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Communication, consolation and discipline: two early Lutheran preachers on confession*

Mary Jane Haemig

Thomas Tentler, in his study of late medieval confession,¹ focused on two social and psychological functions of confession: discipline and consolation. Martin Luther's problems as a monk with confession are well known; Luther found no consolation in it, that is, he found no assurance of the forgiveness of his sins and reconciliation to God.² Luther and the Lutheran reformation did not abandon private confession but reshaped it theologically and thus practically.³ The literature produced by the German Lutheran reformers and directed at mass audiences reflects Luther's primary emphasis on the consolation offered by private confession and the necessity of communicating that consolation. However accents vary. This chapter examines the emphases on the reliable and authoritative communication of consolation and discipline in some oft-reprinted sermons. While all the sermons reflect Luther's

* Research for this chapter was done at the Herzog-August-Bibliothek (HAB), Wolfenbüttel, Germany. I wish to express my thanks to the staff of this library for their generous help.

¹ Thomas N. Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton, NJ, 1977).

² See James Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer* (Minneapolis, MN, 1986), pp. 55–6. Whether the late medieval confessional served to promote fear and anxiety has been a topic of much discussion among scholars. See Steven Ozment, *The Reformation in the Cities* (New Haven, CT, 1975) for a thorough discussion of the thesis that the medieval confessional was burdensome and ineffective in providing consolation. Lawrence G. Duggan, 'Fear and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation', *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, 75 (1984), pp. 153–75, contends that the 'assertion that the late medieval penitential system weighed so heavily on the conscience of the normal layman that it drove him into the arms of the Reformers ... is fundamentally irreconcilable with much of the evidence' (p. 173).

³ See the discussion in articles 11, 12, and 25 of the *Augsburg Confession* in *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* (BSLK) (8th edn, Göttingen, 1979), pp. 66–7 and 97–100. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia, PA, 1959), pp. 34–5, 61–3.

consistent emphasis on consolation as the primary purpose and benefit of confession, later sermons show an increased interest in social discipline. The sermons also deal with contextual issues in an effort to ensure that their listeners understood the benefits of Lutheran confession. The sixteenth-century reformers' interest in private confession stands in contrast to later Lutheranism. In later centuries private confession became less and less important in Lutheran practice and today it is virtually unknown in many Lutheran churches. However, preachers such as the two considered in this essay believed private confession was important because it was yet another setting, a personalized setting, for the proclamation and the hearing of the gospel.

Catechisms, theology and preaching

Lutherans made significant theological and practical changes to confession.⁴ Some still considered confession a sacrament; others did not. More important than this issue were the concrete benefits to be obtained by confession. Private confession was an opportunity to hear the forgiveness of sins announced in the sermon personalized. Lutherans emphasized the forgiveness of sins announced in absolution, not the deed of confessing. Private confession was voluntary, not required, although it was customary to require confession before the Lord's Supper. The reformers thought that the conscience would impel Christians to confess and all Christians should desire the consolation offered by confession. It was not necessary to recount every sin in detail; only those that came to mind should be named. A general confession of sins would suffice. The emphasis was not on the individual's contrition or confession which, in and of themselves, were good works. These good works, like all good works, would not satisfy God. The reformers told Christians to focus instead on the absolution. This was God's work and something Christians receive, not earn, through confession. Absolution was sufficient and no satisfaction was required afterwards to make it effective. The validity and efficacy of absolution were dependent on the promise of God to forgive; the office or status of the one pronouncing absolution was secondary. The office of the keys was understood as simply announcing reality to the Christian: God condemns the unrepentant sinner and God forgives the repentant sinner.

In 1529 Martin Luther published both his *Small Catechism*, designed to teach laypeople and pastors the basics of the Christian faith, and his

⁴ See notes 3, 7, and 8. See also the corresponding sections in *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* in BSLK and Tappert, *Book of Concord*.

