: a doctor must necessarily investigate the wounds before he prescribes medicine; therefore, also when someone goes to confession sins must necessarily be named. That would be completely correct, if we had various kinds of medicine. Only we have just one general medicine for all sins' wounds. Therefore we testify with our Apology,

Although we approve of confession and maintain that some examination is useful to instruct men better, still it must be controlled, lest consciences be ensnared; for they will never be at rest if they suppose that they cannot obtain the forgiveness of sins unless they list all their sins.⁷³

Certainly when someone goes to confession the pastor should use that as an opportunity for conversation, as the caretaker of that person's soul, at least with the troubled and with young people, and wherever else it seems needed. So Luther writes,

We desire to preserve also the Christian custom of going to confession. There the people are instructed, the faith of the simple is examined, and terrified consciences are comforted. Alongside that, you should preserve the understanding of the gospel and the proclamation of it to the congregation as a whole. In other words, the gospel should be announced publicly to many and the forgiveness of sins announced individually to those believers eager for it.⁷⁴

Those taking communion should announce themselves beforehand to the pastor and from them should be sought an account of their faith as well as the reason they want to commune. Indeed, giving account once a year would be enough. With many, even once a lifetime could be enough.⁷⁵

For going to confession like this happens not only so that they recount their sins, but so that you examine them to see if they can tell you the Lord's Prayer, Creed, Ten Commandments, and what the Catechism teaches. For we are well-experienced in how little the rabble and youth learn from the sermon, if they are not individually questioned and examined.

Here Seckendorf adds the note:

In this connection, it is to be noted that there are those among us to whom Luther's idea is very offensive, who hold no examination or conversation with the simple when they come to confession or beforehand, something Luther sharply and earnestly urged be done. For where this is left off, all that matters is the mere recitation of the formulas for confession and absolution, the steady use of which makes for an indifferent custom that people do not esteem.⁷⁶

That is certainly very correct. As the caretaker of the people's souls, the pastor needs to have this kind of conversation, or else going to confession becomes for many the papistic *opus operatum*. For in many mouths

⁷² *Examen* II, p. 195.

⁷³ Tappert, p. 198—Article XII.

⁷⁴ Seckendorf, a. a. O. S., p. 2357.

⁷⁵ *Ebend.*, p. 587.

⁷⁶ *Ebend.*, p. 1343.

the formula for confession is nothing other than lies and hypocrisy. For such orthodoxists, every day for going to confession is a day for settling accounts, on which you try to hold an accounting with our dear God because of the guilt stored up since the last time at confession. That's why the pietists had grounds and cause to lament over the way the orthodoxists went to confession. A. H. Franke has every right to complain:

It's good for you to go to confession. But what does that consist in? That you confess your sins by repeating preformulated words (whether or not they fit the circumstances of your life) and reciting them once to your father confessor. But if you ask whether the person recognizes his sin in his heart, oh, how little of that you'll find! Nor does any fruit follow it. And with all their habits of going to confession, the people remain unchanged.⁷⁷

Truly our Father doesn't want people going to confession like that. Even if not in the outward form, according to its essence it does not differ much from the papists' way.

If you want to rule out the orthodoxists' way of going to confession, then as the caretaker of the people's souls, you need to converse with them. Indeed, this is not where the preacher searches out secret sins. We have neither the call nor the right to do that. "Concerning confession we teach," declares our Augsburg Confession, "that no one should be compelled to recount sins in detail."⁷⁸ "The enumeration of sins should be left free to everybody to do or not as he will," say the Smalcald Articles.⁷⁹ "When forgiveness of sins was to be announced to penitent sinners, you read nowhere that they [the apostles] had demanded a complete recounting of all the person's sins; rather, it was enough for them if you showed them that you recognized and were sorry for sins, believed in Christ, and desired forgiveness of sins in his name."⁸⁰ "That's how Christ absolved so many. That's how the apostles absolved their own thousands: without demanding that a list of [the person's] sins be recited."⁸¹ "Although in our churches we preserve the practice of individuals going to confession, because it is a chance for good instruction, comforting, and absolution, ...it is taught that the listing of sins, as especially happens with the priests, is neither commanded nor necessary for forgiveness. Much less are sins forgiven on account of it."⁸²

All this is said to protect freedom of conscience. May all papistical conscience-binding be cursed! It is enough if everyone goes to private confession and admits to being a sinner. Nobody can require the person to name even one of his sins.

But we have this freedom for consciences: "Everything is permissible for me'—but not everything is beneficial." This passage gives us direction here, too. All our elders advise a sinner to unburden the conscience, confessing to the father confessor those sins that trouble him. In this sense, the *Small Catechism* commands, "before the pastor we should confess only those sins which we know and feel in our hearts." Luther holds that it's "hardly possible" that a Christian would even have to think hard about what his sins were. Even our Article shows this through the words, "However it is not necessary to enumerate all trespasses and sins." So it is good when some sins are mentioned by name. (Cp., *Torgau Articles*, XI.) It is true our general medicine, the gospel, heals all wounds. But you must also apply it correctly for it to show its power to heal. Right here is the problem for a troubled and attacked conscience. If the preacher, as a doctor for souls, is to help him by putting bandages on the open wound, then it will have to be uncovered first. Basilius M. (d. 379) writes,

As far as going to confession and revealing sins it goes the same way as with physical sickness. For, just like people don't show and uncover their physical sicknesses to anyone and everyone, but only to those who have experience in medical care; so also revealing one's sins has to be done before those who know how to heal them.⁸³

⁷⁷ *Penitential Sermons*, I, p. 74.

