

Introduction:

"When I urge you to go to confession, I am simply urging you to be a Christian."

The above quote from Martin Luther's Large Catechism is not merely a pious phrase exhorting pious practice. Nor is it an example of Luther's well-known use of hyperbole. Confession and Christianity are indeed so intimately entwined as to be used almost synonymously. The practice of confession and absolution as revealed in Scripture and professed in the Book of Concord stands at the heart of Christian faith and life. Christian confession is not simply a historic practice of the church or a pious ritual; it is a profound summary of the whole Christian faith.

In confession and absolution the two great emphases of Christianity -- man as sinner and God, in Christ, as man's Savior -- are brought sharply and unmistakably into focus. In confession we humbly and sorrowfully admit all that we are: sinners in need of divine mercy. In absolution, we receive that which God so earnestly desires to give: forgiveness, consolation, and the firm assurance that the death and resurrection of his only Son have overcome our sin.

Given its central place in Christianity, it is not surprising then that confession and absolution stood also at the heart of the Reformation. As a young monk plagued by the knowledge of his own sinfulness, Martin Luther sought refuge in the confessional. Sadly, however, confession as practiced by the church of his day proved as burdensome to the conscience as did the sin for which he sought absolution. It was his search for forgiveness, for a gracious God, that plunged Luther into the word of God. And it was here in God's own word that he found the glorious and consoling truth that this forgiveness is a free, unconditional gift, won by Jesus Christ and freely bestowed in his name.

It was this good news of forgiveness that Luther and his fellow Reformers so unceasingly proclaimed from the pulpit, in the confessional, and even in the home. This good news of absolution, forgiveness for the sake of and in the name of Christ, continues to remain central to the faith and life of the Lutheran church. The reason is simple; when one is urged to confess their sin and to be absolved, one is simply urged to be a Christian.

All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New International Version. Quotes from the Lutheran Confessions are provided in the translation of Theodore Tappert.