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Miscellanea

The Incorrect and the Correct Uses of the Confessional Address

NOTE. — This paper is based on an essay by the Rev. Julius Friedrich which appeared in the March and April issues of the *Homiletical Magazine*, 1918.

Despite the deepening interest in liturgical research of the past few decades and the consequent changes that have been made in the Common Service to conform with liturgical standards, many of our congregations still adhere to the time-honored custom of having a special confessional service precluding the regular Communion service. Such a confessional service is usually conducted along the following lines: a confessional hymn; a psalm or prayer, followed by a so-called confessional address; the general confession and absolution; and concluded by an appropriate hymn or the last stanza of a hymn.

Other congregations have abolished the confessional service, either for want of time to have the additional services or Sunday school sessions or because they have come to recognize the exclusiveness of such a service in that it deprives the non-communing members of the congregation of the benefits of necessary instruction on the blessings of the Sacrament. Where the confessional service is no longer used, a confessional sermon is frequently delivered in the main service. In either case the purpose of the confessional address as well as of the confessional sermon is to assist the communicants in partaking of the holy Sacrament worthily.

In the days of the Reformation and for some time thereafter the confessional, or preparatory, service with confessional address was unknown. The Communion sermon was delivered in the presence of the entire congregation as part of the regular service, especially during the Easter season. Special admonition and instruction were given before Communion during private absolution and confession. Incorporated into the Communion service, however, was the general exhortation as it is still found in our *Agenda* and the *Lutheran Hymnal*. The confessional address postdates the Thirty Years' War and is probably a substitute for the disintegrated custom of private confession and absolution. The *American Lutheran* printed an article a few years back in which the author, the Rev. Fred Lindemann, traced the origin of the confessional service and concluded that it is a product of the age of Pietism. Since the chief tenet of Pietism was subjectivism, the conclusion sounds logical.

However, the purpose of this paper is not to trace the history of the confessional address, but to face the fact that the confessional address is used in our circles and to show how it can be used for a salutary effect and to caution against frequent abuses which have a detrimental, if not a disastrous, effect.

I

First we shall list some of the abuses of the confessional address. It is misused, in the first place, when it is predominantly *legalistic*. Let us remember that the communicants assembled before us are Christians, lambs of the fold of Christ, believing, penitent children of God.

Christian charity demands that we recognize them as such; otherwise we should have been compelled to suspend and repudiate them when they came to announce for the Sacrament. These lambs of Christ have appeared in answer to the gracious invitation of their Savior and desire to obtain that rest which the Savior promises in the Sacrament to those that "labor and are heavy laden," namely, the reassurance of the remission of sins. They confess in effect:

I come, O Savior, to Thy Table;
For weak and weary is my soul;
Thou, Bread of Life, alone art able
To satisfy and make me whole.

It is certainly out of line to employ the condemning power of the Law and thereby to strike terror into penitent hearts at the moment when sinners approach penitently the feast of grace, trusting in the friendly, loving invitation and promise of their Savior to give them the seal and pledge of grace and forgiveness. Picture to yourselves an oriental shepherd at the close of day. His flock has been running and grazing over hill and dale all the day long. At nightfall he leads them back to the fold where they may find rest and security against the beasts of prey that lurk in the darkness. Slowly the tired and weary sheep wend their way to the gate. They are about to enter the fold. Now, what would happen if at that moment the shepherd would release his dogs to charge the sheep? There would be a hurry-scurry confusion. Some of the sheep would probably find their way through the gate; others would blindly rush into the walls of the fold; while most of them would turn to the side in their confusion and run wild. It would not be difficult to understand why on the following evening the sheep would be reluctant to go near the fold. Very similar is the effect upon communicants of the legalistic confessional address. Those are the tactics of the Papacy. The evil effects of the "fire-and-brimstone" confessional address Luther describes in his *Hauspostille*, p. 136: "Da ist's endlich dahin geraten, dass das Sakrament, die troestliche Speise, da jedermann sollte Lust und Liebe zu haben, dermassen in der Predigt gehandelt ist worden, dass man mit Zittern und Schrecken dazu gegangen ist und jedermann sich mehr davor gefuerchtet, denn Trost empfangen hat."

