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In Many, Much

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Pastors of large churches have always had to suffer from well-meaning brothers who masked their sometimes subconscious envy behind a hearty "I'll bet you just wear yourself out on that big job." In addition, two movements of thought have recently bedeviled them. One is that God is dead, and perhaps the whole operation should be turned into a used-car lot. The other is that the parish is dead, that it is a shame for people to come on a Sunday and be comforted when they ought to give up all and live in tenements. In all three corrosive comments is the grain of uncomfortable truth. It *is* hard to keep up with the case load of human need. It *is* hard to remember and to help people remember that God is very much alive and His Christ is with them. It *is* hard not to be discouraged over the apathy not merely of the nonattenders but the attenders.

For refreshment we shall turn to what may at first seem an unlikely source of stimulation to ministry: those acts of the parish pastorate which aim at the whole congregation and seem most apt to become victims of depersonalization. An earlier generation called them "public," and often contemporary pastoral theory has urged to rescue the pastorate from them and to stress the individual approach, clinical pastoral care, counseling one by one. These studies propose to take away nothing from

Seelsorge. But their purpose is to stress the huge value, when properly exploited, of those acts of the pastorate in which large groups are functioning — value for the church, the body of Christ. There are many such acts, and we single out three of them arbitrarily — preaching to the parish, administration of Holy Communion, and public absolution.

Basic to all these essays is that theology of the pastorate which views it not simply as a service to God or people but that service in which God's servants are served so that they serve. This is inherent not only in the title "pastor," but especially in *ἐπίσκοπος*, "overseer." "The things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:2). The astonishing quotation from Luther introduces this approach to the pastorate:

For when I preach, when we come together as a congregation, this is not my word or my doing, but is done for the sake of all of you and for the sake of the whole church. It is only that it is necessary that there be one who speaks and is the spokesman by the commission and consent of the others, who, by reason of the fact that they listen to the preaching, all accept and confess the Word and thus also teach others. Thus, when a child is baptized, this is done not only by the pastor, but also the sponsors, who are witnesses, indeed, the whole church. For Baptism, just like the Word and Christ Himself, is the common possession of all Christians. So also they all pray and sing and give thanks together; here there is

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nothing that one possesses or does for himself alone; but what each one has also belongs to the other. (Sermon at the Dedication of the Castle Church in Torgau, Oct. 5, 1544, in *Luther's Works*, Am. Ed., 51, 343)

I. IN PREACHING

A. *The Meaning of Preaching*

Preaching to the parish is put in a better light if we call it the Sacrament of Holy Preaching. Roman Catholic theologians are affirming that it is indeed a vehicle of the grace of God to man and bail themselves out of the predicament of the eighth sacrament either by simply saying that they are allowed to have only seven, or by saying that in the Word God talks to man, in the sacrament man sacrifices himself to God. We are ready to define a sacrament as God's conveying His grace to man by an act which He has instituted, coupled with a visible sign which the church is to employ. The words of institution of the Sacrament of Holy Preaching are Jesus' own on the evening of the first Easter, spoken to His disciples: "This . . . is what is written: that the Messiah is to suffer death and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that in His name repentance bringing the forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to all nations. Begin from Jerusalem: it is you who are the witnesses to all this. And mark this: I am sending upon you My Father's promised gift; so stay here in this city until you are armed with the power from above." (Luke 24: 45-49 NEB)

Preaching not merely says religious or divine words; in the Biblical sense it is the Word of God, the action by which God invades human existence, and its very institution is a word of God, Christ insti-

tuting it to be done till His return. "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God" (Rom. 10:17). "I have delivered Thy Word to them . . . I have sent them into the world, and for their sake I now consecrate Myself, that they too may be consecrated by the truth. It is not for these alone that I pray, but for those also who through their words put their faith in Me" (John 17:14, 18-20). "Go forth to every part of the world and proclaim the Good News to the whole creation." (Mark 16:15 NEB)

How can words do such great things? It is not the words indeed that do them, but the Word of God which is in and with the words, and faith which trusts such Word of God in the words. For without the Word of God the words are simple words, and no preaching; but with the Word of God the words are preaching, that is, a precious Word of life and the power of God to salvation, as St. Paul says, Rom. 1:16; 1 Thess. 2:13.

What makes preaching a word of God? This, say the words of institution, that they cause the plan of God which He revealed in the Scriptures and brought into completion by the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, to come home and be applied to the person who is hearing; that God's action in Christ moves the listener to "repentance to the forgiveness of sins," that is, the trusting grip on God's favor for Jesus' sake and the turning away from all despair or apathy or self-reliance to that grace and mercy of God in Christ.

Finally: What is the visible sign in preaching? A stock argument against classifying preaching as a sacrament has been that the Word that is preached isn't exactly visible. But the words of institu-

tion do not speak only of the Word preached, but of the witness who is preaching the Word and doing the preaching and seeing that the preaching is being done.