Large Catechism, designed to explore those basics in greater depth.⁵ Among other uses, Luther intended them to help pastors in the preaching task. Originally these catechisms contained no section on confession though confession is implicit in other sections. In light of a contemporary controversy over law and repentance, the June 1529 revised edition of the *Small Catechism* added instructions for confessing.⁶ The 1531 edition added 'How Simple People Are to Be Taught to Confess'. This became a standard part of the *Small Catechism*.⁷ A 1529 revised edition of the *Large Catechism* added 'A Brief Exhortation to Confession'.⁸ During the period 1530–80 a plethora of catechisms flooded the market. By 1580 Luther's catechisms achieved normative status with their inclusion in the *Book of Concord*, the collection of writings which set forth what Lutherans believed.

Though Luther's catechisms were influential and became the basis for other catechisms and catechetical sermons, we cannot rely only on them to paint a picture of confession in the Lutheran reformation. We must look at what was actually taught to people by those who professed to be Luther's followers. The study of catechetical sermons is especially important because in a predominantly oral culture the sermon rather than the written catechism was the way that most people learned the teaching of the Lutheran reformers. The sermon was also important for a theological reason. Lutherans believed, like the apostle Paul, that 'Faith comes from hearing', that is, that the Holy Spirit was active in the preached Word both to condemn the listener through the preaching of the law and to create trust in God in him through the preaching of the gospel. The sermon did not just convey content; it was the Word through which the Holy Spirit really and truly created faith and conveyed salvation. This Word was an external Word, that is, it came from outside the listener and was mediated (spoken) by another human.

Several times a year in the Lutheran areas of Germany pastors preached on the catechism, that is on the basic teachings of the Christian faith. These sermons were based on the texts of the Ten Commandments,

⁵ On Luther's catechisms see Albrecht Peters, *Kommentar zu Luthers Katechismen* (5 vols, Göttingen, 1990–94), and Johann Michael Reu, *D. Martin Luthers Kleiner Katechismus: Die Geschichte seiner Entstehung seiner Verbreitung und seines Gebrauchs. Eine Festgabe zu seinem vierhundertjährigen Jubiläum* (Munich, 1929).

⁶ Peters, *Kommentar*, vol. 5, pp. 15–17, provides a history of confession in Luther's catechisms. Timothy Wengert, *Law and Gospel: Philip Melancthon's Debate with John Agricola of Eisleben over Poesnitentia* (Grand Rapids, MI 1997), pp. 148–53, sees the addition of the material on confession as a response to the antinomian controversy, that is, a controversy about law and repentance, in the 1520s.

⁷ BSLK, pp. 517–18; Tappert, *Book of Concord*, pp. 349–51.

⁸ BSLK, pp. 725–33; Tappert, *Book of Concord*, pp. 457–61.

Apostles' Creed, Lord's Prayer, and the words of institution of the sacraments; some were based on a written catechism (such as Luther's), others were not. Usually these sermons included at least one titled 'Confession' or 'The Office of the Keys'. Examining printed collections of Lutheran catechetical sermons on confession is one way to explore how confession was taught to large numbers of laypeople.

The catechetical sermons of Andreas Osiander and Cyriacus Spangenberg

The catechetical sermons of Andreas Osiander (1496?–1552)⁹ and Cyriacus Spangenberg (1528–1604)¹⁰ were some of the most popular of the sixteenth century, judging by the number of times they were reprinted.¹¹ Both authors were important Lutheran spokesmen who became controversial figures later in their lives. Osiander, known as the reformer of Nürnberg, was a preacher at Saint Lorenz in that city. In 1548 he went to Königsberg in East Prussia where his views on justification developed in ways considered un-Lutheran and brought controversy.¹² Our second author, Spangenberg, studied in Wittenberg, became preacher and teacher in Eisleben and then in Mansfeld, and in 1559 became dean of Mansfeld. Outspoken in the inter-Lutheran

⁹ See Gottfried Seebass, 'Osiander, Andreas', in Hans J. Hillerbrand (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Reformation* (4 vols, New York, 1996), vol. 3, pp. 183–5. Also Gottfried Seebass, *Das reformatorische Werk des Andreas Osiander*, Einzelarbeiten aus der Kirchengeschichte Bayerns, vol. 44 (Nuremberg, 1967); and Gerhard Müller, 'Andreas Osiander', in Martin Greschat (ed.), *Gestalten der Kirchengeschichte: Die Reformationszeit II* (12 vols, Stuttgart, 1981), vol. 6, pp. 59–73.