It was said that the confessional address is incorrectly used when it is *predominantly* legalistic. In other words: when the Law is preached and applied with the implication that all the communicants, or the great majority of them, are secure, impenitent and hardened sinners, and that we must redeem this final opportunity, by means of the Law, to crush their hearts and bring them to a vivid and penitent realization of their sinful state.* It is lording it over the flock of God and tyrannizing the

* On this point Pastor Friedrich says: "Mir kommt das aehnlich vor, als wenn der Vater des verlorenen Sohnes dem Sohne, als er nun zu ihm kam, um seine Suende zu bekennen, erst noch schnell eine scharfe Strafpredigt gehalten haette, in der er ihn an sein suendliches Treiben daheim und in der Fremde erinnert, ihm vorgemalt, welch ein abscheulicher Mensch er gewesen, ihm eingegeben haette, dass er eigentlich gar kein Recht mehr habe, zu ihm zu kommen; oder als wenn der Vater dem Sohne, nachdem er nun seine Suende bekannt haette, gefragt haette: 'Ist's dir nun auch ein wirklicher Ernst? Bist du auch wirklich recht betruebt ueber dein Unrecht? usw.' Von alledem steht aber nichts im Evangelium. Im Gegenteil; der Vater ist so erfreut ueber das Kommen seines Sohnes, dass er ihm entgegenellt, ihm um den Hals faellt und ihn kuesst, ehe der Sohn auch nur ein Wort sagen, ehe er sein Suendenbekenntnis ablegen kann."

lambs of Christ who have their faces set toward Calvary if the confessional address leads them back to Sinai and perhaps even leaves them there; or if the conclusion of the address, which often is merely an appendix to the text, seeks in a few shallow sentences to attract the attention of the communicants to the evangelical promises of the Sacrament and then finally closes with a belligerent "Amen," which convinces perhaps no one but the pastor that he has been successful in preparing the communicants for a worthy reception of the holy Sacrament.

The homiletical path of least resistance runs in the direction of legalism; and there is perhaps nothing more difficult for a pastor in this wicked, perverse world than to be truly evangelical and to hold forth the Gospel of Christ as the sure comfort of the humble, the only hope for the sinner. If we pastors stand in danger of becoming servants of Moses in our regular Sunday sermons, especially when specific sins and offenses run rampant in our congregations, then the danger is doubly great of becoming legalistic in our confessional addresses. We then so often feel called upon, as custodians of the means of grace, to lay bare these rampant sins and to denounce them with all the power at our command. This is true particularly of young, fiery preachers whom the zeal of the Lord's House is consuming.†

The confessional address is a failure also if it does not present the truth clearly and unmistakably that the one and only one essential for a worthy reception of the Sacrament is "faith in the words, 'Given and shed for you for the remission of sins.'" Luther says: "Accordingly it all depends upon this, that one knows what it means to eat and drink worthily. The Papacy teaches that no one should approach the Sacrament unless he finds himself well prepared and quite pure. Such purity, however, they make dependent upon confession, contrition, fasting, praying, giving of alms, and similar works, called works of penance and ordered by the priests. But away with such worthiness and despair of it. For it is impossible that through our works we can be quite pure or attain to such purity." *Hauspostille*, p. 141. (Our translation.)

Now it may not be likely that a Lutheran pastor's conception of a worthy communicant should become so coarsely Roman. But if we are not extremely careful, we can easily make the mistake of describing the broken and contrite heart of a sinner and his firm resolution to amend his sinful life in such a way that the communicant gets the impression that the essentials of true worthiness consist in such emotional manifestations and that the degree of worthiness is in proportion to the intensity of his feelings. The result may be that the communicant will be tempted with doubt concerning his worthiness because he perhaps does not feel his sorrow and contrition as intensely as it is described in the confessional address to which he is listening.