⁷⁸ Art. XXV; Tappert, p. 62.

⁷⁹ Pt. III, Art. VIII; Tappert, p. 312.

⁸⁰ *Magd. Cent.* II, p. 383.

⁸¹ Melancthon in *Locis*, p. 154.

⁸² Georg v. Anhalt, *Opp.*, p. 211f.

⁸³ *Opp. Ausg.*, v. 1691, p. 891.

Anyone who never has need of an assistant in order to appropriate the comfort of the gospel to himself, has tasted little of Satan's attacks and would do well to examine himself to be sure he is not already too thoroughly infected with modern self-confidence. The stronger the attack is, the more advisable it is to make the sickness known. Cyprian (d. 254) writes,

When the serpent, the devil, secretly bites someone and infects him with the poison of sin, without anyone else being in on the secret, and the affected person keeps quiet about it and doesn't do penance or confess his wound to his brother and teacher, then it won't be easy for the teacher to use his healing tongue for the person's good.⁸⁴

"An unrecognized wound takes a long time to heal," says Jerome.⁸⁵ Even Spener answers a question about this very beautifully:

Why do you have to confess some specific sins?—It isn't as though those sins wouldn't be forgiven, because of some special divine command to specifically confess them. Rather it is because of the great benefit. In that way, the preacher could meet with his penitent member about such sins and prove useful to him by giving much better instruction for his conscience, advice that furthers his salvation, and powerful comfort.⁸⁶

Not to lay a yoke on the necks of the disciples, but to be able to advise the poor conscience, is why our fathers have recommended the listing of specific sins. In the Cologne Reformation, 1543, it was commanded,

Going to private confession will remain beneficial, if only the sins that especially press the conscience are named, and counsel and comfort are desired.⁸⁷

Hollaz says,

We hold that the specific confession of especially great offenses is necessary, not absolutely, but conditionally, to facilitate the more complete loosing and instructing of the conscience.⁸⁸

If going to confession is to demonstrate its full power to bless and comfort, then such open confessing of sins is necessary. But where it has become a mere formality, any benefit for the congregation is out of the question. If, in the previous century, going to confession would still have been what it was in the beginning, then it would have well withstood the tests of time. Proper confessional practice preserves itself. The orthodoxist's kind of confessional practice is an empty shell. A. H. Franke writes,

Perhaps you have heard how, under the papacy, the practice of going to confession and confessing sins was greatly and widely misused. This was a great burden for consciences, such as when you couldn't comfort yourself with the forgiveness of sins unless you opened up about your each and every sin to the father-confessor... Maybe you hear of such a thing now, but I say many have fallen over to the other *extremum* and think that the congregations would be better advised to have people completely omit confessing their sins, as if it were something neither necessary nor useful... But we should resolve to go another way, taken from our catechism, following the altogether different teaching the blessed Luther gave about the confession of sins: that "before God we plead guilty of all sins, but before the pastor we confess only those sins we know and feel in our hearts." Also, for this reason he in no way wanted to hear about abolishing the confession of sins: he feared that timid consciences would thereby be deprived of much comfort, as also experience shows... The above words stand in the catechism, sure, but they unfortunately are left out in practice.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ Chemnitz, *Examen*, II, p. 194.

⁸⁵ Ebend.

⁸⁶ *Simp. Explan.*, p. 691.

⁸⁷ Seckendorf, a.a.O., p. 2217.

⁸⁸ *Examen*, p. 1155.

⁸⁹ *Penitential Sermons*, II, p. 315f.

The self-humiliation that is connected with confession of sins is very beneficial against the old Adam. "Nothing is as deadly to sin as self-accusation and self-condemnation," says Chrysostom.⁹⁰ Luther writes to Sickingen,

But our going to confession willingly and gladly should first off stimulate in us the holy pains of the cross, that is, the disgrace and shame of one person baring himself in front of another, accusing himself, and exposing himself to ridicule. That is a precious part of bearing the holy cross. Oh, if we knew what kind of "punishment" such voluntary shame would meet up with—how it makes God gracious, when a person makes himself nothing and humbles himself to honor God—we would find a confessional to go to, even if we had to dig it out from under the earth or fetch it from a thousand miles away."⁹¹

But what "stimulated" Luther to go to confession is what scares us away from it! The live-it-up spirit of the end times has infected us all. The world boasts of its sins, and we Christians are full of false shame. That shows we are too fond of our sinful flesh to be as unmerciful toward it as we should. We are missing the hunger and thirst we should have. For it is true that going to confession is not hard if you have true penitence.

Many think they would confess their sins to an angel, but not to a sinful person. That is only an excuse, from our evil hearts. To comfort us, God has made people into father-confessors. "The cure comes from where the sickness is," says Augustine.

If going to private confession and doing it right are to become commonplace, then we pastors must be the ones to start it. Who needs it more than we do? Where does temptation more dearly love to live than in the parsonage? And how can you emphatically advise everyone to take a medicine, the healing powers of which you haven't experienced yourself? If going to confession is a school unfamiliar to us, how can we initiate others into it? I confess that I have still made scanty use of it. With this confession I want to conclude the lecture and make excuse for its faults.

⁹⁰ *Chrysostom's Sermons*, by Hefele, p. 135.

⁹¹ 10th Gen. Syn. Rep., p. 38.