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The Early Dark Ages of the Church –
Some Reflections

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"Different Ministries, Different Means, One God" –
A Theological Opinion on the Racial Issue

KENNETH F. KORBY

The Ministry of Absolution

FRIEDRICH-WILHELM KUENNETH

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The Ministry of Absolution

FRIEDRICH-WILHELM KUENNETH

The Commission on Worship and Spiritual Life of the Lutheran World Federation at its meeting in Hanover (March-April 1967) decided to summarize its general discussion on absolution and to use it as a basis for further research. At the same time the commission wanted to develop a questionnaire on the basis of its discussion and send it to several experts. Those experts were expected to be particularly well-trained theologians as well as people experienced in hearing private confessions and in pastoral counseling. The commission sought reactions to four specific questions.

Thirty experts from almost all parts of the Lutheran world who were ready to voice their opinions responded promptly. Regionally, the more traditional European churches, those of the United States to a large extent, and those from the younger traditions of Asia, Africa, and Latin America were represented. The questionnaire was mailed to pastors in positions of prominence, to professors and others with advanced degrees, to those with specific appointments such as hospital and campus chaplains, to pastors with additional training in the field of psychology, and so forth.

Certainly one could ask whether we achieved full representation through such a limited number of "Gutachten." Obviously we did not, but the results of the questionnaire are welcomed as an additional aid for our research.

The author is Secretary of the Commission on Worship and Spiritual Life of the Lutheran World Federation.

Although the respondents generally followed the four questions submitted to them by the commission, we find a good deal of overlapping among the replies. Such overlapping is unavoidable if we try to be faithful and realistic toward a spiritual problem of this magnitude. Our quotations will to a certain degree reflect this overlapping. These are the four questions that were posed:

1. From your experience, how would you estimate the openness of people to respond to the offer of pastoral counseling as the offer of the forgiveness of sins (specifically through private confession and absolution)?
2. How do you yourself specifically respond to such openness? What forms do you use? Has your church provided a specific form for private confession which it recommends? What is your experience? Do you have any criticism or suggestions?
3. Out of your experience, do you consider your studies and seminary instruction as sufficient preparation for your tasks in pastoral counseling?
4. What, from your experience, is the connection between the "traditional center" of the pastoral ministry to individuals (confession and absolution) and the questions about psychology and counseling mentioned above?

Sometimes we will quote the replies to our questionnaire literally, and sometimes we will summarize in our own words. In addition to answers to the questions there will be a few clarifying remarks and short excursuses, but in general we will follow

the order of the questions. Our report thus simply reflects answers received and at the same time systematizes them. Finally, on the basis of a collection and comparison of replies we will formulate some of the relatively certain issues that are evident from our research.

BASIC THEOLOGICAL INSIGHTS

"Our Lord Jesus Christ wanted to leave to his church all the power which he exercised during his terrestrial ministry. . . . As far as sin itself is a sickness . . . (revolt against God) . . . they [the apostles] also receive the power to forgive sins and to absolve souls of their spiritual anxieties. . . . Our Lord has placed in the mouth of his apostles the word of absolution, and the church has designated them as particularly qualified to exercise this ministry. . . ." (Fr. 2)*

"Private confession is justification *in actu*. It is the most vivid sign of the vitality of

Christian existence. Congregations without private confession are spiritually dead." (Ger. 4)

"It is difficult to believe in the fervor of those who despise absolution. One begins by saying: The confession of my sins before God, before God alone, that is sufficient. And another ends by presenting himself at the Communion service without serious preparation and without absolution. This is a slippery slope which carries people along in defiance of the Holy Sacrament itself and at the same time in defiance of the whole of the Gospel. . . ." (Fr. 2)

"Acts of private confession are a gift of the Holy Spirit. They cannot be brought about

- either by a system of dogmatic scholasticism,
- or by worship services,
- or by 'pious' postulates in the usual merely verbal life of the church.

Private confession *comes about* when it is given living space in the congregation. Ecclesiastical enterprise and theological dogmatism are its obstacles. But the spiritual decline of our state church compels us in contrition to be open for everything, even for the most insignificant spiritual occurrence in our congregations, and this also means to be open for the development of private confession.