The confessional address would be better undelivered if it describes the worthy communicant hyperbolically as touching repentance and faith. If, *e. g.*, on the one hand, the penitent communicant is depicted as

† Pastor Friedrich (*loc. cit.*): "Ich muss bekennen, dass ich in diesem Punkte in den ersten Jahren meines Amtes oft gefehlt habe. Wenn ich jetzt manche meiner Beichtreden aus jener Zeit wieder durchlese, dann muss ich mich schämen. Heute wuerde ich jene Beichtreden nicht mehr halten."

one whose eyes are swollen with tears of sorrow; whose heart is bleeding with regret; who knows not whither to turn to escape the terrors of conscience; who sees before his soul the flames of hell leaping up to consume it; who is convinced that he is the chief of sinners, the very incarnation of the devil himself — if we thus describe repentance, we are saying something that, frankly, is not true. Such moments and such feelings may be the experience of some Christians, but they are not common to all Christians. Above all, it is not true that only he is a worthy communicant who has such experiences. If that were the case, I dare say that all of us pastors, without exception, would be unworthy communicants. — On the other hand; it is equally erroneous to exaggerate the faith of the communicant. If in the confessional sermon or address we describe the worthy communicant as having now bidden final farewell to his pet sins; as having consecrated himself wholly to his God and Savior in fervent, consuming love; as having an invincible faith in the remission of sins, a faith unassailed by doubt and temptation; as having been enraptured with heavenly ecstasy at the reception of the Holy Supper, then again we are describing a Christian who does not exist, or, at best, is a paragon, a *rara avis*. Such special visitations of grace may at times be the privilege of some Christians, but they are not the privilege of all Christians. Above all, it is not true that these experiences are absolute essentials of true worthiness. What grave responsibilities we have as we wield the sword of the Word! How we should guard against any exaggerations either to the right or to the left! At every Communion service we may have "bruised reed" or "smoking flax" Christians, who are virtually crawling to the fountain of grace. Will such a soul not sink into the slough of despondency when it must confess that it has neither such heart-felt repentance nor such buoyancy of faith as it is described by the pastor in the confessional address? Would such a soul not be forced to conclude, "Then I must not partake of the Sacrament, for I am unworthy"?

The confessional address is abused also when it is expected to atone for negligence in pastoral care or neglect of duty when receiving announcements, *e. g.*, when it is used to warn a member under suspicion or surrounded by evil reports or perhaps even to dissuade him from partaking of the Sacrament. Such a procedure would prove to be unsoothing balm for a disturbed pastoral conscience; for that pastor would seek in vain to convince himself that he has done his duty and that, if the person in question communes unworthily, that person himself is guilty, since he has been warned from the Word of God. It is very unlikely that a confessional address of this nature would deter even an impenitent sinner from communing. It is more likely that he would go either with a guilty conscience or to spite and defy the pastor; for he will readily recognize himself as the target of the pastor's remarks. The cowardice evidenced by such a practice as well as the injustice perpetrated upon the other communicants should suffice to make such a practice taboo.

A misuse of the confessional address is committed also when it is used to name and decry the sins of the congregation. This may under circumstances be done if the confessional sermon is preached during the

regular service. Better still, it should be reserved for the special day of humiliation and prayer. To do so in the confessional frustrates the purpose of the confessional address. The pastor forgets the real reason why the people are assembled. He must rather bear in mind that they are penitent sinners, who have come to obtain the comfort of forgiveness. The Sacrament is a feast of grace. To castigate the sins of the congregation in the presence of the guests who are about to recline at the banquet of Jesus is heartless and loveless, to say the least. And the confessional service, otherwise fraught with comfort and blessing, becomes a veritable torture chamber.