¹⁰ See Ingetraut Ludolph, 'Spangenberg, Father and Son (2) Cyriacus', in Julius Bodensieck (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*, (3 vols, Minneapolis, MN, 1965), vol. 3, p. 2245.

¹¹ I use the edition of Osiander's sermons edited by Rudolf Keller found in *Andreas Osiander D.A. Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Gerhard Mueller and Gottfried Seebass, *Band 5: Schriften und Brief 1533 bis 1534* (Gütersloh, 1983), pp. 182–334; and Cyriacus Spangenberg, *Catechismus: Die Fünff Hauptstu(e)ck der Christlichen Lerel Sampt der Hausztaffel und dem Morgen und Abendt Gebetl Benedicite und Gratias! etc.* (Schmalkalden, 1566). On Osiander's sermons see the introductory material in Mueller and Seebass, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 5; see also Maurice Schild, 'Observations on Osiander's Catechism Sermons', *Lutheran Theological Journal*, 20 (1986), pp. 97–107.

¹² The *Formula of Concord* rejected Osiander's view that justification occurred through the in-dwelling of Christ within the believer which resulted in a real righteousness of love and renewal of life. The *Formula* upheld the view that God declares us righteous for the sake of Christ's righteousness and this righteousness is the forgiveness of sins obtained through faith in the word of forgiveness that comes from outside the believer. *BSLK*, pp. 781–6; Tappert, *Book of Concord*, pp. 472–5.

controversy over original sin, he eventually had to leave Mansfeld. He published numerous sermonic and historical works.

First published in 1533 as part of the Brandenburg-Nürnberg church order,¹³ Osiander's *Catechismus oder Kinder predig* (sometimes referred to as the *Nürnberg Children's Sermons*) was published 28 times in ten different cities (Nürnberg, Wittenberg, Marburg, Frankfurt/Main, Berlin, Erfurt, Leipzig, Königsberg, Magdeburg and Rostock) between 1533 and 1555.¹⁴ These sermons, published anonymously, were by far the most popular series of catechetical sermons published during these years. They undoubtedly profited from the fact that they were, with one important exception, sermons on Luther's *Small Catechism*.¹⁵ Many people during this time learned Luther's catechism via these sermons. Osiander's sermons also profited from inclusion in several church orders, for example that of the electorate of Brandenburg (1542). However between 1556 and 1580 Osiander's sermons were published only eight times and in only two cities (Nürnberg and Frankfurt).¹⁶ They were

¹³ *Die Evangelischen Kirchenordnungen des XVI. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Emil Sehling (14 vols, Leipzig and Tübingen: 1902–), vol. 11, pp. 206–79.

¹⁴ *Verzeichnis der im Deutschen Sprachbereich Erschienenen Drucke des XVI. Jahrhunderts* (VD16) compiled by Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich, and the Herzog-August-Bibliothek (HAB), Wolfenbüttel (23 vols, Stuttgart, 1983–95), vol. 15, O 1035–O 1057 and O 1072–O 1075. Another edition (Nuremberg, 1533) is found in the supplement to VD16 maintained at the Herzog-August-Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel.

¹⁵ Keller comments that the use of the octavo format accounted for some of the popularity of the work but believes the close connection with Luther's *Small Catechism* was, from a business perspective, at least as important. Mueller and Seebass, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 5, p. 195.