"The scene of confessional life is the congregation. The practice of private confession brings about the spiritual subdivision of congregations in state churches to form the future structures of confessional Lutheran diaspora-congregations." (Ger. 4)

One Finnish pastor, speaking on behalf of many Christians, described the benefits he received from the Finnish spiritual revival known as "Laestadianism." He practices a form of private confession which

* KEY:

The countries of origin of the pastors from whom quotes have been taken are abbreviated as follows:

Argentina	Argen.
Ethiopia	Eth.
Finland	Fin.
France	Fr.
Germany	Ger.
Japan	Ja.
Korea	Ko.
Mexico	Me.
Norway	Nor.
Sweden	Sw.
Tanzania	Tan.
United States	US

The number within parentheses is the identifying number assigned to each respondent from each country.

adheres rather closely to the classic Lutheran tradition of administering the "Office of the Keys," a tradition which has frequently fallen into disuse in all parts of the Lutheran Church throughout the world. (We are thinking about the traditional practice of the 17th century, about which the commission meeting at Hanover was partly concerned.) This Finnish pastor was especially helped by the book of Antti J. Pietilä on confession. He considers "a real renaissance of the confession of sins most desirable" for the church, but he is not uncritical of the present practice of liturgical private confession, because he fears that this form could become a mere "trick" and similar to "a borrowed thing."

1. *Do People Desire the Church's Absolving Ministry?*

What were the reactions to the first question about the openness of people today toward the church's ministry?

"The words 'private confession' evoke unconscious reflexes which cause us to avoid them. However the reality of private confession exists. In our big cities particularly, man is more and more alone with his problems, his faults, and his anxieties. I have noticed that he profits joyfully and thankfully when a suitable occasion for conversation is offered to him, and such occasions frequently become a sharing-experience and often a true confession, even if the Word itself is not used. . . ." (Fr. 1)

"The openness is not as great in the medium-sized congregations as in large cities where the individual is afraid of losing his identity and has fewer inhibitions about disclosing his sorrows and needs. In general, the openness is limited through lack of experience." (Ger. 1)

"There is a greater demand for pastoral

care¹ in congregations at health and tourist resorts; the need for guidance counseling predominates in the city." (Ger. 2)

"The openness for private confession is at a minimum in my country congregation, although members of the YMCA have had positive contact with it at retreats. This suggests a method of approach in the church. I run a private Bible study circle with a small group of men (6—8 people). In this atmosphere private talks with common prayer have also developed, which I should like to call acts of private confession, even if they took place without liturgical formularies." (Ger. 5)

Several pastors — quite independently of each other — agree on one point emphatically:

The church must make private confession, i. e., the opportunity for articulation and for the reception of absolution, its *official concern*; it must persist in making it a *declared and proclaimed aspect of its normal life*. Otherwise this service of the church will establish itself as an exception which is either met by ignorance or by prejudice. (Ger. 3)

One African respondent reports that for several national reasons a more extended request for the church's offer is not found in his region (Eth. 1). But even in this case, which indicates relative agreement with that which was reported from Germany and to some extent from other European countries, one finds that apparently the openness of people to request it depends to a large extent on the church's offer and practice as well as the explanation given by the church on the whole matter. Perhaps this applies more or less to all parts of the world.

¹ Usually the German word *Seelsorge* is translated as "pastoral care" or "pastoral ministry."

"Every conversation is . . . very earnestly . . . but very courteously . . . proffering the forgiveness of sins. . . ." (Fin. 1)

". . . More often it tends to be in an informal counseling or pastoral care setting." (Fin. 2)

As a result of a revival movement and its echo in psychotherapeutic literature, one now finds a more extended use of confession and a remarkable understanding of it. In fact, similar to the Eucharist, confession is frequently considered to be central in church life. The importance ascribed to confession is often connected with a new understanding and interpretation of the ministry itself. Confession is preparation for Holy Communion as well as an independent liturgical rite. (Sw. 1)

Doubtless there is a need for people to have a listener. There is a great openness toward private confession and the care of souls, although people do not always realize what this need means (Sw. 2). It is not purely coincidental that a student pastor who has himself benefited from the possibilities of private confession in a specific order (*Ordo Crucis*, a fellowship of pastors and laymen) sees the necessity of making the Lutheran concept of Law and Gospel more concrete in pastoral practice. His own experiences and convictions are confirmed by people who respond positively to the church's offer of forgiveness and absolution. A Norwegian pastor states that his experience has convinced him that pastoral counseling, understood as private confession and absolution, should be a normal happening in the Christian life (Nor. 2). Hence, the organized church has a distinct responsibility to promote private confession, for it is not practiced very frequently outside specific groups.