II

How, then, is the confessional address used correctly? Much of what follows has already been hinted at in the process of eliminating the abuses. For the sake of re-orientation let us once more visualize a Communion service. The Holy Supper, the Sacrament of the Altar, is to be celebrated, in which the Lord Jesus gives us His true body and His precious blood as a seal and pledge of the forgiveness of sins. Before us a number of Christians are gathered for the purpose of preparing themselves for a worthy reception of the Sacrament. As pastors and curates of souls we are to assist them in this last-minute preparation. The people gathered before us are our confessional wards. We know them more or less intimately. Many times, perhaps, we have visited with them in their homes or talked with them otherwise. Only a few days before they announced their intention to us of partaking of the Sacrament, or they registered by proxy. We knew before the service who would be present for Communion. In the exercise of Christian charity we consider all of them penitent, believing children of God. Should we know and have proof that one or the other of them lives in sins and manifest impenitence, then we should have done our duty by him or her before; we should at least have admonished him or her at the time that announcements were made and sought to convict the sinner of his condition. And if those efforts would have been in vain, we should have suspended him from the Sacrament until some later date, until which time he could have made amends. The law of love, then, demands that we regard them all as Christians who have come in good faith to reassure their heavy-laden hearts of the grace of forgiveness. Accordingly, the fundamental thought of our address should comply with the Savior's loving invitation, "Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." In other words, the sum and substance of the confessional address should be the sweet, comforting Gospel of the forgiveness of sins through the merits of Christ and His atoning Blood.

Now, it is true, that a desire for forgiveness can be had only by a sinner who is conscious of his condition; only he seeks rest who is weary and heavy laden. Consequently, we cannot offer forgiveness to any one without reminding him at the same time that he is a sinner and that he is in need of forgiveness. When Jesus offered "living water" to the Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well, He also showed her that she was in need of that "living water." It is necessary, therefore, that the confession address also deal with the subject of sin and the cor-

rect knowledge of sin. Since the knowledge of sin is by the Law, we cannot avoid proclaiming the Law of God in the confessional address. However, the Law should never be preached for the Law's sake, but only in the service of the Gospel; it should never be an end in itself, but merely the means toward an end; never an effort to make the hearts worthy and well prepared, but solely and alone for the purpose of making room for the Gospel so they will all the more gladly accept Jesus, the Physician of souls, to be purged, cleansed, and healed by Him. When we acquaint a patient with the seriousness of his ailment, we do so not in order to frighten him out of his wits nor because we feel that doing so will heal him. No; we do so that he might be induced to consult a competent physician and faithfully use the remedy prescribed. More than that; when we emphasize the seriousness of the ailment and its possible consequences and then recommend a remedy, we are by contrast emphasizing the healing powers of the remedy. For the same purpose we must hold the mirror of the divine Law before our communicants, so that when the communicant then hears of the riches of the grace of God in Christ he will have the joyful assurance "Though my sin doth abound, the grace of God doth much more abound." "Though my sins be as scarlet, Jesus will make them as white as snow." In summarizing this entire paragraph, we might say, the confessional address must be predominantly evangelical, assuring the hearers that Christ Jesus came into the world to save *sinners*, and no one else. This fact calls to mind the legendary incident often told of Luther. Satan came to him and said, "Martin Luther, you are lost; for you are a sinner." Luther answered, "Thank you! Christ came to save sinners; and if Martin Luther is a sinner, then Christ came to save Martin Luther." This is exactly what the Apostle Paul means in 1 Tim. 1:15: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief."

Every confessional address or sermon should have as its chief aim to strengthen and promote faith in the forgiveness of sins through absolution and the Sacrament. Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who instituted this Sacrament as the highest expression of His love to dying sinners, should be portrayed before the faith of the communicants so vividly and condescendingly that even the poorest in spirit, the despondent, be encouraged to come without reservation.