B. *The Congregation and Preaching*

When He instituted preaching, of whom was Jesus thinking as preachers? The apostles obviously, as John 17 suggests. Saint Paul made the preaching of the Gospel an intrinsic element of his own apostolate (2 Cor. 2:14 to 6:10) and drew his entire life and behavior into the witness of the Gospel which he gave. But others, too, preached, such as Stephen and Philip, his associate (Acts 6:1 ff.). Preaching was not confined to addressing groups, for Jesus could be preached to one person at a time (Acts 8:35); or to the witness in formal addresses, for the sharing of the body and blood of Christ was a preaching of Christ's death (1 Cor. 11:26). In fact the New Testament tends to weaken the line between the person who is giving the address of preaching and the Christians who are listening. True, there is a special charism of preaching, of "outspeech," but it is one which many Christians should desire to possess (1 Cor. 14:39); the early services of Christian worship gave opportunity for many people to give their witness (1 Cor. 14:26). The special charism involved a unique and trained aptitude for causing people to hear the Word and receive the power of God and not be distracted by the speaker (2 Tim. 2:24-26). But actually in every Christian the faith that saves is simultaneously a conviction of the heart and an affirmation of the lips (Rom. 10:9-10). This means that the worshiping congregation is preaching as much as it is listening, and the preacher is the

initiator of a message that is spoken on; he is a servant to set out a word that is shared and not merely absorbed.

Interestingly enough, communication theory through the past 20 years has been drawing attention first to the fact that good public address elicits feedback, and subsequently to the principle that persuasive speech must operate by a process of dialog. This does not mean two men in the chancel, which may make for even less communication than one (as I have heard Reuel Howe affirm). But it does mean that the listener thinks of himself not as being spoken to but as speaking, of retorting to the speaker and speaking on to the fellow hearer. The test of involvement of impassioned address is not just that the speaker got a sore throat from it, but that the larynges of the listeners are as tired as his.

However, we have to do here with more than communication theory. We are here concerned for the meaning of the worshiping church, the company of God's saints serving to the building up in faith and life of one another. There is one thing in the world that contributes to that building up: the remembrance, applied and real, of Jesus Christ suffering, dying, and rising so that the listener be rescued from death and sent out on the tasks that God gives him. As the hearer sits in the pew, he is already engaged in such a task, namely, of sharing the Word of God to the end of common energy and consecration. As the preacher preaches to the congregation, he is not simply sowing the seed of the Gospel on the soil of the human heart, but he is filling seedbags and overseeing many sowers at work. The more the better! Here we can merge two Latin proverbs: *non multa, sed multum* — not many, but much;

and *multum in parvo*, much in little, to become: *in multis multum*; in a big congregation being preached to we have many; but oh, the great thing that is coming through them all, the Word for one another.

C. *Engaging the Congregation in Preaching*

Isn't this really an empty ideal, that Christians listening to a sermon are actually to be preaching it to one another? Not really. Every preacher has a few situations set up in front of him for sounding boards of his message: bright-eyed married couples, perhaps, where the wife shyly looks up at the husband after a telling paragraph to see whether he got and appreciated it; youngsters jiggling with interest as they are directly addressed in the sermon. The smiles of listeners are more direct indications of the process, I suppose, than the frowns. But one gesture of the listener is basic to the process, during a parish sermon, and that is that he looks at the next person and not just at the preacher. Sometimes we do it formally: in the middle of the sermon we have the congregation rise, face one another across the aisle, and join in a rousing stanza or two that underscores what we just said.

The point is that when this sort of communication goes on it had better not be just a by-product of a sermon. The New Testament has several lists of ingredients of common worship and of Christian conversation, and curiously few of them include formal addresses by some professional. "Speak to one another in psalms, hymns, and songs; sing and make music in your hearts to the Lord; and in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ give thanks every day for everything to our God and Father"

(Eph. 5:19-20 NEB). "Let us be firm and unswerving in the confession of our hope (profession, outspeech), for the Giver of the promise may be trusted. We ought to see how each of us may best arouse others to love and active goodness, not staying away from our meetings, as some do, but rather encouraging one another, all the more because you see the Day drawing near" (Heb. 10:23-25 NEB). The vitality for good works, for mutual love and the undertaking of the tasks of God, comes from that pondering of the work of our great High Priest Jesus Christ which our fellow Christians induce particularly in the gatherings of our common worship, bringing it to our remembrance and applying it to our own need.

Preaching is the act of bringing that work of Jesus to remembrance. True, we never only preach. We let the people know that we are there for their sake and that we propose to do an important thing for them (the introduction). We let them know what the thing is, set them on the course of improvement in their faith and life (the goal of the sermon). We help them recognize that they need some help in this process of serving God and each other, help them see the erosion from outside and the handicaps within (the Law), and thus encourage them to take hold of the remedy which we impart. Then we give the remedy (the Gospel), and the more explicitly and with clear application to the persons before us it comes, the less they will be minded to be inattentive. The experience and adroitness of the preacher comes in making the Word of Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection be so clearly God's answer to their current new demand for help that they start at once to

apply it to themselves and try to think how it could work also in the lives of their dear ones and friends.

