

Chemnitz: below (Translated by M. Harrison and Andrew Smith) from the Braunschweig-Wölfenbüttel Kirchen Ordnung:

Regarding Confession and Absolution.

In the oral confession of the papists there are two things which are rejected on the basis of God's word. First, that they demand complete and express recounting and revelation to the priest of each and every sin, so that the sins which have not been revealed to the priest in confession can not be forgiven. Second, that such work of confession is meritorious and necessary for the forgiveness of sins. But when this is correctly rejected on the basis of God's word it must be done in such a way that the impression is not given that confession is to be entirely and completely condemned and removed from these churches. Rather, it should be demonstrated in detail with precision, according to God's Word, what kind of a confession [we] desire to have and retain, [based] upon what kind of a concept, and for which reasons. Everyone should, each day, expressly confess all his sins before God, Psalm 32[5] And where he has offended someone, he should confess it to him and ask pardon, Mat. 18[15-18]; Luke 17[3f.]; Js. 5[16].

Confession before a pastor, however, when someone desires to go to the Lord's Supper, shall be maintained for the following reasons. First, so that a Christian may in and with confession explain to his pastor [seelsorger] that he acknowledges his sin and confesses it to God, that he is repentant, how things stand with his faith, what plan he has for improvement, so that from this the pastor may perceive whether he is to be bound or loosened.

Second, so that the pastor, where he notes that something of these parts is lacking, may recount, instruct, admonish and demonstrate how according to God's word, repentance, faith, and the plan for betterment are to be configured. For it is not sufficient to [merely] understand these things well. For it is common for one to understand [these matters] yet be quite cold in regard to repentance, faith and improvement. But when in such private conversation there is instruction and admonition from God's word, it is certainly the case that God through his word is effective in working and granting true repentance, faith and improvement.

Third, if the pastor knows that his little sheep are caught in sin, he can rebuke and admonish unto true repentance in such private conversation all the more appropriately.

Fourth, when a poor conscience has burdens, troubles, or is under attack, this conscience may seek counsel and consolation with his pastor [seelsorger].

Fifth, so that no one may receive the Lord's Supper to judgment because of ignorance or indiscretion, he may be instructed, reminded and admonished in confession that and how he should examine himself.

Sixth, this confession is to be maintained so that in true repentance through right faith the private absolution of the Lord Christ in the word will be sought, and received from Christ through the means of the minister [diener]. Thus confession, as we maintain it, is in accord with God's word, is very profitable and will produce much fruit. And if the people are instructed regarding it, and think aright of it, there is no need to drive, force or compel them to confession. Rather the great profit and their own need will well drive them to it. But it is easy to tell what kind of Christian a man is who disregards all this.

Above all, however, the doctrine of the absolution shall be well explained because previously the pope soiled it with his satisfaction and the merit of the saints. Now the sacrament-schwermer and some others despise it in part while others reject it all together. [This is to be done] so that the people will be instructed from God's word what glorious, beautiful consolation poor consciences find in absolution, and so that those who make use of it often and in true faith, regard it very highly. The absolution, however, is nothing other than the promise of the gospel of God's grace and the forgiveness of sins through faith for the sake of Christ, which is otherwise delivered to all in the common sermon, but with this distinction: In the common sermon this same promise is delivered, offered, presented to and appropriated by all believers in general. But in the absolution this same promise is delivered, presented and appropriated to each individual personally who uses it in right faith. Now, also in the common sermon the promise of the gospel is not to be dealt with as a mere narrative [narrative] or recitation [recitative], rather the people shall be admonished that they are to lay hold of and receive this same promise through faith. And thus he to whom the promise of the gospel is offered and presented in general, grasps it in his heart in faith, and thus takes it to himself, should know and not doubt, that thereby [his] dear God truly and certainly presents, sends and transfers to him what the promise sets forth and offers. Therefore it is an old, good, useful practice for the sermon to be concluded with a general confession and a general absolution, through which is demonstrated that the hearers should not leave the doctrine from God's word in the sermon hanging in general, rather consider its application [de applicatione] for repentance, for faith, for improvement, as we shall hereafter discuss regarding such general absolution.