Just as I am, without one plea
But that Thy blood was shed for me
And that Thou bidst me come to Thee,
O Lamb of God, I come.

Just as I am and waiting not
To rid my soul of one dark blot;
To Thee, whose blood can cleanse each spot,
O Lamb of God, I come.

Thus we are both properly dividing and properly integrating the Word of truth.

Since Jesus' promise to deal with the sinner is only through the means of grace, the confessional address should never fail to present the comforting promises and the glorious power with which both the visible and audible Gospel is charged and to appeal to the Christians, en-

couraging them to trust the promises of the Gospel implicitly and thus to use the Sacrament frequently. If we bear in mind that the majority of our communicants attend the Sacrament but once or twice a year and that, where the confessional or preparatory service is in vogue, little opportunity is otherwise given us during the course of the year to preach on the wealth of God's grace in the Sacrament, we should be urged to use especially the confessional address to treat the doctrine of the means of grace from every angle and show the glorious privileges that are ours as members of the universal priesthood of all believers. When we pray for our communicants, we ask Jesus to "let them experience Thy grace at the heavenly feast"; but let us not forget, then, that their experience of His grace at the heavenly feast depends in a measure upon our efforts in the confessional address, to the extent that we preach to them, or withhold from them, the contents of the Gospel. When people are properly fed at a banquet, they will be inclined to accept the invitation when another banquet is planned, and vice versa. Is the lack of hunger and thirst for the Sacrament among the communing constituency of our Church perhaps partly our fault in that we fail to tell them what is on the menu, because we do not emphasize sufficiently the wonderful fruits of the Sacrament?

The confessional address should present the fruits of the Sacrament evangelically. It should remind the Christians that even after their communion, they will still have their sinful flesh with its evil tendencies and corruption; and that "the devil with his lying and murdering day and night will let them have no peace within or without"; and that after communing, even as before, "they will have no lack of sin and trouble"; and that they should, therefore, not be discouraged and feel that their Communion has been in vain or that they have communed unworthily, since they are unable to conquer sin completely. On the contrary, the Sacrament does not eliminate the battle against the flesh and the devil; but it supplies strength for renewed attacks upon the forces of evil so potent in their hearts, that they may battle with renewed vigor, valor, and strategy and not be robbed of the crown. In the words "given and shed for you for the remission of sins" Jesus assures His battle-weary, but yet mobilized children, "Fear not, I have redeemed thee; thou art Mine; and no man shall pluck thee out of My hand." And the Christian heart that has been encouraged to trust that blessed promise will fight bravely on, no matter how fierce the battle nor how frequently he is wounded with the fiery darts of the Wicked One. He knows that victory is certain in the power of Him who says in effect:

But if too hot you find the fray,
I, at your side, stand ready;
I fight Myself, I lead the way,
At all times firm and steady.
A coward he who will not heed
When the Chief Captain takes the lead.

We must remind our communicants, too, in this connection that there can be no stalemate in this battle nor an unconditional surrender of the enemy, but that the duration is for life. Their personal experience will not be that of progress and advance, but rather reverses. How-

ever, God and their fellow Christians will note that they are progressing along the way of sanctification. Through such reminders in the confessional address the Christian communicant will be encouraged not only to return frequently to the arsenal of the Sacrament for the weapons of victory, but to re-enlist joyfully and fight valiantly and heroically in the battle for the saints, praying the while:

Jesus, all Thy children cherish
And keep them that they never perish
Whom Thou hast purchased with Thy blood.
Let new life to us be given
That we may look to Thee in heaven
Whenever fearful is our mood.
Thy Spirit on us pour,
That we may love Thee more—
Hearts o'erflowing;
And then will we be true to Thee
In death and life eternally.

May we who have the rare privilege of being helpers of the joy of our parishioners make the most of the opportunities presented to us in the confessional service. May we always remain evangelical in our preaching; for it is the Gospel, and not the Law, which is the power of God unto salvation unto everyone that believeth.

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