Many a preacher feels embarrassed by the largeness of an audience because he is afraid that anything that he says will be old and stale to at least somebody in that throng. But what the preacher should be thinking about is this: How can I say the work of Jesus Christ so concretely and helpfully that anybody in this audience will want to say it to at least one or two other people there and later? What makes that language concrete and helpful is not its newness. To use P.T. Forsyth's phrase, the same old Gospel has to be said to brand new needs. The larger the audience the more colorful the spectrum of human waywardness, disability, anxiety, which is at the preacher's disposal. Many a preacher says to me: "I can talk interestingly, I think, about human handicaps and sins; but I get the feeling that I'm so threadbare about my Gospel." Splendid! What makes an aspirin acceptable to a person is not that it is in cloverleaf form or orange-flavored, but that the person has a headache and that his friend says: Take it, it's really aspirin. And so the preacher says in old words indeed: Take it, the great God planned it long ago just for you, this act of His Son to redeem you, free you, give you new courage, strengthen your will to serve the living God.

This point is important because the preacher's sermon to his congregation is the one finest episode in training them to speak and witness the Gospel to one another and to their world. The more recognizable, straightforward, unmistakable, his word of Christ's work is said as remedy for the relief of human frailty and death,

the more rapidly his hearer will find the words in his mind and lips, the more quickly he will think of the very moment of listening as the moment of sharing.

D. *Sending the Congregation to Preach*

But the listener is not done sharing the Gospel with the moment of listening. It is hard to imagine a sermon on any theme of the Bible or in the Christian year which allows the listener to be through with the end of the sermon or the service. This is one of the great libels on the church which its detractors in our time have perpetrated: that the trouble with the church is its huddling together for warmth away from the real woes of humankind in the inner city or mass conflict. If the church is Christian at all, and if its preaching directs the Gospel of Christ to its people at all, then people are being equipped in that room not only to praise their God, affirm their faith, and count on Him in need while they are there, but also after they leave; and then people are being equipped to pick up the responsibilities of life, their life, as they move out. I'll admit that we have dodged some of the publicized and distant ones. But look at the list of the immediate ones: trustworthiness at the job, faithfulness to the spouse, loving care coupled with firmness in rearing the children, concern for the fellow citizen in the neighborhood, facing the march of time and the enchantment of material things and the anxieties and pressures of the business world. True, our preaching to the big audience has to overcome the temptation to hide behind clichés and abstractions, the very ones that I have been using, but people must feel themselves reached and find whom else they are to reach. The people

have to be helped to realize and play the role of church members themselves; they are to move out into their world and to their people with the same Gospel of God that they are hearing from that pulpit, and for the same help.

This is what the New Testament terms the calling: a wife toward her husband, a workingman toward his employer, a friend to a friend, sounding out the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the power for rescue and for the rescued person's rescuing life. The home is where it starts. As the family takes the sermon apart over the dinner table, are they commenting only on some new illustrations or some curious pronunciation, or are they retracing the suffering and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the power for their undertaking whatever tasks are before them? The process is continued in church-related groups, and the pastor can quote his own preaching effectively toward circles of men and women and youth to indicate that he has set the pattern, never only that he has given the final answer, but always that he has set the pattern for the outspeech in which the people themselves are to engage day upon day.

We go to a bit of trouble, at times to develop evangelistic groups that will speak a word of Gospel to people who have not yet joined a church. This is all to the good. We train our teachers of the church schools to weave the Gospel of Christ into the lessons they teach, and it is true that church schools exist as much for the purpose of putting teachers to work as for helping the children to learn. But how wonderful if all the hearers of a great audience can be helped to realize, as the Gospel of God sounds out over them, that

this is for them to be saying to each other, this is for everyday life; for every day is lived from God, by God, for God, and therefore for one another; that every day therefore is an arena for saying the life and suffering and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to one another, so that, remembering it, we live by the forgiveness of sins which God gives us so that we live for Him.

Preaching starts a chain reaction, when it is indeed preaching. Preaching to a large audience, if it is indeed preaching, starts a large chain reaction. How wonderful to be an overseer, from the pulpit, of that chain reaction under way.

Heavenly Father, help that the Word of Thy Son, the Suffering Servant, may empower me, Thy servant, to preach it faithfully to Thy people, and help them through it to undertake their service to one another; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

II. IN ADMINISTERING HOLY COMMUNION

A second domain of pastoral responsibility which aims at larger numbers of people than simple pastoral care is the administration of the Sacrament of Holy Communion. One of the most common exhortations of preaching is that Christians should not neglect the Sacrament, that all should attend. In most parishes the people themselves ration their attendance to the point that, to commit an outrageous pun, it can hardly be termed a mass medium. Many of the routines of advance registrations for Holy Communion or of preparatory services of confession and absolution have become simplified, and the larger the church the more strenuous their operation. The purpose of this paper is to recog-

nize in functions involving the entire parish not so much a difficult or burdensome phase of the pastor's ministry as an opportunity for strengthening the spiritual life of the parish and the vitality of the pastorate within it.

A. *The Meaning of Holy Communion*

The Lutheran pastor proposes, on the basis of the Scriptures and the Confessions, to administrate Holy Communion in such a way that the original intention of Jesus Christ is carried out and therewith its original purpose is safeguarded. Through nearly 2,000 years Christian churches and pastors have tended to overlook some of the original intentions and purposes.

