

## His Mercy and His Men

### I. *What is Confession?*

In the minds of many, I imagine, the mere word *confession* brings up mostly uncomfortable images: a black box set up in the darkest corner of the sanctuary, like an inside hut, to provide an enclosed space, as if to add the discomfort of claustrophobia to the already agonising experience of having to search your memory for all sorts of wrongs and wrongdoings of yours, and describe them in embarrassing detail to the man behind the curtain, whom you know very well, even though he is hidden behind the curtain, and who also knows you, and might very well take his knowledge of all your faults and flaws and failures with him in his future dealings with you and use them against you. No, he will not say anything about what he knows about you to anybody else, for he is not allowed to do that, and very much not so; but still, he can look at you with that condescending look, reminding you that *he knows*, and still has the upper hand whenever he wants something from you.

We know very well, of course, that this image does not quite correspond to what happens in our Lutheran Church; our churches do not have confessional booths. Thankfully, the Reformation did away with those, right?

Actually it did not. In the old world, many Lutheran churches do have confessional booths; and most of those do *not* go back to the time before the Reformation. It was a natural thing for the first many generations of Lutherans to keep the confessional booths in their churches, not only as a memory of ages past, but for actual use. But that is beside the point; for the point is that the Lutheran Reformation not only did not abolish the practice of private confession and absolution, but in fact treasured it as a precious instrument of the Gospel.

Nevertheless, the image still lurks in our minds, does it not, that it must be an agonising experience to confess your sins to your Pastor, or at least an embarrassing one, even if you like your Pastor, and trust him, that he would never use against you what you admit to him; which, by the way, he is not allowed to do, either, as little as he is allowed to tell anybody else about anything else you tell him in confidence, which would include anything he only knows because he is your Pastor.

Even if you do trust your Pastor, admitting to your sins and shortcomings would come with some embarrassment, would it not, if not with outright agony.

Yes, for facing our sins and shortcomings, and admitting to them, even to ourselves, it comes with some embarrassment, does it not? Particularly it does for those of us who prefer to see ourselves as perfect persons; in fact, for us, it is an agonising experience whenever we have to acknowledge any faults and flaws and failings on our own part, whenever it becomes inescapably obvious that in this or that particular regard we did wrong, or even that we made a mistake.

And therein lies the rub, does it not? Well, therein it lies. The very innermost nature of sin is this very inclination to see ourselves as perfect, equal to God in His goodness, or at least *almost* equal to Him, so that we cannot bear to admit to our shortcomings, neither to others, nor to ourselves, even if we are willing to admit that we are sinners before God, formally at least, like everybody else. That we can do, because admitting to being a sinner like everybody else is something we know that we have to do, and it is part of being the perfect person we prefer to think that we are. But it is a far cry from formally admitting to being a sinner before God, just like everybody else, to actually acknowledging that our sin is actually evil, really evil, that by it we actually gravely offend God and justly deserve His temporal and eternal punishment.

`A mere formal admission of being a sinner before God, in general, without acknowledging any actual wrong or wrongdoing, it allows the evil one to make us think of our sin as something that is not really real and really has nothing to do with the real world, and nothing to do with me, who I really am.

We learn tonight of what real evil our sin is, as we hear of our Lord Jesus Himself being in agony on account of sin, not His own, but ours, sweating blood at the thought of not only physically having His life blood shed in agony and die, but having to do so under the judgement of God, having to drink the bitter cup of His righteous wrath against sin, the holy hatred of His goodness against evil. Such was *His* agony, who knows all things, at knowing what awaited Him, what He would have to suffer for the salvation of sinners.

