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With Reference to the Formula of Absolution

By W. G. POLACK

There is some discussion in various parts of Synod regarding our formula of absolution.

Let us say at the outset that the wording of any such formula belongs in the field of things indifferent, so long as the doctrine of the Office of the Keys is maintained. For that reason we can and do have more than one formula, namely, the Declaration of Grace, p. 6, *The Lutheran Hymnal*, and the Absolution, p. 16 and p. 48, *The Lutheran Hymnal*.

The *Concordia Cyclopaedia*, under "Absolution (Liturgical)" rightly states: "It is immaterial whether this proclamation be termed 'Declaration of Grace' or 'Absolution.' In either case the forgiveness of sins declared in the Gospel is actually transmitted to all believers."

In our circles, owing to the desire for liturgical uniformity, the exclusive use of our so-called "Absolution" was well-nigh universal until the old *Evangelical Lutheran Hymn-book* was introduced in our circles.

What is Lutheran usage in this respect?

It is apparent from the old Lutheran liturgies, or *Kirchenordnungen*, that there has never been anything approaching uniformity in the formula of absolution. Whatever the differences in the wording, however, the power of the Office of the Keys has not been set aside, minimized, or rejected.

The various forms of the "general" absolution grew out of the formula of the "private" absolution, as the Lutheran churches retained "Private Confession" for some time, in some places for several centuries. However, the medieval Roman form of absolution, which was deprecativ, was not used. Instead, a declarative form of absolution was formulated. Lambert, in *Memoirs of the Lutheran Liturgical Association*, quotes a medieval form of absolution, as follows: "Almighty, eternal God, remit this Thy confessing servant his sins according to Thy goodness, in order that the guilt of conscience, as punishment, may do him no more harm, and the indulgence of Thy goodness is valuable to his pardon. Through Jesus Christ, etc."

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During the Middle Ages there was no unanimity in the Roman Church as to the form of absolution in the exomologesis of the sinner. Whatever place the priest took in reconciling the penitent to the Church, the actual forgiveness of sin was left to God. It was Thomas Aquinas who brought the whole matter to a conclusion by teaching that the priest through the power of the keys, as instrument and servant of God, can set aside everything that hinders entrance into heaven. As Baptism, a lifeless means, works forgiveness, so the priest, as a living instrument and as minister of God, works forgiveness of sin and remittance of punishment in the sacrament of penance. He paralleled the formula "ego absolvo te" with the baptismal formula "ego baptizo te."

As indicated in Luther's statement in the Small Catechism, the Reformer retained the "ego absolvo te," basing it, however, on nothing else than the Word of Grace, the Gospel. Luther, too, paralleled "ego absolvo te" with "ego baptizo te," but for him it was in both acts the promises of the Gospel that made them effective; nothing else. "When a servant of the Church baptizes a child on the command of Christ, you do hear a mere man speaking, who is personally a sinner like yourself; but he is acting at God's command. Therefore when he says: 'I baptize thee in the name of the Father,' etc., you should hear and accept these words as if God Himself were speaking. Likewise when in absolution your sins are forgiven, then doubt as little as though God Himself had spoken the words. For God Himself does pronounce this sentence upon you that you should be free of your sins." (Erl. 32, 121.)

Harnack, in his *Lehrbuch der Liturgik*, Vol. II, points out that the Lutheran churches generally did not use Luther's form. We have it in the Small Catechism, as follows: "As thou believest, so be it done unto thee. And by the command of our Lord Jesus Christ I forgive thee thy sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen. Depart in peace." (*Triglotta*, p. 555.) Harnack finds it only in the Saxon churches, *Naumberg* KO, 1537, and *Dresden* KO, 1581; it is also in the *Jueterbogk* KO, 1562. The majority of the German church orders have such statements as: "I absolve thee of all thy sins" ("Ich spreche dich frei, los und

ledig aller deiner Suende"). Others have a "declaration" of the forgiveness of sins. This "declaration," however, was held to be a personal application of the forgiveness of sins. Some orders combine the latter two forms. (Cf. also Lochner's *Hauptgottesdienst*, p. 185 f.)

In the transfer of the Lutheran Church to American soil, all these types were brought over. The *Common Service Book*, in keeping with its purpose, to present a consensus of the liturgies of the sixteenth century, gives the absolution in the form of the Declaration of Grace, as we have it. (*The Lutheran Hymnal*, p. 6.) In the Order for Public Confession, however, it has this form, which includes the Retention: "Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, hath had mercy upon us, and for the sake of the sufferings, death, and resurrection of His dear Son Jesus Christ, our Lord, forgiveth us all our sins. As a Minister of the Church of Christ, and by His authority, I therefore declare unto you who do truly repent and believe in Him the entire forgiveness of all your sins: In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

"On the other hand, by the same authority, I declare unto the impenitent and unbelieving, that so long as they continue in their impenitence, God hath not forgiven their sins, and will assuredly visit their iniquities upon them, if they turn not from their evil ways, and come to true repentance and faith in Christ, ere the day of grace be ended."

Loehe's *Agende fuer christliche Gemeinden des lutherischen Bekenntnisses* (our copy is dated 1844), used by the Loehe churches until it was superseded by our Synodical *Kirchen-Agende*, has three *Absolutionsformeln*, none of which follow Luther's form, but all of them are in keeping with the forms generally used in the German Lutheran churches in Europe.

Lochner's *Hauptgottesdienst* gives the "Declaration of Grace" (same as *The Lutheran Hymnal*, p. 6) as the first form of absolution. He cites eleven church orders for this usage. A second form of absolution, that of Bugenhagen in Wittenberg, 1524, is presented in these words: "The almighty, merciful God forgive you your sins, and I at the command of our Lord Jesus Christ, in the stead of the holy Church, absolve you (sage euch frei, ledig und los) of all your sins, in the

name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen." Then follows the "confession" of the minister: "Since I also am burdened with many weaknesses, pray God faithfully for me, that I may carry on and fulfill this ministry diligently to His glory, to your and my comfort and salvation, as it is written, Ps. 123: 'Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.'"

In the German *Kirchen-Agende* of our Synod (1866), which followed the Saxon Orders, we have the formula of absolution as customarily used today in our circles and taught to the children in our Catechism. It retains Luther's: "I forgive thee," etc. Another form, practically lost sight of today, is in the "Exhortation at Communion" (*Kirchen-Agende*, 1866, pp. 233—236), in which the Confession of sins and the Absolution are stated in the form of a prayer.

The other American Lutheran synods generally use the Declaration of Grace as in the United Lutheran Church's *Common Service Book* and in *The Lutheran Hymnal*, referred to above. In addition, several use one or more alternate forms.

The Augustana Synod, in its *The Hymnal*, has a very simple form on p. 563: "May the Almighty, Eternal God, in His infinite mercy and for the sake of our Savior, Jesus Christ, forgive all our sins, and give us grace to amend our lives, and with Him obtain eternal life. Amen." In the Order of the Holy Communion, this form is given (p. 594): "If this be your sincere confession, and if with penitent hearts you earnestly desire the forgiveness of your sins for the sake of Jesus Christ, God, according to His promise, forgiveth you all your sins; and by the authority of God's Word and by the command of our Lord Jesus Christ, I declare unto you that God, through His grace hath forgiven all your sins; in the Name of God the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen."

The *Lutheran Hymnary* of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in both the Morning Service and the Order of Holy Communion uses the Declaration of Grace as in the *Common Service Book*.

The *American Lutheran Hymnal* of the American Lutheran Church, in both its orders for Morning Service, retains simply the Declaration of Grace of the *Common Service Book*.