One of the sources of unclarity is the fact that the administration of this sacrament is attached to a service of worship. In its original setting the Sacrament was incidental to the ritual of the Passover meal, which was not henceforth to be celebrated by Jesus' followers. The words of institution do not indicate whether Christians were to make this memorial every time that they ate food, or in connection with acts of worship. Rapidly the Sacrament became an element of the chief service of worship of the Christian congregation, and this tradition has become hallowed. By Luther's time the term "mass" was used interchangeably and sometimes ambiguously for the administration of the Sacrament and for the entire service of which it was a portion. That service contained prayers, the confession of sins and absolution, the reading of selections from Scripture, the confessing of the Creed, the preaching of the Gospel and exhortation to Christian life, the singing of hymns, the bringing of offerings and sacrifices, in addi-

tion to and as a setting of the Sacrament. St. Paul had sharply criticized the conjunction of the Sacrament with a nonworship practice, and thus the relation to worship materials seemed all the more appropriate. The question then is: How, in a service of worship, can the Sacrament be administrated so that its original intention is maintained and its value achieved?

What is the intention of Jesus? He said that He distributed His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins, and that was to be done by His people from that time on until His second coming. God seeks out and returns to His people and does not hold their sins against them. The evident occasion for this in the Upper Room was that the disciples were fragmented by rivalry and made impotent by fear. In Saint Paul's review of the Sacrament it is particularly the evil of rivalry and the fragmenting of the body of Christ that becomes both the need for and the threat to the Sacrament.

The Sacrament does its work of conveying the forgiveness of sins by the communicant's receiving, eating and drinking, as an act symbolic of his clutch of faith at desperately needed help, the very body and blood which Jesus Christ gave up in His suffering and death for that forgiveness of sins. In the Upper Room that giving up was still impending; since then it is a remembrance. But in typical Old Testament meaning, the act is not just for that moment but for all time, and the remembering of the act brings the meaning and power of that act down to the individual who at that moment is remembering. This is why the Sacrament is a thing to be done again and again in every age. But the moment that it is done without re-

remembering that suffering and death for the forgiveness of sins, the entire significance is worse than negated, and God is invited to scrutinize a blasphemy.

B. *The Meaning of Sharing*

In the Sacrament the body and blood of Jesus are distributed and shared. It is an act for many. In order to rescue from lethargy and stimulate to vitality, pastors have sometimes stressed that whereas in preaching the grace of God is broadcast generally, in the Sacrament it is applied individually and therefore with special effectiveness. This is a half-truth with reference both to the sermon and the Sacrament. For the sermon, if it is really the preaching of Law and Gospel, thoroughly applies the grace of God to the individual. This is why we said that good listening involved dialog, personal appropriation, and transmission on the part of the listener. And the Sacrament, if it really fulfills the intention of Jesus, not only brings forgiveness to the individual but it welds him into a community with his brother communicant. You may shrink from terming it a mass medium, but, says St. Paul, you had better discern the body. In the light of 1 Corinthians 12 we see that he is thinking simultaneously of the body and blood of Christ, here taken in faith as remembrance of Christ's atoning act for the forgiveness of sins, and of the body of Christ which is made up of Christ's people, in love sustaining each other and edifying one another in the faith.

Therefore the Sacrament is a sharing, a sharing not merely from the officiant to the communicants but from each communicant to every other one including the officiant. To safeguard order and worthi-

ness of communicants, the customs of thousands of years have enhanced the ceremonial and the dignity of the celebrant. If order and worth accrue through these processes, good. But if the stature of the celebrant becomes mystic, and if his ministrations appear to reach into a throng of individuals, each separated from the other, a good thing has been spoiled. For the communicants need to feel that they are preaching Christ's death to one another, that they are handing His body and blood to each other so that thereby God Himself, God forgiving sins, is at work toward each of them by virtue of this participation of each of them. "When we bless the cup of blessing, is it not a means of sharing in the blood of Christ? When we break the bread, is it not a means of sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, many as we are, are one body; for it is one loaf of which we all partake" (1 Cor. 10:16 NEB). The original is rendered more faithfully if we say "sharing" instead of "sharing in."

What are we sharing in the Sacrament as we hand the body and blood of Christ to one another? In the intention of Jesus we are obviously not enhancing the glory of common things in bread and wine and pewter cups and the sacramentality of the altar guild as they put things away afterward, although all of these ingredients and processes are respectable. But we are seeing to it that by remembering Christ's death the forgiveness of sins reaches our brothers and sisters, and we are grateful that it is reaching us from them.

In the *Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg* (usually known as the *Formula Missae* of 1523) Martin Luther, as so often, seems to speak

to situations of 1967 (*Luther's Works*, Am. Ed., Vol. 53). He strikes out at "unclean swine without faith or reason . . . who delight only in novelty and tire of it as quickly when it has worn off" (p. 19). To help the congregation celebrate Communion adequately, mere gamesmanship and novelty will not do; for one whose interest is temporarily piqued, a dozen are derailed. (Shortly before his death our doughty Cardinal Ritter had to pull his hotspur liturgical innovators off their quest because they were confusing the faithful.) True, the most staid and hoary liturgy can also confuse the faithful; but novelty won't solve the problem.