"Generally our people are not open enough to speak about the personal sense of guilt. One wonders whether this applies specifically to Japanese people." (Ja.1)

"Our people hesitate to speak openly about personal matters. My question is, How can I create an atmosphere? How can the church provide a situation to let the counselee feel that he is welcome and invited?" (Ko. 1)

The immigrant background of a German-speaking congregation in Mexico is noteworthy. Private confession is regarded as a Roman Catholic practice only, and the pastor regards the acknowledgement of sins as more urgent than a declaration of the forgiveness of sins. The pastor stresses the fact that we receive the comfort of the Gospel through several different means, but he expresses interest in the values of a more specific form of absolution. (Me. 1)

This is similar to what is reported from the Argentinian Lutheran Church, which is a member of the Lutheran World Federation. In Argentina there is almost no tradition of private confession and absolution and only a rather modest request for it, but the Lutheran faculty of José C. Paz understands the importance of the question and is seriously interested in further research. (Argen. 1)

A pastor with an American background who works at a secondary school in the church of Tanzania knows about the importance of the "Office of the Keys." Bad instruction given by the church is, in his opinion, the reason for the fact that people do not ask too often for confessions to be heard:

"Perhaps future revisions of the pericopal system will also permit preaching on the subject more often than on the First Sunday After Easter alone." (Tan. 1)

The following remark deserves special attention:

Private confession strongly connected with Holy Communion as a preparation for the Eucharist does harm to the confession as well as to the Communion. (Tan. 1)

As might be expected, American theologians are particularly aware of the importance of the whole matter, and they contribute much to our research.

Confession "much more often tends to be in an informal counseling or pastoral care setting." (US 1)

A few people respond readily and find it most remedial and assuring. "Counseling has in many cases led to formalized private absolution, whereas in others it has followed, but one seldom fails to lead to the other." (US 9)

"Our people do not respond to the offer of private confession and holy absolution. Perhaps the emphasis has been too much on the *confession* and not enough on the *absolution*. For a number of years I published a stated time when I would be available in the church for confession, but had so little response that I terminated this practice. . . . I think we have to start with the children." (US 8)

This pastor, too, is convinced that it would be the responsibility of the organized church to make private confession a normal institution of the church.

It takes about 20 hours per week in the ministry of another pastor who reports a great openness on the part of people in his large city.

"Few people come with the idea of making formal confessions in order to receive absolution. They come to discuss their problems, trying to find some help. Often this leads to a kind of informal confession. Although, it often leads to an

informal kind of absolution, an assurance of forgiveness, a Scripture passage and a prayer shared together, and sometimes a regular absolution. For many people a formalized service of confession and absolution is meaningless unless the problems have been thoroughly discussed first." (US 7)

Another chaplain associated with an office of counselors finds a great openness. People may even make a choice whether to have a psychologist or a pastor from whom to receive forgiveness of sins so that they may strengthen their relationship to God. (US 5)

2. Is the Church Well Enough Equipped to Respond?

For question 2, in which we asked for more objective data, we received answers that helped us to systematize our report.

In the context of this question the desire is expressed again to have private confession stressed as a normal and legal institution of the organized church.

"Private confession must receive its 'legitimate place,' and this must find expression in the agendas." (Ger. 3)

"The nature of private confession is laid down for a Lutheran in the section on Confession in the Small Catechism of 1531; in the Exhortation to Confession in the Large Catechism; in the Augsburg Confession, Articles XI, XII and XXV; in the Apology, especially XII, 41; in the Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article VIII." (Ger. 4)

Almost all of our experts agree with this assertion, which specifies the common Lutheran tradition, as found in existing church orders.

With regard to confessional literature,

which prepares the pastor as a confessor, and to the orders of private confession, it seems at first sight that there is no shortage of material, particularly in the United States and in most European countries. Despite this first impression a more detailed examination of the questionnaires reveals the following important items:

"There are sufficient aids and orders of confession as such available, even if there is a lack of *official* . . . ones, as can only be expected in a church unaccustomed to private confession." (Ger. 1)

It is helpful to delve more deeply into the details of this almost disturbing variety of what is used or wanted, approved or disapproved. Sometimes the use of a formulated order seems helpful, sometimes not.

