

The place of absolution in the service of the Lord's day

Charles Hohenstein and David Tripp

An evening service of a Hispanic Assembly of God ended with the public repentance and restoration of a man who had wounded some members of the church. They were embodying Christ's mission of forgiveness, the power of the keys: "*Reciban el Espíritu Santo. A quienes les perdonen sus pecados, les serán perdonados*" (John 20:22–23). This scene, reminiscent of the early church (see Gal. 6:1–3, 2 Cor. 5:18, Luke 15:7, 1 Tim. 5: 22), raises the question of confession and absolution in Sunday worship.

Is confession a necessary element in the liturgy?

One could argue that confession of sin has no place in the public liturgy of the redeemed, because they are the redeemed. In the

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early church, after all, the service of the Lord's day had neither confession nor absolution. The pattern changed, in the West, about the turn of the first millennium A.D., with the addition of the *Confiteor* (the form of confession of sins, so named from its first word) and its response.

Has the tone of the service of the Lord's day become too dominantly penitential in the West? Ministry is always, though not exclusively, addressed to the forgiveness of sins. For health, we need the constantly

reinforced assurance of pardoning grace; liturgical absolution is a healing ministry. Absolution looks to the future, to spiritual maturation, to the glory of the triune giver of holiness. This need and this gift are the concern of the church, and the church, as the body of the world's maker and redeemer, confesses for the world at large.

The Eucharist itself is, under one aspect, an absolving sacrament. It has therefore been argued that, however necessary absolution is in a liturgy of the Word, specific absolution has no place in a eucharistic order. On the other hand, Christ's absolving word and his real presence in the sacrament of the altar are indissolubly linked acts of the one Christ.

Where in the service? And by which form?

At the opening of the pre-Vatican II Roman mass, both priest and people confessed and absolved one another. First the priest: "I confess to God almighty, to blessed Mary ever virgin..., to all the saints, and to you, brothers and sisters [*fratres*], that I have sinned greatly.... Therefore I pray blessed Mary ever virgin...and all the saints and you, brothers-and-sisters, to pray for me to the Lord our God." And the people prayed: "May almighty God have mercy upon you [singular], and, forgiving all your sins, lead you to life eternal." Then the people confessed likewise, but saying, "Father," instead of "brothers and sisters," and the priest followed with the same prayer, with "you" in the plural, and added the prayer, "May the almighty and merciful Lord grant us the pardon, absolution and remission of all our sins."

Cranmer's Anglican rite also prescribes a general confession at the entry to worship (in this case, daily morning and evening prayer). Then the priest says, "Almighty God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who desireth not the death of a sinner, but rather that he may turn from his wickedness and live; and hath given [power, and] commandment, to his Ministers, to declare and pronounce to his people, being penitent, the [Absolution and] Remission of their sins: he pardoneth and absolveth all them that truly repent, and unfeignedly believe his Gospel. Wherefore let us beseech him to grant us true repentance, and his Holy Spirit, that those things may please him, which we do at this present; and that the rest of our life hereafter may be pure and holy; so that at the last we may come to his eternal joy; through Jesus Christ our Lord."

Also at the opening of worship, the proposed communion order for the covenanting churches of Wales offers: "Receive this assurance: 'There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.' Our sins are forgiven in Christ." The people

respond: “Amen. Thanks be to God.”¹ Another example of the assurance being given near the start of the service in scriptural language—words of Jesus, in this case—is in the 1975 British *Methodist Service Book*: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Hear then his word of grace [the Uniting Church of Australia adds: ‘to us’]: Your sins are forgiven.”

The advantage of placing absolution early in the liturgy is that we are assured at once that we are approaching the throne of grace. To begin corporate worship with absolution is especially helpful in a tradition that is replacing private confession with a corporate act.