Especially did Luther strike out at the practice of the Roman Church to turn the administration of the Sacrament into a sacrifice by the people. "The words of life and salvation are imbedded in the midst of it all, just as the ark of the Lord once stood in the idol's temple next to Dagon. . . . They have taken pains to hide the Words of Institution, which are the bread of life itself and have . . . tried to make the communicants perform a work supposedly good in itself instead of letting their faith be nourished and strengthened by the goodness of Christ" (pp. 26, 33). Experiments with the eucharistic prayer in our own time repeat this practice from which the Reformation sought to free the church. The issue is not one merely of liturgical taste or sophistication, but it is a strategy of communication over which the pastor as servant of the congregation presides so that the full intention of Jesus may be fulfilled: that forgiveness of sins from God reach his people through their faithful grasping of the atoning act which He carried out through His suffering and death.

Here utter explicitness and simplicity is the virtue. But it has to be coupled with training, so that the people do not forget by repetition, so that they are conscious in the very moment of reception what God is doing for them through Christ, who died on the cross.

Likewise Luther gives the warning that "vestments, vessels, candles, and palls, of organs and all the music" should not be allowed to engulf or obscure the meaning of the Sacrament itself (p. 22). He even felt that the Sacrament ought to be celebrated, in distinction from the office of preaching, apart from unbelievers (p. 25) and did not seem satisfied with people watching the Sacrament without receiving it.

Obviously all this takes much more than liturgical forms, complicated or simple. It takes patient and repeated training of communicants, beginning with the catechetical stage. After a large Communion the pastor and his helpers congratulate one another that they made it without unpleasant incidents and that many of the faithful were present. But what are the faithful thinking now that they go home?

C. The Gifts of Unity

It used to be a custom, and perhaps still is, that a hospitalized Christian about to undergo surgery received the Sacrament. Pastors go to some pains to help the patient remember that the same elements consecrated at the major service of the parish now are administered to draw him into a sharing of faith and love of their fellow communicants.

But look at the healthy ones. They are tooling out onto the equally hazardous

freeways. They are heading into the jungle of a status-seeking suburb or the rat race of competitive business. Some are staying back to discuss a parish policy over which opinions differ and tempers may flare. They have received the body and blood of their Lord, which He gave that God Himself might be Father in their hearts and that all of them might be one. In their families they need to be one, parents and spouses and children committed to the common enterprise of sustaining one another in faith and prayer for the rigors of life. For the spiritual life, the faith and love which has been fostered at the Lord's table is not to be left there, locked into some cenacle till next week; it has to go on out with them to be used, abraded perhaps and jarred and jounced in the journey of life, but it has to go on out into that life with them all. In their common life as Christians they need to be one, linked as Christians in the enterprises of business and citizenship, with Christians with whom perhaps they did not even receive Communion on a given Sunday, but with whom they are nevertheless joined in the body of Christ.

The larger a roomful of Christians on a given Sunday morning, the greater the groupings and blocs and configurations, the streams of opinion and varieties of judgment, the gaps between ages and credit ratings and levels of experience and stability which need to give way to the unifying power and purpose of the Sacrament. This gift of unity will not occur mystically or subconsciously. The unity of the church, the Confessions say, is not a platonic and imaginary thing. But the communicant, beginning with the pastor himself, has to exert hard labor of mind

and brain in recognizing what he has to overcome and what the atoning death of Jesus Christ has done to overcome it. In St. Paul's words, he has to investigate himself frankly to recognize whether he is placing the unifying value of Christ's redeeming action upon the sacramental act which he is sharing (1 Cor. 11:27-30), whether he is ready to turn away from factionalism and censoriousness and status seeking and simply invest himself fully in the task of edifying the body of Christ. But look at the tremendous thrust to the work of the Spirit of God holding Christians together at their callings which this sacramental gift of God Himself at work in His people exerts as the gathering shares the atoning body and blood of Christ.

D. *The Meaning for the Pastor*

The powerful thrust of the Sacrament for the people of God in the congregation is the responsibility of the pastor as he administers the training and preparation for sharing the Sacrament as well as its distribution from service to service. The pastor must prevent the ceremony from becoming a petty act of the communicant's self-righteousness, and instead employ all the factors of catechetical training, pastoral care, group discussion, liturgical decorum, vestment, and music to the end of the communicant's receiving the forgiveness of sins as he remembers the atoning death of Jesus Christ so that he rejoices in the help of God and joins in the sustained and fruitful life of the body of Christ with his fellow members. It is a high strategy which the overseer of the flock directs with increasing devotion to the service to which he has been called. Only the Lord of the church can compute the value of

that contribution to the strength of His people and body.

At once we must underscore, however, what this means also for the administrator, the strategist, the overseer — the pastor himself. We do this because at the outset of the study we thought of him as perturbed that the ceremony of the Sacrament might fail of personal meaning and that the people of his parish did not attend with the frequency that they should. At this point we are now ready to meet the perturbation of the pastor with the same medicament that he applies to the apathy of his people. And that is the meaning of the Sacrament itself.

