

The Augsburg Confession

Article 11

Confession

There are two separate articles in the Augsburg Confession which are titled “Of Confession” - Article 11 and Article 25. The first of these is found in the main section of the Augsburg Confession, and is very short. The second is found with the “Articles in dispute” and is more lengthy. These two articles, though they have the same title, serve to address a different aspect of the subject of confession.

Article 11

Roman Catholic theologians like John Eck had accused the Lutherans of all kinds of untrue charges. One of the charges was that the Lutherans sought to abolish private confession and absolution entirely. In this first article on confession, the Lutherans correct this misunderstanding about their teaching and practice concerning private absolution: *It is taught among us that private absolution should be retained and not allowed to fall into disuse. However, in confession it is not necessary to enumerate all sins, for this is impossible. Ps. 19:12, “Who can discern his errors?”*

Absolution

Notice that the emphasis of this article is on the beneficial use of Private absolution. Here the Lutherans set the record straight by declaring that they were not against private confession and absolution.

Note: The word *absolve* (absolution) comes from the Latin and literally means to be “loosed from”. In this case it is used to refer to a sinner being loosed (released) from the burden of sin.

On numerous occasions the Lord Jesus gave His followers the authority to pronounce the absolution to penitent sinners. After speaking about how the church should handle

sin among its members, Jesus said: ***“Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 18:18).*** Likewise, after His resurrection from the dead Jesus told them: ***“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20:23).***

Receiving absolution is a very important part of our worship service.

- At the start of our worship service we make confession of our sins and receive absolution from the LORD through the pastor with these words: *“Upon this your confession, I by virtue of my office as a called servant of the Word, announce the grace of God to each 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.”*
- We receive absolution in the message of the sermon;
- Through baptism an individual receives absolution (Acts 2:38);
- And communicants receive absolution through the reception of the Lord’s Supper (Matthew 26:26-28).

While absolution is an important part of our public worship, we should also realize the importance and need for private confession and absolution. Confession and forgiveness are necessary for a healthy relationship with God and our neighbor. James writes: ***“Confess your trespasses to one another” (James 5:16)*** and Jesus says, ***“if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23-24).***

In particular, this article is addressing the use of private confession and absolution with the pastor. Sadly, despite the statement made here in this article, private confession

and absolution of this kind has nearly fallen into disuse in the Lutheran church today. This type of confession can be a great blessing for an individual who is struggling with things they have done in the past, weighed down with the burden of their sin and seeking comfort. Pastors should always be ready to hear such confessions and offer absolution to the troubled soul, and members should be willing to make that confession so that they may receive the assurance of God's forgiveness. What great comfort can be found in such confession and absolution!

In Your Bible: The Psalms are full of sections which describe the distress of sin and the comfort of confession and absolution. Consider these "Penitential" Psalms: 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, and 143.

Enumeration of Sins

While the Lutheran church did retain the practice of private and public confession, it differed from the Roman Catholic Church in that they rejected the idea that a member must enumerate all sins which have been committed. This was demanded by Canon Law of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215 A.D.) which states: "*A member of the Christian faithful is obliged to confess in kind and in number all serious sins committed after baptism....*" and "*it is to be recommended to the Christian faithful that venial sins also be confessed.*"

There has been much confusion on this point in the past and even to the present. Some have understood the Catholic teaching on enumeration of sins to mean that a person must confess every sin that has ever been committed. As we can see from this article, this was Melancthon's understanding of Catholic Law: *However, in confession it is not necessary to enumerate all sins, for this is impossible. Ps. 19:12, "Who can discern his errors?"* But that was never the intent of this Law. The Canon law clarified that a person must confess serious sins "*of which one is conscious after diligent examination of conscience.*" Again in the Confutation the Roman theologians stated: "*although they cannot state all their sins individually, nevertheless, a diligent examination of their conscience being made, they make an entire confession of their offenses - viz. of all which occur to their memory in such investigation. But in regard to the rest that have been forgotten and have escaped our mind it is lawful to make a general confession, and to say with the Psalmist, Ps. 19:17: 'Cleanse me, Lord, from secret faults.'*"

The real problem with private confession and the enumeration of sins in the Catholic Church is that it is demanded by the Church. In the Confutation they state that the

Lutherans must *"compel an annual confession to be observed by their subjects, according to the constitution, canon Omnis Utriusque, concerning penance and remission and the custom of the Church universal."* Nowhere in Scripture does God demand that His followers make a verbal confession of their sins to one of His called servants. The Bible, describes confession of sins as a fruit of faith, not as a demand of the law. When John the Baptist came and began preaching, ***"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"***, we are told that ***"Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins" (Matthew 3:1-6)***. When Paul preached about the Lord Jesus to the people in Ephesus, ***"many who had believed came confessing and telling their deeds" (Acts 19:18)***. These were not actions demanded by the law, they were the results of faith worked in the heart of sinners through the Holy Spirit.

Summary

Private confession and absolution is Scriptural and beneficial. It is an excellent opportunity for a person who is troubled by sin to declare a wrong, show sorrow for sin and receive the good news of the forgiveness of that sin. But we should not turn this blessing into a work-righteous act by demanding private confession of all sins. Rather let us offer private confession and absolution and encourage people to make use of it as moved by the Gospel!