

The Augsburg Confession

Article 12

Penance

Article XII of the Augsburg Confession brings us to the very issue that provoked the crisis which resulted in the Reformation: the Roman Catholic sacrament of Penance. Rome taught that Baptism negated Original Sin, and removed all sins committed before the time of Baptism, but not any of the sins committed after Baptism. For these sins the Sacrament of Penance was devised as a second and more laborious form of Baptism.

Satisfaction for sin

In the 1439 Bull, *Exsultate Deo* (Exult in God), Pope Eugenius V decreed that the sacrament of penance consisted of three parts: the contrition of the heart, the confession of the mouth, and the satisfaction of sins. While absolution removed the guilt of sin, and the eternal punishment, satisfactions were still necessary to remove the temporal penalty of the sin (the penalty imposed by the congregation or the priest). Provision was made, however, in certain circumstances, for the congregation to relax a portion of the predetermined satisfactions. This relaxation of the temporal penalty by the congregation was called the granting of an "indulgence".

If this temporal penalty had not yet been removed by the time of the person's death, it had to be removed after death, in purgatory, before the believer could proceed to heaven. In this way, the "sacrament" of penance was employed as a means of keeping the laity in fear and in subjection. As a result, whether or not a person received forgiveness depended on whether he was sufficiently contrite, whether he confessed all his sins, and whether he performed the satisfactions as demanded by the priest. There was no way that he could ever be certain that these conditions had been properly fulfilled.

Article 12 - Repentance

It is taught among us that those who sin after Baptism receive forgiveness of sins whenever they come to repentance, and absolution should not be denied them by the church. Properly speaking, true repentance is nothing else than to have contrition and sorrow, or terror, on account of sin, and yet at the same time to believe the Gospel and absolution (namely, that sin has been forgiven and grace has been obtained through Christ), and this faith will comfort the heart and again set it at rest. Amendment of life and the forsaking of sin should then follow, for these must be the fruits of repentance, as John says, "Bear fruit that befits repentance" (Matt. 3:8).

Rejected here are those who teach that persons who have once become godly cannot fall again [and also those who contend that some may attain such perfection in this life that they cannot sin].

Condemned on the other hand are the Novatians who denied absolution to such as had sinned after Baptism.

Rejected also are those who teach that forgiveness of sin is not obtained through faith but through the satisfactions made by man.

Definition of Repentance

In contrast to the Roman teaching which stated that Repentance consisted of three parts, the Lutherans declared that it consisted of only two parts: Contrition and faith. *"Properly speaking, true repentance is nothing else than to have contrition and sorrow, or terror, on account of sin, and yet at the same time to believe the Gospel and absolution (namely, that sin has been forgiven and grace has been obtained through Christ), and this faith will comfort the heart and again set it at rest."*

Contrition is certainly demanded by Scripture: ***"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart—These, O God, You will not despise" (Psalm 51:17); "Out of the depths I have cried to You, O LORD; Lord, hear my voice! Let Your ears be attentive To the voice of my supplications" (Psalm 130:1-2).*** But sorrow over sin is not enough. The most important part of Repentance is trusting that God has forgiven you. The apostle Paul says: ***"Therefore, having been justified by***

faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.” This was the difference between the contrition of David and that of Judas. While Judas was sorry for his sin ***“Then Judas, His betrayer, seeing that He had been condemned, was remorseful and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, ‘I have sinned by betraying innocent blood’”*** (Matthew 27:3-4), and even made satisfaction for His sin, his sorrow did not include a trust in Christ for forgiveness (compare 2 Samuel 12:13,20-23).

When Jesus sent His disciples out into the world after His resurrection, He told them to announce both the law and the Gospel: ***“Then He said to them, ‘Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And you are witnesses of these things.’”*** (Luke 24:46-48). This was in complete contrast to Roman doctrine which refused to include faith as part of repentance.

Condemnation of error

Three errors are specifically condemned at the end of this article. the Roman teaching is the last one condemned: ***“Rejected also are those who teach that forgiveness of sin is not obtained through faith but through the satisfactions made by man.”***

In addition the Lutherans condemn two other groups who also taught errors connected to repentance. The first of these groups were the Anabaptists: ***“Rejected here are those who teach that persons who have once become godly cannot fall again [and also those who contend that some may attain such perfection in this life that they cannot sin].”*** Once again the Lutherans want to separate themselves from those who followed Luther in the wake of the Reformation, but whose teachings were contrary to Scripture. This passage is directed to the “once saved, always saved” philosophy that is still held by some today. Such a teaching would negate the need for repentance completely. But in His Word God reminds the godly of the dangers that surround them and instructs them to ***“give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away”*** (Hebrews 2:1) and ***“Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it. For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it”*** (Hebrews 4:1-2). Scripture provides countless examples of godly people who ***“strayed concerning the truth”*** (2 Timothy 2:18) reminding us to be on guard for sin and false teaching.

Also condemned are those who believe that they can reach a state of perfection here on earth. John Wesley was a proponent of this teaching, which is still alive in many of the “holiness” churches of today. (Consider Romans 7:14-25 and Philippians 3:8-14 to see what the Bible says about this teaching.)

The Lutherans also separate their teaching on repentance from the errors of those in the early church: “*Condemned on the other hand are the Novatians who denied absolution to such as had sinned after Baptism.*” Novatian was a teacher in the third century who taught that those who committed serious sins could not be forgiven. But forgiveness is always available to those in whom the law has worked contrition, and the Gospel has worked a trust in God for forgiveness.

Summary

The Psalmist confessed: “***But there is forgiveness with You, That You may be feared***” (***Psalm 130:4***). Our confidence in that forgiveness from God does not come from our sorrow over sin, but rather is founded on the reliability of Christ’s work and promise of forgiveness to those who believe.