

Small Catechism—Fifth Chief Part—Office of the Keys

Rev. Adam Filipek

St. John writes in 1 John 1:8-9, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." These words confront us with the terrifying reality that we are all sinners deserving of God's wrath. To say otherwise is to be a liar. Yet these words also give great comfort and certainty to sinners, namely that those who confess their sins are forgiven and cleansed. There is no doubt about who God is or what he does when a sinner confesses his/her sins. God is faithful. He is just. He forgives. He cleanses. No wonder Luther, when speaking of confession and absolution in his Large Catechism, writes, "Thus we teach what a wonderful, precious, and comforting thing confession is, and urge that such a precious blessing should not be despised, especially when we consider our great need."

What does it mean to confess our sins? The Small Catechism simply says confession has two parts: that I confess my sins, and that I receive absolution, or forgiveness. But the Large Catechism further defines confession as lamenting my sin and a desire for comfort and restoration of the soul. Moreover, Absolution is defined as a work that God does through the Word that he places on the lips of another. And while it is true that individual Christians "forgive one another, as the Lord has forgiven you" (Col. 3:13), Luther, in his Catechism's fifth chief part, focuses not on individual Christians forgiving one another's individual sins but rather on the Office of the Keys, established and given for the sake of his church when he breathed on his disciples and said, in John 20:22-23, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." In other words, Luther focuses on the forgiveness of all your sins that God gives in his Church, through the mouth of his representative, your Pastor.



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Hence every Divine Service, God is at work forgiving your sins through the mouth of your pastor who speaks, "Upon this your confession, I, by virtue of my office, as a called and ordained servant of the Word, announce the grace of God unto all of you, and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." And if that were too little, Christ also gives us the opportunity to receive Holy Absolution, not just publicly on Sunday Mornings, but by means of private confession, which is Luther's (and the reformers') primary means of confession and why he incorporated his short order of it into the Small Catechism.

What a wonderful, precious, and comforting gift God has given us in Confession and Absolution. For here is where I, a sinner, hear Christ say to me, "I forgive you all your sins!" Therefore let us not neglect but make use of this precious gift.

A Short form of Confession

You should speak to the confessor thus: Reverend and dear sir, I beseech you to hear my confession, and to pronounce forgiveness to me for God's sake.

Confessor: Proceed!

Penitent: I, a poor sinner, confess myself before God guilty of all sins; especially I confess before you that I am a man-servant, a maidservant, etc. But, alas, I serve my master unfaithfully; for in this and in that I have not done what they commanded me; I have provoked them, and caused them to curse, have been negligent [in many things] and permitted damage to be done; have also been immodest in words and deeds, have quarreled with my equals, have grumbled and sworn at my mistress, etc. For all this I am sorry, and pray for grace; I want to do better.

A master or mistress may say thus:

In particular I confess before you that I have not faithfully trained my children, domestics, and wife [family] for God's glory. I have cursed, set a bad example by rude words and deeds, have done my neighbor harm and spoken evil of him, have overcharged and given false ware and short measure.

And whatever else he has done against God's command and his station, etc.

But if any one does not find himself burdened with such or greater sins, he should not trouble himself or search for or invent other sins, and thereby make confession a torture, but mention one or two that he knows. Thus: In particular I confess that I once cursed; again, I once used improper words, I have once neglected this or that, etc. Let this suffice.

But if you know of none at all (which, however is scarcely possible), then mention none in particular, but receive the forgiveness upon your general confession which you make before God to the confessor.

Then shall the confessor say: God be merciful to thee and strengthen thy faith! Amen.

Furthermore: Dost thou believe that my forgiveness is God's forgiveness?

Answer: Yes, dear sir.

Then let him say: As thou believest, so be it done unto thee. And by the command of our Lord Jesus Christ I forgive thee thy sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen. Depart in peace.

Hence every Divine Service, God is at work forgiving your sins through the mouth of your pastor who speaks, "Upon this your confession, I, by virtue of my office, as a called and ordained servant of the Word, announce the grace of God unto all of you, and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." And if that were too little, Christ also gives us the opportunity to receive Holy Absolution, not just publicly on Sunday Mornings, but by means of private confession, which is Luther's (and the reformers') primary means of confession and why he incorporated his short order of it into the Small Catechism.

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