"I am grateful for the Lutheran form (compare *Ordnung des kirchlichen Lebens*) which is there as an ecclesiastical safeguard against pietistic experimentations." (Ger. 5)

"Our Lutheran Church is using a manual containing a certain formula for private confession . . . but the form of 'official confession' is used very seldom." (Fin. 1)

"Our order for private confession (Lutheran Church in America) is simply an individualized form of the general church confession and is not very flexible." (US 1)

Another confessor has used the form of the Roman Catholic Society of the Incarnate Word, a form which is "fine for those who are truly 'open' to a real confession. It has worked very satisfactorily." (US 9)

"I find that in working with students the rite of the Lutheran Student Association in the United States is the most meaningful service." (Tan. 1)

"The chief difficulty I believe is the lack

of guidance in *how* and *where* to hear confessions. . . . What are the mechanics [for hearing confessions]?" (US 8)

"It is my feeling that the church has not provided usable forms specifically for this purpose. I think such a form should appear in both the *Service Book and Hymnal* used by the congregation as well as in the pastor's handbook." (US 4)

"I do not use a specific form . . ." (though this pastor indicates that his church, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, has provided some forms). "My suggestion is that the form be printed in colloquial language as a guide to counselors." (US 5)

Another, having enumerated the forms available, adds his opinion:

"Incidentally, it is perhaps significant that it is not anticipated that private confession will occur often enough to place it in our *Service Book and Hymnal* so that easy reference to it can be made." (He stresses the necessity of having a specific form of private confession and absolution, although he does not want to bind himself to a legalistic practice, but rather intends to be faithful toward the situation he faces.) (US 3)

The pastoral counselor "must have a guideline for searching the conscience which prevents him from indulging in mere moralism. This commission [the Lutheran World Federation Commission on Worship and Spiritual Life—ED.] should exert itself to the utmost in preparing such guidelines. The only aid to confession provided in the hymnal is apt to mislead the people [only some of the Lutheran churches in Germany have added a short instruction and order for private confession to their hymnal—ED.]. Most of all I recommend the aid to confession in Max Thurian's book *Evangelische Beichte*. . . . A variety of forms is required." (Ger. 2)

Generally speaking, one has the impression that in Germany a common and helpful form is available since the introduction of the *Agende III* of the United Lutheran Church in Germany. Within the Scandinavian countries no particular lack of a usable order for private confession is felt. The form "de recevoir publiquement l'absolution individuelle" is highly appreciated in France, and it seems to be a part of ancient Lutheran tradition still used in other parts of the Lutheran world as well, for example, among the Slovak churches.

One pastor states emphatically:

"A pastor who has no confessor of his own cannot be one himself." (Ger. 4)

Another says:

We cannot have a popular order of private confession unless we utilize the common order of private confession for ourselves." (Fin. 1)

And similarly:

"I have found private confession enormously therapeutic in my own life." (US 1)

A pastor should not be able or allowed to hear confession "without ever having gone to private confession himself." (Ger. 3)

"I cannot understand how a pastor can be a confessor if he has not been through the pain and the joy of a radical confession and of reception of absolution." (Nor. 2)

"I really doubt if it is possible to make private confession acceptable to parishioners until pastors of the church have themselves experienced its meaning." (Tan. 1)

How does the church respond to the openness of people? Many spiritually oriented groups, particularly orders for pastors and laymen, the present number of which is hard to estimate, realize the ne-

cessity of private confession. Our questionnaire reveals the interests of several groups, for example, those involved in Finnish "Laestadianism," the *Ordo Crucis*, the Marburger Kreis, or the Swedish High Church Revival. *Doubtless the realization of the practice of private confession is intimately tied up with various movements for renewal in our church.* The younger churches derive their immediate existence from those movements, and the American scene is more strongly influenced by this spiritual background than the European scene. In Europe the practice of private confession is found almost exclusively within the borderlines of such groupings. Here the tension between organized churches and various movements for spiritual renewal is particularly felt. One very important remark is to be understood in this context:

"Private confession is justification *in actu*.

It is the most vivid sign of the vitality of Christian existence. Congregations without private confession are spiritually dead.