For as he distributes the Sacrament, he is receiving it. Sharing is never from one to another only, but back again and laterally. If a splendid congregation of 500 communicants received Holy Communion on one Lord's Day morning, and 10 shut-ins and sick that afternoon, that means that 510 were sharing Christ's body and blood also with the pastor. This is the rediscovery of the meaning of the pastorate, at first sight somewhat humbling but which ennobles and stimulates: the pastor is receiving as he serves; he is sharing in the midst of people with whom he, a member, is one body and Christ is the Head.

This is not said to weaken the conscience of the pastor about his own worthiness as a dispenser of the Sacrament. You can't hurt Christ's body and blood by an unworthy minister, but Christ is concerned that He has good ministers. And one of the mighty ways of maintaining that goodness is that the people of God share with their minister the body and

blood of Jesus Christ given and shed for the remission of their sins and his sins.

Think what that forgiveness means for a pastor. He is in charge of the bringing and protecting of *zoe*, the gift of life for which Christ gave Himself and which makes not only eternity our home but which makes this present world a room for exerting the power of God in our callings. Does the pastor cringe from the task? Does he sputter with rage or pique when he does not get his way? Does he feel that God must be asleep because the Word which has God's promise seems to do no good whatsoever? Does he get forgiveness for his own brand of frailties and find that the next day and the next hour he perpetrates the same frailties over again? Does he bolster up his courage by telling himself that he is more than other people and then wonder why God seems to thwart his every plan? Does he curse himself for trusting in politics and insincerity and finding that they work for Christians as much as they work for heathen? Does he join the clique of critics and gossipers and dissenters and in a quiet moment wonder what makes him different from non-Christians, who do the same or are even a bit better-tempered?

Into every one of those moments of disaster and disgust comes the word of Jesus Christ saying: "This is the body and blood which I have given up for you for the forgiveness of sins." These are the people joined with you, sustained by this same forgiveness of sins after every failure, to carry out the Father's work. Share the gift with them, share the task with them, again and again.

Heavenly Father, Thou who hast given us the mandate to be stewards of Thy mys-

teries, help us to lead Thy people thoughtfully and thankfully to receive Thee and Thy forgiveness through the body and blood of Thy Son, and ourselves therewith to arise strengthened; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

III. IN ADMINISTERING HOLY ABSOLUTION

A. *The General Confession*

Every service of Holy Communion begins with the General Confession of Sins and the Absolution. Whether sung or spoken, most pastors and people doubtless think of it as a sort of preface to the service, which is ushered in with the Introit. The words are so sweeping and serious — “iniquities . . . offended Thee and justly deserved Thy temporal and eternal punishment . . . heartily sorry for them and sincerely repent of them . . . a poor, sinful being.” The reaction of the pastor is so momentous: “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 Ghost.” But if the people really meant it, would they mumble so glumly and glibly? If the absolution really signifies what it says, ought not thunderclaps and jubilation follow rather than the creaking of kneeling benches and the clearing of throats of the choir? Probably no Christian in our congregation disputes the doctrinal correctness of the form. How many, do you suppose, wonder whether it means anything to them? In fact, as the theme of forgiveness is picked up by the Introit and Kyrie and Gloria in Excelsis and Collect and Lessons and Creed and

Sermon and Proper Preface and Words of Institution and Agnus Dei, aren't some hearers going to wonder whether this commodity of forgiveness isn't being oversold; or at least whether they can't dream through the first affirmation of it in the General Absolution since the direct application of it will come frequently thereafter? Do the pastors doze too?

The General Confession is the end of a process which began in the Reformation when the effort was made to renovate the practice of penance. This had become a discipline of assuring forgiveness of a given sin by audible confession of it to a confessor and demonstration of sincerity of contrition by undertaking an act of penance. The net result had become the opposite of forgiveness, for the absolution now seemed payment for what had been earned rather than the word of the grace of God displayed in the atonement of Christ.

In 1521 Luther from the Wartburg issued the tract “Concerning the Authority of the Pope to Command Auricular Confession” (EA 27, 318 ff.). He attacked private penance on two fronts: the bondage of conscience to command enumeration of sins in the confessional, and the arrogation by pope and clergy of the right to absolve. He distinguished between three types of confession: that spoken in the heart directly to God, that spoken in private and voluntarily to a confessor, and that spoken before witnesses. Absolution in the latter instances is, according to John 20, he says, altogether the business of the Christian church, the people who have the Holy Spirit. He asserted that when a Christian confessed to a clergyman, it was important that he thought of

him not as a clergyman but as a fellow Christian; when absolution was pronounced in the service, this was the act of the entire church. If no clergyman was available or desirable for private confession, a trusted layman was satisfactory (note especially pp. 375—78).

"The Office of the Keys" in the Fifth Chief Part of Luther's Small Catechism and the statement that directs the Lutheran mind to the General Confession, "I believe that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us, etc.," is the product of Oslander and Schleupner about 1533 and became incorporated in the Small Catechism by 1582 (M. Reu, *Catechetics*, Chicago: Wartburg, 1927, 2 ed., p. 26). This is not to say that Luther would have disapproved of it but that his interest in the statement would be the concern that the person absolved have the full faith that the forgiveness is from God Himself, and that the officiant was the servant of the congregation.