¹⁶ VD16, vol. 15, O 1058–O 1065. The decline in popularity may simply be due to Osiander's death in 1552 or the decline may indicate that the market was saturated. It is also possible that the popularity of the sermons dropped because of Osiander's involvement in the inner-Lutheran disputes concerning forensic justification. Osiander's teaching on this was condemned by the *Formula of Concord* (1577). Whether this is the reason for their decline in popularity is questionable. The catechetical sermons were published anonymously. (On the authorship question and generally on the writing and publishing of these sermons see Seebass, *Das Reformatorische Werk*, pp. 249–51.) A tract, Michael Rotig, *Etlicher Jungen Prediger zu Nu(ern)berg berantwortung gegen der anklag Andree Osiandri/ so newlich im druck widder sie ist ausgangen* (Magdeburg, [c. 1552]), written by some Nürnberg theologians opposing Osiander's views on justification notes his claim, apparently made at the time of the controversy in the late 1540s and early 1550s, that both his catechism and the Nürnberg church order in which it was included supported his view on justification. The writers declare that Osiander alone reads the catechism this way; they can find no indication of his view in the catechism. They also note that the Church had understood and adopted the catechism as the right teaching. Thus Osiander's catechetical sermons were drawn into the controversy surrounding his teaching on justification. Though others apparently considered them to contain correct teaching, the mere association of Osiander's name with them and his own claims that

dropped from the revised edition of the church order for the electorate of Brandenburg (1572). A number of preachers filled the gap left by Osiander's sermons and published catechetical sermons in the period 1556–80. While no one preacher dominated the market as Osiander had done earlier, Spangenberg's catechetical sermons were among the most frequently reprinted of this period. They were printed at least eight times in four cities (Erfurt, Smalcalden, Magdeburg and Ursel).¹⁷

Both Osiander and Spangenberg present the parts of the catechism in the order in which Luther presented them – Ten Commandments, Apostles' Creed, Lord's Prayer, baptism, confession (or office of the keys) and Lord's Supper. This order was very common among Lutheran catechisms and catechetical sermons. A theological purpose determined this order. Lutherans understood God's work to be twofold, that is, both law and gospel.¹⁸ One purpose (use) of the law was to provide some measure of order and justice in a society. The other purpose of the law was to show the individual his sins and the impossibility of keeping the law by his own efforts and thereby drive him to the gospel, the good news that God forgives sins for the sake of Christ. The Apostles' Creed announced what God had done for the believer, the Lord's Prayer described how the believer should seek and receive this gospel, and the sacraments bore the assurance of salvation.

they contained his later views on justification may have, at least temporarily, influenced their popularity. During the decade before the *Formula*, Osiander's catechetical sermons were not published even once. The controversy may also be the reason that the sermons were dropped from the revised edition of the Electorate of Brandenburg church order (1572) though they had been included in the 1540 order. The opinion of the Nürnberg theologians that the catechism did not contain the errant teaching seems to have triumphed in the long run – Osiander's catechetical sermons were republished several times after 1580 (see *VD16*, vol. 15, O1066–O1071; another edition [Frankfurt, 1561] is listed in the *VD16* supplement) and in following centuries. On the impact of Osiander's catechetical sermons generally see Mueller and Seebass, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 5, pp. 195–6, and Matthias Simon, 'Einleitung' in Sehling (ed.), *Kirchenordnungen*, vol. 11, p. 125. Müller believes that the justification controversy had no impact on the use of these sermons because their author was unknown. Müller, 'Andreas Osiander', p. 72.

¹⁷ *VD16* lists no editions. Supplemental information to *VD16* maintained at HAB lists the following editions: Erfurt (Bauman) 1564, Erfurt (Bauman) 1564, Smalcalden (Schmuck) 1566, Erfurt (Dreher) 1567, Erfurt (Dreher) 1568, Ursel (Henricus) 1568, Magdeburg (Kirchner) 1568, and Magdeburg (Kirchner) 1573. Reu lists the following editions: Erfurt 1564, 1565, 1567, 1568; Schmalkalden 1566; Magdeburg 1568, 1570; Ursel 1572, 1580. Johann Michael Reu, *Quellen zur Geschichte des kirchlichen Unterrichts in der evangelischen Kirche Deutschlands zwischen 1530 und 1600* (9 vols, Gütersloh, 1904–35; Hildesheim, New York, 1976), vol. 1/2, 1, p. 252.

¹⁸ Timothy Wengert points out that the distinction between law and gospel and its connection to true *poenitentia* (repentance, penitence, or penance) was not as clear in the 1520s as it seemed later. See Wengert, *Law and Gospel*, for a full discussion of early Lutheran thinking on the necessity and meaning of *poenitentia*.