. . . The scene of confessional life is the congregation. The practice of private confession brings about the spiritual subdivision of congregations in state churches to form the future structures of confessional Lutheran diaspora-congregations." (Ger. 4)

3. *What About Training for the Ministry of Absolution?*

From the answers sent to us one can easily get the impression that up to now *preparation for the confessor's ministry has been totally insufficient and very often almost nonexistent.* This is all the more true if we recognize that in cases where pastors evaluate their training positively, they often benefited much more from single persons or a particular fellowship

than from the faculty or seminary where they were trained.

What was their preparation like? Generally pastors from all over the world agree that their seminary training was inadequate. Some of them have commented as follows:

"However, we have not been sufficiently prepared for this ministry. . . ." (Fr. 2)

"In my time, in fact, the courses on practical theology did not teach anything on this subject. . . ." (Fr. 1)

"My training was totally insufficient." (Ger. 1)

"In the course of my studies I hardly saw an opportunity of gathering knowledge and experience in this field." (Ger. 2)

"A look at non-German conditions (in Texas) made me critical toward the theoretical intellectualism of German training and more open for the concerns of private confession." (Me. 1)

"I see the difficulty . . . in the fact that our outdated theological training neglects preparation for the service of the pastoral ministry, and that contemporary theology further discredits the ministry as such. What makes it all the more difficult is the fact that future pastors have hardly ever experienced regular guidance and thus have only a very hazy idea of the pastoral ministry." (Ger. 3)

"Equipping us pastors for private confession, pastoral counseling, and (common) prayer is either lacking or at least totally inadequate. . . . Our training for the spiritual office shows its greatest weakness here." (Ger. 6)

"All the academic courses at the university and the practical training at the seminary ('Predigerseminar') remained highly theoretical, and had it not been for my contact with Biblical pietism at the grass roots level, I do not know how I would have gained access to the pastoral

ministry so as to practice it in the congregation." (Ger. 5)

"There was not nearly enough adequate preparation — either for pastoral counseling or for the whole realm of the personal application of the Gospel in face-to-face meetings . . . a great lack in the church." (US 6)

". . . I believe most emphatically that neither my seminary training nor my own study has prepared me to deal adequately with either situation [pastoral counseling or private confession]." (US 8)

"I think we got a *good introduction* to the problems especially through the theological seminary. . . . [the "menighets-fakultet" of Oslo] . . . it would perhaps have been useful to get more concrete knowledge about *mental diseases*. . . . But I do not think that studies, books, and lessons are sufficient as an introduction to the pastoral problems one faces. . . ." (Nor. 2)

"I think that my seminary has grown just as I have since that date. . . ." (Now courses in psychology, psychotherapy, pastoral counseling, and clinical training are offered.) (US 5)

"My training compared very well and in some cases exceeded present training on this point. . . . Much of the more sophisticated psychological jargon used today very easily misses the theological necessity for understanding Law and Gospel as related to both the First Article (creation) and the Second (redemption). . . ." (US 4)

4. *What Is the Connection Between the "Traditional Center" of the Pastoral Ministry to Individuals and Psychology and Counseling?*

There can be no doubt that our experts are aware of the necessity of confronting the sinner in order to transmit Christ's for-

giveness to him! They are equally aware of the necessity to counsel and help him in his daily existence!

However, we must realize that the relationship between the so-called traditional center and the contemporary means for recognizing man's needs is construed differently. This is due to the fact that personal gifts as well as preparations for the ministry are different. In addition, it can be maintained that it is rather difficult to formulate this problem concisely and correctly since a certain amount of casuistry is involved. But certainly after all we have learned from the preceding remarks we can draw the conclusion that the failures of an ill-equipped church with pastors inadequately trained for the ministry of absolution are reflected in both this lack of clarity and this uncertainty.

In view of the simplicity of the Gospel, we should "not follow the trend of psycho-analyzing . . . although we are aware of the usefulness of psychology." (Fr. 1)

"Confession in a strict sense can never be the only form of pastoral care to be used." (Sw. 1)

"Psychology and counseling are important, but not to be considered independently. . . . Both are simply means in applying the Gospel to the actual situation." (Ja. 1)

"One has, of course, to distinguish carefully between two different reactions. The troubled man who is faithful raises himself through pastoral counseling, the sick man through psychotherapy. Sometimes the cooperation of the pastor and of the doctor will be fruitful. Sometimes the cooperation does not prove helpful. . . ." (Fr. 2)

"I was of the opinion for a long time that cooperation between pastors and Christian psychiatrists (or psychothera-

pists) would be fruitful, but several unfortunate experiences have made me skeptical about this subject. The psychiatrist has a tendency to stir up the past which has already been covered by absolution, and his mode of treatment is often catastrophic.

