

The Divine Service (Preparation): Confession & Absolution 19th C.

P O almighty God, merciful Father,

C I, a poor, miserable sinner, confess unto You all my sins and iniquities with which I have ever offended You and justly deserved Your temporal and eternal punishment. But I am heartily sorry for them and sincerely repent of them, and I pray You of Your boundless mercy and for the sake of the holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death of Your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, to be gracious and merciful to me, a poor, sinful being.

P Upon this your confession, I, by virtue of my office, as a called and ordained servant of the Word, announce the grace of God unto all 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 Spirit.

C Amen.

[John 20:19–23]

The “left-hand” or “indicative-operative” form invites us to confess to “almighty God” original (“I, a poor, miserable sinner”) and actual (“all my sins and iniquities”) sin. To “confess” means “to say the same thing, to agree.” Here God’s Law has compelled our agreement: I have “justly deserved your temporal and eternal punishment.” Compare Psalms 32, 51, and 130; also Luke 23:39–42. Yet we do so to our “merciful Father” “of [His] boundless mercy” and “for the sake of the holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death of [His] beloved Son, Jesus Christ.” Here, contrition, sorrow over our sin and its fruits, meets faith in Christ, and his fruits.

The absolution that follows is the origin of the rite, as the Lord commanded it (John 20:19–23). The confession of our sins and sinfulness provides salutary context. Repentance goes with the Gospel (Mark 1:15; Luke 24:47). Here we “plead guilty of all sins, even those of which we do not know, as we do in the Lord’s Prayer.” The pastor then absolves the congregation at once, by the authority of his office, “in the stead and by the command of [his] Lord Jesus Christ.” There the Gospel does its work. Luther’s Small Catechism says of this: “I believe that, when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, especially when they exclude manifest and impenitent sinners from the Christian congregation, and again when they absolve those who repent and are willing to amend, this is as valid and certain, in heaven also, as if Christ, our dear Lord, dealt with us Himself.” What a gift, given straightaway, of a clean conscience before God. This is what the pastor is for! (1 Tim 1:5)

At the same time, private confession and absolution, which from Luther’s day (and before) to the 19th Century *was the norm*, offers the penitent to confess “those sins only which we know and feel in our hearts” (Small Catechism), to receive bullet-proof assurance of the forgiveness of sins where it is needed most. Private confession and absolution also provides an opportunity for the pastor to instruct the conscience in Law and Gospel. Including the indicative-operative form of Confession and Absolution at the start of the service is a relatively new feature, a bold venture in the Gospel, hoping that the common comfort it gives sinners will not lead them to despise repentance and the forgiveness of sins as “common,” but to seek and treasure them more and more.