And yet He would bear not only the agony of knowing, the Son of God, and the Holy One of God, the Father's beloved from eternity, but also that of actually suffering His wrath. Such was His prayer: *My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will. My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, Your will be done. Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but Yours, be done.*

And He would rise to face the fate that awaited Him, judgement unto death at the hands of sinners, and also the judgement and death of sinners, that which we have all earned with God with our sin, unbelief and ungodliness and evil and impurity, in our lives, and in our hearts and minds, surrendering and submitting to the Father's will in all things, even unto death, and death upon a cross at that, for love of the Father, and for love of us sinners, that love which the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit shared from eternity, the love out of which God made us to begin with, for us to be there for Him to love, and have all things good given to us out of His goodness and be with Him forever in the fullness of His goodness and His glory.

Such is our salvation set before us tonight. Where we have failed, the Son of God has fulfilled the Father's will. He has borne the agony of drinking the bitter cup of judgement and death, the wrath of God against all sin, the holy hatred of His goodness against evil. And this He has done for us, in our stead and on our behalf.

As such is it that He has had His holy Apostle John write that *if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just so as to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness*. The price has been paid, in full and in abundance.

And therefore is it also that our Catechism teaches us that *confession has two parts. First, that we confess our sins, and second, that we receive absolution from the Pastor as from God Himself, not doubting, but firmly believing that by it our sins are forgiven before God in heaven*.

His salvation calls for us to confess our sins. For as He has also had His Apostle write it, *if we say we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His Word is not in us*. If we refuse to submit to His judgement of our sin, we reject also His Word of forgiveness for our sin, and with it, our salvation.

But to confess our sin is exactly that, to submit to His Word, when it judges our sin as evil, as well as when it promises us full forgiveness for our sin on account of what He has done for us.

Confession is not about our own agony. The very word *confess* means to state something together with someone else; and the Greek word we translate as *confess* means to *say the same*. To *confess* our sin is to agree and submit to what God Himself says about our sin, that it is real, and that it really is wrong, and evil; not because we feel it and are in agony about it, but because we acknowledge that He is God, and we are not, and that, as such, His judgement is that which matters. This is what it means to *confess* your sin.

Similarly, *faith* is to submit to His promise of full and complete forgiveness for all our sins and shortcomings. It is to submit to His Word of salvation, as did the blessed mother of the Son of God: *Let it be to me according to Your Word!* Or as our Catechism says it: *that we receive absolution from the Pastor as from God Himself, not doubting, but firmly believing that by it our sins are forgiven before God in heaven.*

This is what He demands of us. And what He demands, He works in us Himself, with His Word, who has Himself fulfilled all things for us, and will Himself fulfil all things for us, and in us, when we allow Him to do that.

His promise that *if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just so as to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness* does not come to us with the demand that we agonise about whether or not we have worked up enough agony in ourselves about our sins and shortcomings. It comes to us as His judgement that our sin is indeed evil, and that we are righteous before Him on account of the sufferings and death of Jesus Christ the righteous One, who is Himself, as He has also had His holy Apostle John write it, *the atoning sacrifice for our sin*, by which the price and penalty for all sin has been paid, in full and in abundance.

For those whose conscience is formed by the faith, though, awareness of sin often comes with agony, when it becomes inescapably obvious to us that we have failed. It did for Peter. How can we not remember, as we hear it tonight how he boldly proclaimed that *even if I must die with You, I will never deny You?* Such agony is what He Himself will work in us, though, for our salvation, whenever He sees it needful.

One great benefit of personal confession and absolution is this: that putting our awareness of our sin into words, it forces us to face reality as it really is, that our sin is real, and really is ours. It delivers us from that false faith in the forgiveness of sins which is so common, that sin is not serious, not really evil. And so it enables us, also, to hear His promise of salvation as a real promise, and to know His salvation as *real* forgiveness for the real sin of real sinners such as myself; that in spite of all that I am and all that I have done, I shall nevertheless not perish and die in His judgement, but rather live and be with Him forever in the fullness of His goodness and His glory, all on account of what He Himself is and what He Himself has done. And ultimately. this is worth whatever agony may come with it.

O Christ our God, Lamb of God, who have borne, and take away, the sin of the world, have mercy upon us. *Amen.*