Osiander's catechetical sermons are structured around the explanations found in Luther's *Small Catechism*. The only exception is the sermon dealing with confession, a sermon Osiander calls 'On the Office of the Keys' (*Vom ampt der schlüssel*).¹⁹ Though Osiander puts it at the same place where Luther places an order for confessing in his *Small Catechism*, Osiander's sermon is not based on or explicitly connected to that part of the *Small Catechism*. In every other sermon the preacher repeats Luther's explanation of the part (from the *Small Catechism*) at the beginning and end of the sermon and has the congregation repeat it after him at the end. Near the beginning of the sermon 'On the Office of the Keys' the congregation is asked to repeat a scripture passage, John 20:22–3. The brief explanation stated by the preacher and repeated by the congregation at the end is not Luther's, but Osiander's.²⁰ Osiander's sermon is divided into two parts, the call and authority of the preacher to announce the forgiveness of sins and the purpose of the office of the keys to provide consolation and help to the ordinary layperson.

While Osiander starts with the office of the keys, discussing the preacher's authority to announce forgiveness and using this to anchor the certainty and consolation of forgiveness, Spangenberg starts with repentance, confession and their results, and only then moves to discuss issues related to the office of the keys. Spangenberg includes three sermons related to confession in his lengthy (773 pages in a 1566 quarto version) explication of the catechism. These are 'On Repentance' (*Von der Busse*), 'On Confession' (*Von der Beicht*), and 'On the Office and Power of the Keys' (*Vom Ampt und gewalt der Schlu(e)ssel*). This threefold structure parallels the structure of the Roman Catholic sacrament with the sermons corresponding respectively to contrition, confession and satisfaction. Spangenberg divides each sermon neatly into two or three main parts, sometimes with subparts, and provides an outline of the main parts in bold print near the beginning of each sermon. 'On Repentance' has two parts. The first is a detailed attack on Catholic teaching on repentance, taking up in turn contrition, confession and satisfaction. The second part describes proper Christian repentance. Its three subparts, true regret and sorrow for one's sins, faith, and new life as a fruit and result of faith, stand in implicit contrast to the three parts of Catholic confession. 'On Confession' also has two main parts, what confession is and the different kinds of confession. The second part is subdivided into confession to God and

¹⁹ Mueller and Seebass, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 5, pp. 319–26.

²⁰ This explanation was printed in many later editions of Luther's *Small Catechism* and came to be part of instruction in many Lutheran churches. *Ibid.*, p. 191.

confession to humans.²¹ Confession to humans is divided again into what we confess according to love (*aus Liebe*) and what we confess according to necessity (or duty, obligation, responsibility or requirement) (*aus Rhat*). 'On the Office and Power of the Keys' has three parts: first, a general discussion of the office of the keys, what it is, its origin and its misuse; second, the binding and retaining of sins; and third, the loosing of sin called absolution.

Themes and emphases

Consolation, discipline, and the effective communication of these are the chief themes in these sermons. Consolation and discipline have both vertical and horizontal dimensions, that is, they concern the penitent's relationship both to God and to humans. Communication likewise involves both God and humans for one can only hear God's Word of judgement and forgiveness from another human. Osiander and Spangenberg draw out these themes in ways that show not only Lutheran differences from Catholic and Reformed teaching, but also variations within the development of Lutheran thinking and practice.

Consolation for Osiander and Spangenberg involves not just the cure of anxiety but also the assurance of faith in God. The emphases of Osiander's sermon become clear from his brief explanation of the office of the keys:

I believe that [when] the called servants of Christ deal with us according to his divine command, especially when they exclude the public unrepentant sinner from the Christian church and again absolve those who regret their sins and want to better themselves, this is all as powerful and certain in heaven as if our dear Lord Jesus himself had done it.²²

Osiander's major themes are the reliability of the pastor's words, the associated certainty of forgiveness and the consolation flowing from this. At first glance it seems that the more important part of this sermon is the first – the discussion of office and the reliability of the pastor's words takes considerable space and takes priority over the practical discussion of confession in the second part. The first part, however, functions to support the second, for Osiander makes clear that the major purpose of

²¹ The *Brief Exhortation to Confession* in Luther's *Large Catechism* states that in addition to secret confession, two more kinds of confession, namely to God and to the neighbour, exist. Both are in the Lord's Prayer. BSLK, pp. 727–8; Tappert, *Book of Concord*, p. 458.