"I am, however, convinced that most of man's problems are spiritual problems, the center of which remains justification by faith. One can convince oneself of this by reading the chapter devoted to the subject of fatigue in the recent book by Dr. Tor Aukrust entitled *Mennesket i samfunnet* (Vol. II, Oslo)." (Fr. 1)

"I regard the above-mentioned 'traditional center of the pastoral ministry' as basic, now as before. But I also regard it as essential to avoid seeing in all problems, all illnesses, and especially in all mental disturbances an immediate tie-up with *personal* guilt in such an oversimplified way as has often been the case. Differentiation arising from expert knowledge is essential here for the pastoral ministry. And I believe that much of the animosity toward private confession stems from the fact that frequently there has been and still is too much oversimplification here." (Ger. 1)

"I feel that the collapse of the pastoral ministry in our church and the evasive flight into a chaotic secularism is bound up with the fact that Rationalism has destroyed private confession. Contemporary theology, in setting out to vindicate the honor of Rationalism, shows that it has very little awareness of the inner state of contemporary man. The insights of psychology should therefore be theologically assimilated in such a way that the so-called modern theologians realize how baffled they are when confronting modern man and be made aware of the many lofty values of serving man, which have been entrusted to the evangelical congregation,

[but] which they have already sacrificed.” (Ger. 3)

“The traditional center of the pastoral ministry is doubtless the forgiveness of sins as an act of our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . In its pastoral ministry the church must require the readiness for a genuine *metanoia* and bring it about in practice. This is a question about the nature of the church.” (Ger. 2)

“In some cases cooperation between the psychologist and the pastor will be desirable. . . . My own experiences in the area are almost without exception positive.” (Nor. 2)

“The form of private confession and absolution is important. . . . I feel we should retain a distinction between confession and absolution . . . and psychology and counseling. I personally believe that it is needful at this moment in history to make a separate appointment for ‘counseling’ in order to preserve the integrity of the ‘confessional.’” (US 3)

“The need of society for integrity necessitates confession and absolution as a simple process for achieving honesty. Add to this the relationship to God as a meaningful way of fulfilling oneself in society, and confession and absolution are essential.” (US 5)

“‘Private confession’ is both *confession and absolution*. And when one first realizes this, he finds the right openness for private confession, the right form and the right training. Only if one defines ‘care of souls’ in this way can he begin to cooperate with psychologists, physicians, and so on. Only then can he help the whole man — spirit, soul, and body.” (Sw. 2)

“The only connection I can see is that absolution as a sacramental act could follow a counseling situation — but the two, it seems to me, would have to take place in different physical surroundings. Both are desperately needed.” (US 8)

Another respondent refers to O. Hobart Mowrer, who stressed the reality of guilt, and to Prof. D. Belgum, who has taken the thesis of Mowrer seriously in his book *Guilt, Where Psychology and Religion Meet*.

“I have noticed that some authorities stress that private confession and absolution should be made available only after a complete counseling relationship. However, if the stress of pastoral counseling is on helping those who are already in trouble, could not regular private confession have a certain preventative function as spiritual direction quite apart from pastoral counseling?” (Tan. 1)

Conclusion

To be sure, actions cannot be seen as mere statistics. We have not endeavored with our research to achieve completely objective data or assured results. What we modestly believe is that as pastors of the church who have received responses from our brethren in the ministry, we have acquired some important insights that validate or confirm our own experiences. Similarly, we look more hopefully to the evaluation that is taking place within the context of the commission’s work on this issue of private confession and absolution. How do we as Lutherans face the reality of sin? How is it to be met: by private confession and/or counseling? Have our “experts” provided any clear definition? No, I don’t think so. But it seems that all of them could more or less agree to the following:

1. that we are speaking about that which our formal confessional writings emphatically recommend to be maintained within the life of the church;
2. that we are speaking about the Gospel, which is alive in the church, urging

people to confess their sins and to receive forgiveness that they may be strengthened in their faith;

3. that what "happens" besides preaching and the use of Baptism and the Eucharist, "happens" in a face-to-face relationship and to some degree in a situation of dialog;
4. that the ministry of the Gospel, the church's mission to reconcile, is realized on the basis of and in fulfillment of a commandment of the Lord (it seems that there is very little hesitation in using the traditional term of "sacrament" for descriptive purposes);
5. that by agreeing on the previous four points we find no need to postulate a specific form for private confession which would minimize or exclude other forms.