B. *The Importance of Forgiveness*

All this suggests that if confession and absolution are to be administered helpfully, the archaeology of the ceremony needs to be replaced by the sense of significance of what is transpiring. Two things come together at this point, just as they do in preaching and in the sacraments: the work of Jesus Christ by which man is reconciled to God, and God forgives his sin; and the church, the company of God's people, through whom the work of Christ reaches the believer and the believer is sustained in the life and faith.

The whole process deteriorates unless there is a clear insight into the meaning of sin. God makes man for the purpose of fulfilling His will. This is not an arbitrary

or formal or abstract demand to obey a code, but it is the purpose for which man is made, it is the manner in which man carries out God's own operation in life, it is the way in which man is truly alive. This life in keeping with the will and purposes of God is therefore an obligation under which man stands. Therefore the Bible uses the term "debt" to describe a failure to do God's will. But Christians tend to think of individual infringements upon God's will as lesser or greater debts, debts that can be expunged by acts of piety or that can be compared to other people's greater faults, and thus the central meaning of the relation to God is overlooked, the core frustration of God's plan is sidetracked from the mind.

Man, as he is born into the world, is without the intention to fulfill God's plan. He has the mechanism, the mind and nervous system, the muscle and personality, the relation to the world and to human beings. But to be the agent of God's will does not occur to him. Thus it is possible for the human being to think and feel and act, sometimes with conspicuous ability and skill and art, quite without regard to the will of God. He can be rich in the signs of physical and mental life, but in terms of God he is dead.

Thus the meaning of forgiveness cannot be understood unless we are thinking of a limitless God and facing our own life under the unlimited demand of God. Forgiveness is that God does not hold our failure against us. He sees us born dead, prostituting capacities for doing God's will quite thoroughly for purposes without God and for a show of life that does not represent God. But God does not turn away in disgust, even though He recoils from the

spectacle. He moves in on man in an operation as old as mankind and as new as the newest human being, "operation mercy." He reaches back into the human being with all the help for life that he needs, in an act that is sheer rescue; "where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation."

This operation has a demonstration, a signal, around which God Himself organizes the plea and program to be rescued. The Word, the action, by which God put the world into being becomes His appointed instrument to bring dead man back to the life that is His own Word at work in him. "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Truth is God fulfilling His plan, keeping His Word, putting man back on the track of life again; and Jesus is the truth.

The work of Jesus and the fulfilled plan of God thus become the agency by which God and man are reunited and kept in union. This side of the grave the new life in any man is still shot through with the remnants of death, and thus even the man who has heard the great Word and found His peace with God needs it coming to him. "Keep the Kingdom coming," the Savior taught His followers to pray. "If we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, then we share together a common life, and we are being cleansed from every sin by the blood of Jesus His Son. If we claim to be sinless, we are self-deceived and strangers to the truth. If we confess our sins, He is just, and may be trusted to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from every kind of wrong; but if we say we

have committed no sin, we make Him out to be a liar, and then His Word has no place in us. My children, in writing thus to you my purpose is that you should not commit sin. But should anyone commit a sin, we have One to plead our cause with the Father, Jesus Christ, and He is just. He is Himself the remedy for the defilement of our sins, not our sins only but the sins of all the world." (1 John 1:7 to 2:2 NEB)

Thus it is that the finest Christian must think of the forgiveness of sins not as the settling of occasional debts but the maintaining of the connection with the essential God. Forgiveness of sins for Jesus' sake is the breath of life.

And this is why confession is so important. For this is the recognition that God is necessary, that the breath has to be drawn. What happens several times in so many words in a service of worship is only a token of what has to be going on in every moment of life: God the controller of life, because He is forgiving, giving Himself instead of withholding, having mercy instead of withdrawing in disgust.

This, then, is the meaning of the holy Christian church, and even if there are only two Christians together in a place at one time, that they keep this forgiveness of God thrusting in upon one another. Our Lord is recorded as having employed the word "church" only twice (Matthew 16 and 18), and each time it is the mutual purveying of God's forgiveness which He places in the midst of the meaning of the church. As Christians bring that forgiveness to each other, they are the stones on which the church is built and protected from decay. As Christians forgive each other their sins for Jesus' sake, they are

fulfilling the purpose for which they live together and reflecting to them the mercy of God which they received first.

C. *The Overseer of Forgiveness*

The Matthew 16 address of Jesus to Peter and John 20 to the apostles have given rise to the assumption that either the forgiving of sins is a mandate from God to Peter and therefore to be carried out among men only by the successors of Peter, or that it is the prerogative only of the contemporary successors of the apostles, who are the pastors. In his tract previously quoted, Luther in 1521 affirmed that this was a misinterpretation of Scripture and that it is the people who have the Holy Spirit, the church which has the mandate and commission to forgive sins; and the Confessions picked up this accent explicitly (*Power and Primacy of the Pope*, p. 324, par. 24; p. 331, par. 67, Tappert Ed.). Does this take something away from the noble phrase of the absolution, "as a called and ordained servant of the Word"? Does this make the General Confession not only apt to be absentminded, but pretentious?