²² Mueller and Seebass, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 5, p. 326.

the office of the keys is to help the sinner who is too weak to withstand despair and therefore needs God's Word to assure him of forgiveness. He states that sinners should not trust in their own thoughts that God will forgive them but should go to a 'servant of the church', confess their sin and ask him to announce forgiveness to them. Joy and comfort should follow in faith as well as peace and quiet in conscience.

Spangenberg, too, emphasizes consolation. His first sermon, 'On Repentance', stresses that repentance results not only in despair, but also in faith, praise of God and consolation. The second sermon, 'On Confession', discusses the consolation derived from confession to God and humans. Spangenberg gives a number of biblical examples of confession to God. He concludes with a discussion of the result of such confession, namely the 'comforting absolution' God gives when he says that our sins are forgiven. The purposes of private confession to a human are to obtain advice and consolation to put one's conscience at peace and strengthen one's faith, to prepare oneself to receive the sacrament and to help one better one's life. Consolation is a primary result of confession to humans 'according to necessity':

According to necessity we confess to humans in God's place when I secretly confess and open my heart to my properly-appointed pastor, chaplain, or whomever else I may have in the moment of despair, bemoan my sins and associated troubles, and ask that he may give me from Holy Scripture good help and comfort, that I may put my conscience at peace and that through this also my faith may be strengthened.²³

Spangenberg defines confession's usefulness in the life of the Christian in terms of the comfort, peace and faith it brings. In the third sermon he describes the usefulness of private absolution in terms of making the sinner certain of the grace received in baptism.

Discipline is a secondary theme for both preachers but it is more prominent for Spangenberg. Neither preacher uses the word 'discipline' but each describes the disciplinary function of confession. For both, discipline involves the individual's confrontation with God as well as measures to modify the individual's outward conduct within society. Sinful behaviour affects the relationship to both God and other humans. In the setting of private confession, Osiander does not envision a pastor or preacher instructing penitents in the law and trying to bring them to a knowledge of their sins. For Osiander, this function has already been fulfilled by the preaching of the law – in these sermons, by the first ten sermons covering the Ten Commandments. The primary purpose of private confession is to console the penitent. Osiander briefly

²³ Spangenberg, *Catechismus*, fols Mm3r–v.

discusses the excommunication of those who stubbornly remain in public sin, who do not desire to better themselves, but nevertheless expect to go to worship services and receive the sacrament. These people should be excommunicated so that their bad example does not poison others, and so that the Christian church, God's Word and God himself are not thereby despised. These reasons indicate that the primary purposes of excommunication are social and ecclesiastical rather than the punishment or betterment of the individual sinner. A short paragraph bemoans the fact that this way of punishing public sin has been suppressed and admonishes listeners to pray to God to restore its use.

Spangenberg's interest in discipline is much greater than Osiander's and permeates all three of his sermons on confession. He does not leave discipline solely to the lengthy sermons on the Decalog. Discipline takes many forms and has both personal and social aspects. Discipline affects both the relationship to God and to others. Concrete disciplinary measures extend from the expectation of the amendment of life and the demonstration of the fruits of faith to excommunication.

Discipline is first of all divine discipline and is reinforced by divine threat, according to Spangenberg. Before God, the Christian should experience sorrow for sins. This is the first step of repentance as Spangenberg describes it in the first sermon. The preaching of the law, God's 'sharp threats', produces true regret, sorrow, contrition and enmity toward sin. One result is the confession to God discussed in the second sermon. It takes place daily in the Lord's Prayer in the words 'Forgive us our sins'. All humans must confess in this manner and no one obtains forgiveness of sins without this confession. Confession to God also takes place through confession to humans. Spangenberg says one truly should not be ashamed to confess to another human as this is better than to carry things secretly that will be revealed at the last judgement.