We find situations which are close to the ancient tradition of a confessional, and we find ordinary conversations in which principally the same thing is happening: the pronouncement of absolution after private confession.

It should be remembered that responses were given on the basis of our commission's work up to this point. From the responses we can learn what the relationship is between the opinions of the "experts" and our commission's tentative conclusions. There is some agreement, and probably not one of those who responded would question the fact that pronouncing absolution would be a primary means for transmitting the Gospel. Almost all could rejoice over the "celebration of reconciliation"² that happens through absolution,

but at the same time it is understandable that anyone who proceeds from a practical point of view might not be too much interested in such reflections. We realize how practical usage may determine its own accents.

But in spite of this fact it is easy to see how much practice itself depends on doctrinal and theological presuppositions. What one does depends on what he is willing to do, what he finds, and what he seeks.

Keeping these remarks in mind, we can now list the most evident conclusions:

- I. The openness of people to the church's ministry is not always evident, though it is evident that the church knows about human need and about its mission. (1)³
- II. There seems to be extensive agreement that, generally speaking, literature which prepares for confession is not lacking. (2)
- III. Sufficient liturgical material (that is, orders for private confession) is available in some parts of Lutheranism in ordinary agendas and congregational hymnbooks. (3)
- IV. There is a very strong demand that the Lutheran Church today should stress private confession as one of its fundamental, normal, and necessary institutions. (4)
- V. Most men realize and regret that there is usually no preparation in the church for the confessional ministry of the church. (5)
- VI. A ministry that is not acquainted with the vital use of private confes-

² This term was introduced into the theological discussion by the commission's consultant, Wolfgang Böhme of Germany.

³ The numbers in parentheses refer to notes on the theses; the notes follow after the theses at the end of this article.

sion does not appeal to people seeking private confession. (6)

- VII. Modern man's receptiveness to psychology and psychotherapy should be considered in preparing men for their entire ministry, particularly their ministry of private confession and absolution. Seminarians should be acquainted with the methodology of both psychology and psychotherapy. (7)

Some of the criticisms and proposals are expressed quite emphatically, sometimes even bitterly. But it is more important to see how many pastors report the encouragement and joy which their experiences have provided, as they have tried responsibly to make the best of the Christian treasure and its Lutheran interpretation.

Any discussion of private confession must also raise the question of the extent of our common heritage with the Roman Catholics. Is private confession intimately involved in the 16th-century split? Do our experts refer at all to Roman Catholicism? Most respondents seldom referred to Roman Catholicism. Neither overenthusiasm toward nor negative preoccupation with Roman Catholicism played a great role in their responses. And yet one voice reminded us of our common responsibility by asking whether Roman Catholics with their renewed stress on general absolution and we with our emphasis on private confession might not pass each other. The fact that all criticism is infused with a gratefulness for the spiritual richness we are to administer and a love for the church and its congregations . . . and the fact that at present pharisaical, destructive, and ironic slogans are avoided . . . give us a well-founded hope for fruitful continuation of our work.

NOTES ON THE THESES

1. a. With regard to details one may remark that those who have experienced private confession themselves feel the need for this ministry of the church most of all;
- b. Furthermore, one finds a great variety of people looking for this ministry:
 1. those afflicted people in suburbs who are eager to speak out because they do not have anything to hide;
 2. more educated people who are well informed about psychological matters and feel at ease with a pastoral counselor if he seems to be adequately trained in psychology.

