

The Augsburg Confession

Article 25

Confession

In Article 11, which also dealt with the topic of Confession, we have already discussed the Biblical role of absolution as connected to confession and the errors (both perceived and real) on the part of the Roman Catholic Church. As we continue with the subject of Confession here in Article 25, we will consider several other related issues. While there are similarities between these two articles we see that this article is much more detailed. Like Article 11, it contains two parts: The first paragraph deals with the benefit of absolution, and the second paragraph with erroneous teachings connected with confession.

The Benefit of Absolution

In the first part of this article the Lutherans state: Confession has not been abolished by the preachers on our side. The custom has been retained among us of not administering the sacrament to those who have not previously been examined and absolved. At the same time the people are carefully instructed concerning the consolation of the Word of absolution so that they may esteem absolution as a great and precious thing. It is not the voice or word of the man who speaks it, but it is the Word of God, who forgives sin, for it is spoken in God's stead and by God's command. We teach with great diligence about this command and power of the keys and how comforting and necessary it is for terrified consciences. We also teach that God requires us to believe this absolution as much as if we heard God's voice from heaven, that we should joyfully comfort ourselves with absolution, and that we should know that through such faith we obtain forgiveness of sins.

Once again, but in much greater detail, the wonderful blessings given by God through confession and in His Word of absolution are described. In the Catholic Church this "great and precious thing" was not being used to console terrified consciences, but to torment them through such things as "long enumerations of sins, with satisfactions, with indulgences, with pilgrimages and the like."

Confession, Absolution and Communion

Here we are introduced to the connection between confession and absolution and preparation for the Lord's Supper. *"The custom has been retained among us of not administering the sacrament to those who have not previously been examined and absolved."* Note that this is called a "custom" of the church. This custom was based on the practice of the early church and the exhortation of the apostle Paul concerning individual examination as preparation for receiving the Lord's Supper: ***"Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup" (1 Corinthians 11:27-28).***

It is important to remember that this practice of making confession and receiving absolution prior to receiving the Lord's Supper is not commanded by God in His Word, though it certainly serves as a aid to individual self-examination. For that reason, the way in which this custom was (and is) practiced has varied over the centuries, and even differed from church to church.

Note: Private confession, which was used both during and after the Reformation over time evolved into a Confessional Service which was held prior to Holy Communion. Those intending to partake of the Lord's Supper were to attend this service, which included a confessional address, general confession, followed by the absolution. Later, the confession and absolution part of this Confessional Service was incorporated into the regular worship service similar to how we have it today.

Announcement

The practice of going to private confession before receiving the Lord's Supper was introduced in 1523 at the church in Wittenberg by Luther's friend and co-reformer, Johannes Bugenhagen. At the same time we find the practice of announcing for communion being developed. In that same year Luther encouraged the practice of announcing for communion, writing, "...that notice first be given to the bishop, by those who are about to commune, that they request to be communed with the Lord's Supper, so that he may be able to know their names and their manner of life."

Finally, after a long period of being used side by side, the old practice of private confession before communion began to die out and the practice of announcing for communion took its place.

While the practice of announcement for communion does not necessitate a specific confession of sin on the part of the person announcing, its intentions are similar:

- It gives the pastor an opportunity to speak to each communicant privately, and offers the communicants an opportunity to talk with the pastor about anything that may be troubling them.
- By announcing communicants should be reminded to examine themselves, repent of their sins, and trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sins.
- The people should want the pastor to know that they are participating in Holy Communion, and helps the pastor to keep better attendance records.

Confirmation

Confirmation is another subject related to the topic of confession before communion. This is because the ceremony of Confirmation has long been practiced as preparatory for receiving communion for the first time. Already during the time of Luther the Roman Catholic Church considered Confirmation a sacrament (see Article XIII - Of the Number and Use of the Sacraments). Because Luther saw Confirmation as a human custom which was neither commanded nor even spoken of in Scripture, he dropped the practice of Confirmation in the church. He continued to instruct young and old alike by means of the catechism, but he did not use the ceremony of Confirmation as preparation for receiving the Lord's Supper. Instead, Luther would examine those children who wished to commune to make sure that they had a proper understanding of the work of Christ and the nature and blessings of Lord's Supper. It was from this practice of Luther that the custom of Examination developed - a practice that is still used in our churches today.

Note: While Luther did not retain the custom of Confirmation, other Lutheran pastors did, although it was in a modified form from that of the Roman Catholic Church. Bugenhagen was among those who did make use of Confirmation, right there in Wittenberg.

Summary

Though the customs of private confession, announcement for communion and Confirmation are not commanded by God in His Word, we can see that, if they are used properly, they could each serve a spiritually useful purpose. At the same time, there is always a danger of making such useful customs “**commandments of men**” (**Matthew 15:9**) which lead to a work-righteous emphasis. May we guard against such temptations, and make proper use of the manifold blessings God offers to us through His absolution, instruction in His Word, and in the reception of the Lord’s Supper!

The Apology of the Augsburg Confession

It is interesting to note that Article 25 is not found in the Apology. The reason for this is the similar nature of it and Article 11. The Lutherans felt that the Roman Confutation had been dealt with adequately in Article 11 and saw no reason to respond on this article. There are three other articles which are not found in the Apology for the same reason: Articles 5 and 6 are discussed under Article 4, and Article 26 is discussed with Article 15.