It may happen, however, that the weak faith of a poor conscience often may not be sufficiently strengthened as a result of the common sermon. For it may indeed believe that God's promise is true and is given to all believers, but may dispute regarding this promise as follows: "Who knows whether dear God wills to give even to you, a poor, great, unworthy sinner, such high, heavenly

treasures and benefits? You desire, want, believe and trust to be sure. But who knows what God in heaven thinks and has concluded regarding your person etc.?"

Here the Son of God has to strengthen the weak in faith, and comfort poor consciences, not only in the preaching of the gospel in general, rather he also preaches the forgiveness of their sins to poor consciences privately [privatim] and individually, Mat. 9[6] to the paralytic, Luke 7[48] to the openly sinful woman, Luke 19[10] to Zachaeus, Luke 23[43] to the murderer on the cross. And when the Pharisees would have only the common announcement [of forgiveness], and regarded private absolution [privatam absolutionem] as blasphemy, Mat. 9[3]; In Luke 7[39], the Lord Christ defended private absolution and confirmed it with miracles that the authority were given to him to proclaim the forgiveness of sins not only in general, but also to each and every believer who seeks and desires it, to offer, apply and assure in particular with consolation: "Take heart my son. Your sins are forgiven you," Mat. 9[2]. "Go in peace. Your faith has helped you," Luke 7[50]. But the Son of God not only made use of such power where he personally and without means preached on earth the forgiveness of sins. Rather he promised and gave this same key to the kingdom of heaven to his apostles and to all who convey his word pure and undefiled: "What ever you forgive on earth, etc." [Quicquid solveritis in terra, etc.], Mat. 16[19] and 18[18]. "Whosoever sins ye remit etc." [Quorumcumque remiseritis etc.] Jn 20[23]. But this is not so one man personally has the power to forgive sins before God. For that belongs to God alone, Is. 43[25], and the power is given only to the Son of Man, Mat. 9[6]. Rather Christ now and everywhere wants to use and manifest His power to forgive sins on earth through the means of the ministry [ministerium], indeed, as certain and true as in Mat. 9[6]; Luke 7[50]. For he himself is there present as he promised, Mt. 28[20], and will thereby be efficacious with his Spirit, as he says in John 20[22f.]: "Receive the Holy Spirit, whosoever sins ye remit etc." [Accipite Spiritum sanctum, quorum remiseritis etc.] Therefore one must not look to the minister's [diener] person in the absolution, rather to this basis, that the Son of God himself is there present through his minister [do gegenwartig durch seinen diener] to offer, appropriate, certify and insure what it says: "What ever you forgive on earth shall also be forgiven in heaven." Mat. 16[19]; 18[18]; John 20[23].

On these grounds it is easy to understand what glorious, beautiful consolation we have in the absolution, namely, that I know where I here on earth can find and approach my dear Redeemer and Savior Jesus Christ, where he through his word may deal with my poor person in particular, and proffer, send, appropriate, certify and assure to me personally the forgiveness of my sins, so that I need not remain in doubt about what God above thinks and has concluded regarding my person, and that I can be certain of the same here on

earth, not because of mere men, but from the Lord Christ himself through his minister [diener], and that it also applies in heaven. And through it he desires to give the Holy Spirit, John 20[22], who through the word desires to strengthen and maintain faith. And for this reason, too, the absolution is to be regarded highly. This power of the keys, however, does not consist in this, that a preacher has the authority, as he pleases, to absolve as and when he desires. Nor should the people think that if they are and remain without repentance and faith, but merely make use of absolution, that this should suffice. The keys ought rather be exercised and used according to the mandate and institution of the Lord Christ, namely, that those who are repentant and seek from God grace and forgiveness of sins for the sake of Christ through faith, shall receive the absolution for consolation and thus make use of it in true repentance through right faith. The unrepentant and unbelieving are not to have their sins forgiven, but rather bound and kept, Mat. 16[19]; John 20[23]. And the reason we maintain confession, as stated, is so that the distinction may be maintained according to the mandate of Christ, where sin is to be forgiven or bound. Troubled consciences must also, however, be instructed that the absolution is not based upon how firm, strong, excellent and perfect both repentance and faith are. It stands rather only on the basis of the obedience, suffering and death of Jesus Christ. And the absolution is to be used because through it the Son of God desires to increase, strengthen and maintain both repentance and faith.