(We find a reluctance to use the term "confession" where the whole Lutheran heritage is unknown and where suspicion is felt toward Roman Catholicism.)
- c. One gets the impression that in all regions of the world with relatively young ecclesiastical traditions, the relatively vital desire for concrete forms of committed Christian life is tied up with very little experience in this context. There one may speak about "too little openness." The explanation for this is that when the church started missionary work in the 19th century, *the ancient confessional tradition of Lutheranism had already been extinguished.*
- d. On the other hand, in some areas we find a tradition of private confession that is very close to the *prerationalistic* tradition (compare Finnish "Laestadianism"), but those involved do not envisage a restoration or extension of this specific tradition.
- e. Particularly important was the confirmation we found in some answers for the supposition that at least *on the*

European continent we can find what really may be called private confession almost only within specific groups, orders, and so on. These derive their existence from different revival movements. The names of many of these groups are well known: the Ordo Crucis, YMCA, Taizé, Marburger Kreis, Laestadianism, and so forth. In Hungary there is some practice of private confession, and its connection with Finnish practice is evident. If the American Lutheran churches are children of revival movements to a greater degree than the European, then it is no wonder that private confession is more widely evident in ordinary American church life.

2. Quite naturally the situation is not always the same. Although pastors do not find much literature with regard to preparing for confession within their ordinary theological studies, such literature is available in the major parts of Lutheranism. Probably the situation in the younger church traditions is less favorable insofar as the use of the traditional Western languages is only in part satisfactory. (Cf. note 1, c.) Whether that literature will be found and used by pastors depends on whether they discover through specific persons or groups a vital practice of confession.
 3. Several other impressions are received from the responses we tabulated:
 - a. With regard to confessional practice, one finds an unsatisfactory situation in Germany in spite of the fact that the United Lutheran Church in Germany has prepared exemplary orders and formulas in its *Agende III*. These formulations seem to be valid today. Our experts, at least, do not criticize them.
 - b. On the other hand, although churches in the United States have not included
- as many formulas or orders for private confession in their agendas, their experience of private confession and absolution has still been more vital than in Europe.
- c. Again, questions must be raised about the course of those younger church traditions which, due to their original missionary background, have almost no tradition, no literature, and no orders for private confession.
 - d. It is a necessary task of the Commission on Worship and Spiritual Life of the Lutheran World Federation to point out such needs and to make urgent recommendations to fulfill those needs.
4. Our experts have often underscored the fact that all the efforts made by individuals or groups will not result in a more general practice of private confession so long as the organized church itself does not confess that those efforts are in harmony with the church's message, heritage, and conviction. Several means of instructing people have been proposed, for example:
 - a. regular announcements of confessional facilities;
 - b. consideration of the matter when reforming the pericopal system;
 - c. instruction for both children and adults in Sunday schools. Many of these suggestions are well known and no other specific proposals arose out of our questionnaire. Again, if we keep in mind what has previously been said about the younger church traditions, we come to the conclusion that the focal point of the problem is touched upon in Thesis IV. Nobody can recognize our church as a confessing church — that is, a church that is vitally experiencing justification — from the

mere fact that it still maintains its heritage of historical confessional writings. When we Lutherans realize how extremely one-sided, theoretical, intellectualistic, and individualistic we become, probably more on the Continent than in our more recent church traditions, and how the church's proclamation itself remains empty and vague, then we shall have touched the heart of the matter.

5. Several of our "experts" claimed that the *justificatio sola fide* should be reflected by the practice of the Lutheran Church in order to overcome the sins of the world within its own midst. The responses to our questionnaire have indicated our failure to do this. Revival or renewal movements often bring to light more hopeful situations, so that we might conclude that in the future improvements are to be sought only in close connection with such revival movements and reforming groups.
6. It is probably not necessary to look for reforms of details (better altar books or techniques), but our entire ministry must be thoroughly reformed. This is a step-by-step process which will hopefully lead to a theological definition of the *ministerium ecclesiasticum* in the present ecumenical

context. Because our "experts" apparently have a traditional Lutheran conception of the ministry, they have not stressed the ecumenical aspects of the ministry.

7. Certainly, as our data have indicated, there have been no uniform opinions. On the contrary, sometimes it seems as if various evaluations of our present situation move in opposite directions. Some have stressed the need for combining the ministry of absolution in the strict theological sense with psychology, while others have underscored their desire to keep the two distinct. We should note, however, that apparently *nobody* opposes the recommendation for more intensive training today in psychology and psychotherapy. It is remarkable that instruction available in this field up to now is in many cases considered to be of a high standard already. Sometimes greater knowledge of psychotherapy is desired to enable the pastor to decide where his task ends and that of the physician begins. In any case, both extremes are to be avoided, that is, allowing the pastor to function as a medical man who dominates the scene or the physician to function as a secular priest, exclusive of the Gospel.

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