Confession and absolution are also a fitting response to the proclamation of the Word, which itself offers reconciliation. One example is from the Church Order of the Electoral Palatinate of 1556: “The almighty and merciful God forgives you your sins, and I, upon the command of our Lord Jesus Christ, on behalf of the Holy Christian Church, declare you free, clear and unbound from all your sin, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Go forth and sin no more, but improve yourselves without cease. God help you in this through his Son Jesus Christ.”² In Baden 400 years later, we find this: “Upon this your confession, I proclaim to all who heartily lament their sin, have a sincere faith in Jesus Christ, and have a serious intent to change their lives for the better, the grace of God and the forgiveness

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of their sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Go forth in peace; may it be for you according to your faith.”³

The choice of wording in absolution is theologically sensitive. The need for authoritative assurance argues for absolution as promise, either absolute (that sins are forgiven through Christ, the condition of repentance and faith being implicit) or conditional. Such promise is perhaps most cogent if put in Scripture language, particularly in words of Christ. Instead of a promise, the absolution may be a petition, asking for forgiveness as promised

and effected in atonement by Christ, and for divine aid in meeting its conditions. Petition or promise may be “for us,” which asserts the minister’s need for the same forgiveness as everyone else, or “for you,” which Protestants often deprecate as wrongly sacerdotal, but which is properly spoken not as by a human individual but in the name of the Lord. It may also be “for you,”

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by minister and people in turn: “Hear the good news: ‘Christ died for us while we were yet sinners, that is God’s proof of his love toward us.’ In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven!” “In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven! Glory to God. Amen.”⁴

If a recommendation is asked for, we offer this twofold proposal: to place the confession and absolution at varying positions according to the season—say, at the opening during the penitential seasons of Advent and Lent, after

the preaching at Christmas/Epiphany and Eastertide, before the intercessions during ordinary time. Where there is serious disquiet about absolution in the “you” form, we suggest incorporating the absolving words of Christ within a prayer, thus: “We confess..., and we ask for your forgiveness for the sake of your Son, and that we may hear in our hearts his gracious word: ‘Your sins are forgiven.’”

Some risks and costs of absolution

Roman Catholic debate on general absolution is much concerned with the danger of offering forgiveness on the cheap, not least by discouraging individual auricular (“to the ear”) confession (confession of sins to God in the presence of a priest). Experience suggests, however, that the vigorous use of emphatic general absolution encourages individual confession, precisely because it brings home the reality of salvation.⁵

More urgent is the consideration that the liturgical ministry of reconciliation commits the church to a full-orbed and growing ministry of reconciliation. The congregation is called to grow into a true “forgiving community,”⁶ which takes responsibility for the guidance and healing and maturation of its members. To be

consistent, our churches will be obligated to follow the example of, for instance, Mennonites and Anabaptists in witness to peace and justice, forgiveness and reconciliation. What that might lead us into is beyond imagining.

Notes

¹ The Commission of the Covenanted Churches, *Y Cymun Sanctaidd* (Swansea: The Commission of the Covenanted Churches in Wales, 1981), 15.

² Fritz Hauss and Hans Georg Zier, eds., *Die Kirchenordnungen von 1556 in der Kurpfalz und der Markgrafschaft Baden-Durlach*, Veröffentlichungen des Vereins für Kirchengeschichte in der Evangelischen Landeskirche Badens, no. 16 (Karlsruhe: Verlag Evang. Presseverband, 1956), 53–4.

³ *Evangelisches Kirchengesangbuch: Ausgabe für die Evangelisch-protestantische Landeskirche Badens* ([Karlsruhe]: n.p., 1953).

⁴ Commission on Worship of the United Methodist Church, *The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper: An Alternate Text, 1972* (Nashville: United Methodist Pub. Hse., 1972), 3.

⁵ Aelred Tegels, "Reconciliation in Memphis," *Worship* 51 (January 1977): 70; and "Confession in Memphis," *Worship* 51 (May 1977): 260.

⁶ See William Klassen, *The Forgiving Community* (Philadelphia: Westminster Pr., 1966); also Theodore W. Jennings, *The Liturgy of Liberation: The Confession and Forgiveness of Sins* (Nashville: Abingdon Pr., 1988).

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