Concerning the form of the absolution, i.e., how it is to be used, that will be explained in another section, "regarding ceremonies", in this book.

And also this one:

How to deal with people in confession.

Because confession and private absolution is a highly necessary thing in the church and through it the benefits of Christ are applied to each individual, the same are thus also to be retained in their correct use in the church. Therefore no one shall go to the sacrament of the altar, unless he has presented himself to the priest and confessed himself a sinner and received private absolution [privatam absolutionem]. But the pastors shall thoroughly and in Christian fashion instruct the simply people regarding proper confession so that they fear and learn to recognize God's wrath against sin and they thereafter, if they repent and intend to amend their lives, console them with God's word and after each individual has confessed specifically absolve that person on the basis of the mandate and promise of Christ, and not two, three or more at the same time, as sometimes happens. For such will not be tolerated.

And when at times very simple people come before the pastors and father confessors, they shall thus ask them questions in their catechism, and let them recite the same. And where they do not know [the catechism] they admonish them with discipline to learn it. And although a particular pastor will know how he shall absolve the penitent [beichtkinder], still there follows [here] for the sake of the simple pastors, a form or two, which may be used.

Form of Absolution.

The Almighty God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ will be gracious and merciful to you and will forgive you all your sin for this reason, that His beloved Son Jesus Christ has suffered and died for it, and in the Name of this our same Lord Jesus Christ, upon his mandate and in the power of his word, where he says [Mt. 18:18, cf. John 20:23]: "Whosoever sins you forgive, they are forgiven," I pronounce to you that all yours sins are forgiven, gone and done away with, so that they are at once forgiven you so richly and completely as Jesus Christ Himself through His suffering and death merited and through his Gospel he has command to be preached in all the world. And this comforting promise, which I now have made to you in the Name of the Lord Christ, you should receive in consolation, set your conscience aright and in peace, and firmly believe, your sins are certainly forgiven in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Another form of absolution.

Because you confess that you are burdened with sin and have angered God with sins, and therefore desire comfort against the devils affliction, and I am ordained for the consolation of poor sinners, a servant [diener] of God, and thus Christ has also spoken to me [Mt. 18:18, cf. John 20:23]: Whosoever sins you forgive, they are forgiven unto them, likewise whatever you unbind on earth, is unbound in heaven, upon such promise of God and according to his mandate I pronounce you free from all your sins, now, in the stead of God, in the Name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Go in peace and sin no more.

Because not only blessed and pious, but also unrepentant people at times come to confession, the preacher will know full well how to deal appropriately with admonition and earnest reminders against such people, and when they do not promise to improve, the [preacher] shall neither absolve or allow them to communion. For Christ commanded not only to loosen, but also to bind.

Rhegius: below

How to Speak Circumspectly about Confession:

Confession has always existed in the church, but there have been certain useless, even dangerous, human additions.

They said all sins should be declared, but that is impossible.

And they should be declared only to a priest, unless the penitent have obtained permission to confess elsewhere. It is beneficial indeed to consult one's own pastor, but the conscience should not be burdened by command to this effect.

If one sin is willfully omitted, the entire confession has to be repeated.

People were persuaded that sins were remitted by the act of confessing and their own contrition. The merits of Christ were scarcely considered. The papists were insisting on these things as if they were necessary, placing consciences thereby in great danger.

Christians, therefore, should confess always to God and frequently to a minister of the Word, at the very least when they intend to approach the table of the Lord, so that they hear the word of Christ from the mouth of the minister, for Christ absolves us from our sins through the mouth of the minister. Christ gave to his church the keys of the kingdom of heaven and commits them to ministers of the world. To whomever they remit sins, they are remitted, and for whomever they retain sin, they are retained. We ought to believe firmly, therefore, in the absolution, no less than if Christ himself would visibly absolve us as he absolved Mary Magdalene and the paralytic.

Those who are about to commune should be diligently examined in confession before they receive the venerable sacrament, not in large groups, but individually, so that the pastor can explore whether they understand the catechism, know why they should go to communion, and what they ought to seek in the sacrament. [Preaching the Reformation, p. 77]

Bonhoeffer's **Life Together** (section on Private Confession and Absolution)

AC XI, XII, XXV (corresponding sections in Apology)

LC Appendix

Beicht-tafel, pp. 1458-1462 Treasury of Daily Prayer