To the contrary, the General Confession and Absolution is a mighty opportunity for the pastor at one and the same moment to practice what he is in the plan of God, and what the people of God are. He is a gift of Christ to the church, a trainer and starter of God's people on their tasks of mutual ministry (Eph. 4:8 ff.). He is their servant and helper, the sound system by which they speak to one another and build the body of Christ. He is the overseer who trains the people of God for their tasks, and the outstanding task among them all is that they convey the forgiveness of sins to one another. His training

is by precept and example. Through sermon and sacrament, through group work and private pastoral care, he makes clear the meaning of forgiveness. He sets up the mechanisms of mutual acceptance, the fellowship of faith, between Christians rich and poor, black and white, young and old, through which the Word of forgiveness can transpire. He is happy to share in the associations of Christians on every level of sociability and service, which are the matrix for the Word of forgiveness when it has to be spoken. Through it all he keeps on trying to make clear the most elusive and yet the most important thing: that it is God's forgiveness that Christians are to bring to one another. They forgive as they themselves have been slighted, of course. But the act which is the glue of the church and the purpose of the Christian in the world and the edification of the body of Christ is that God's forgiveness reaches a person from another person in the name of Jesus.

We said that the examples of mass communication in these studies were arbitrarily chosen, for there are many more. But there was a common factor in these three: the conveying of the forgiveness of sins.

The General Confession has a remarkable contribution to make to the breath that the Christian breathes. True, it is general; no special names are mentioned. It suffers sometimes from the assumption that it has something to do with Holy Communion only, and that the latter is not there unless this has preceded. The action of God, namely, the atonement in Christ Jesus, is not specifically mentioned except in summarizing words. And worst of all, many a Christian may imagine that it is really a sort of private operation between the

pastor and himself brought into a crowd of people in order to save time. But these handicaps can be remedied. Above all, Christians need to feel the warmth and acceptance simultaneously by God and by one another as they confess their faults in each other's presence and hear the word of forgiveness of God through the servant of them all — on behalf of them all.

This accent on the action of the church in the General Confession can then transplant itself out among Christians in their personal relations, beginning especially in the family. True, the absolution that one Christian gives another one may not necessarily be expressed in the language of *The Lutheran Hymnal*, p.16. On the other hand, as Matthew 18 indicates, it will often take place right on the scene of the disaster. The lack of formality will be compensated for by an increase in depth, an immediacy of need, a felt joy of peace. Through the high experiences of personal confession, whether to a pastor or another Christian, and absolution there and then, the Christian will grow in the understanding of the reality and concreteness of God's care for the erring Christian, the breath of His Spirit provided in the nick of time.

D. *Forgiveness for the Overseer*

If the pastor feels that the General Confession and Absolution is threadbare and meaningless, it may be that he has not had the opportunity to share in the process by which its meaning is both taught and applied, the personal and private confession. The warning of Martin Luther still obtains that this should not be a burden on conscience or a substitute for justification by faith. On the other hand, the

phrases of the General Confession that may go through the mind so glibly will normally leap into life through the experience of particularizing where necessary.

Pastors normally enjoy a good relation in pastoral care and counseling with the individuals of their flock. It is a splendid means of surmounting the danger of sounding merely commonsense or secular or kindly in such conversation if the way can be led to God's stake in the matter under discussion and the assurance given of God's forgiveness. The most agonizing problem in the life of most Christians is that their good intentions do not seem to come true. The discipline of regular confession and absolution is often a help in improving the situation.

As the pastor joins with his people in the words beginning "O almighty God, merciful Father," it will be a great help to his devotion and joy in sharing the absolution with his people if he, too, has had the opportunity to particularize through the practice of private confession. A bygone generation was trained to regard it as self-evident that the pastor had a father confessor, a person whom he had chosen to engage with him in this important nurture of the Christian faith and life. As America begins to fill up with Lutheran parishes, it is no longer so difficult to find a brother congenial by temperament and by years to undertake this task.

True, the pastor will not assume that only the sins that he confesses are forgiven. But he will also discover that most trying test of loyalty to God: that he may not want to confess certain sins at all. With Augustine he may have some of which he prays to God, "Make me a Christian, but

not yet." The self-searching that is necessary for the pastor under such a circumstance is a potent antidote for the front and facade behind which languishes an untended human being. The kindly and confidential service of a brother Christian conveying God's forgiveness in the midst of these failures is a great steadying of the servant of the Word.

A final contribution to the pastor's character and ministry will be the insight, the tenderness blended with firmness toward his people, which will emerge from a self-discipline of confession and dependence on absolution. This would be a good way of thinking of a private confessor not as a pastor but as a fellow Christian. For that is just what the pastor is—a fellow Christian working for the rest, a helper of

God's people enjoying the fruits of God's goodness with them.

Current Biblical studies point up the importance of sharpening the meaning of concepts that have become dimmed by overuse. New terms and new lexicography help. But the greatest importance comes as the old concepts are refreshed by new use. The primary one in the economy of the church is the forgiveness of sins—through preaching, sacrament, and absolution. May God Himself refresh it!

Heavenly Father, grant that the servants of Thy Word accept the charge of bringing the forgiveness of sins to Thy people with joy, as they themselves learn to prize it because of the need of their own hearts and the treasure which Thou hast given in Thy Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

St. Louis, Mo.