Discipline has other, more social, aspects for Spangenberg. The first sermon discusses the fruits of faith at length. Spangenberg says that the resolve, with God's help, to avoid what is wrong and do what God has commanded is especially necessary because humans must live in this world. Here discipline is seen in terms of a changed life. Discipline includes reconciliation to others, according to the second sermon. Confession to another human 'according to love' occurs when one has wronged a neighbour and reconciles one's self to him, asking for his forgiveness and patience. Even in cases where one is not at fault, one should still go to the neighbour and ask him to drop his suspicions and not live at odds with him. For Spangenberg, such confession to the neighbour becomes an instrument of social reconciliation.

Even where the main emphasis is consolation, as in the discussion of confession to another human 'according to necessity' in the second

sermon, disciplinary aspects persist. Confession 'according to necessity' focuses attention on the sinner's relationship with both God and neighbour. Spangenberg admonishes his listeners to examine how their hearts stand *vis-à-vis* God and whether they have done works of mercy for their neighbours and the poor. He criticizes sharply those who believe they need not confess 'according to necessity', including those who say that confessing to God is enough.

Discipline is clearly the function of excommunication. Spangenberg discusses at length both 'secret' and 'public' binding and loosing in the third sermon. 'Secret binding' occurs after one hears an admonition from a brother to cease a particular sin. If the Christian is not guilty, he should take this in the best way. But if he is guilty and does not better himself, he is in effect secretly excommunicated when the neighbour thereafter refuses to associate with him. Once again, though not explicitly naming it as such, Spangenberg makes clear that social discipline is an important function of the office of the keys, even when the keys are exercised privately or secretly and by a fellow Christian rather than an ecclesiastical officeholder. Later Spangenberg discusses 'secret' loosing for those who have not 'angered an entire congregation' and who do not need 'public reconciliation'. He states that this is the absolution commonly given in secret in Christian churches before participation in the Lord's Supper.

Spangenberg describes at length the justification and procedure for 'public binding', discussing who should be excommunicated, what excommunication means, its use in Christian churches historically, the benefits of excommunication and objections to its use. He laments that it is not used as much as it should be. He recognizes the reasons for the reluctance to exercise this power, including the fear that once again pastors will exercise a 'tyrannical power over the conscience' as they did under the pope, but then rejects those objections to it. Spangenberg describes a public ceremony of reconciliation before the congregation for those who have been publicly disciplined. The penitent sinner is named and absolved of his sins in front of the whole congregation; those he has angered are asked to forgive him, and to pray for him that he may avoid sin in the future. Spangenberg defends this ceremony against criticisms that it shames the public sinner and claims:

it is really their highest honour, in which they also honour God, gladden all the holy angels in heaven, reconcile a whole collection of pious Christians whom they have angered, warn other people of sin, encourage other sinners with a living, visible sermon, themselves become members of Christ, and uphold God's ordinance.²⁴

²⁴ Ibid., fols Nn1r-v.

Spangenberg concludes this discussion with the threat that those who do not do this will have their sins revealed before the church on the last day. For Spangenberg the threat of divine discipline results in social discipline and refusing social discipline results in divine discipline.

Underlying these sermons is a concern for effectively communicating both consolation and discipline. For both preachers consolation and discipline must come from outside the Christian, that is, they must be spoken by another person. This is consistent with the Lutheran emphasis that faith comes from hearing. It also meets a pastoral concern: how can the Christian be certain that the words of forgiveness are true?

Osiander spends over half his sermon addressing this issue. He connects faith, hearing, preaching, proper call to preaching and the reliability of the preacher's words. He emphasizes that no one can have faith in God through his own thoughts but, rather, must hear it from others. No one can fruitfully preach unless he has been called and sent, for God the Holy Spirit must participate in the preaching in order for it to be fruitful. Unless Christians are certain that God has commanded a sermon they cannot believe but will doubt and wonder whether it is true and really meant for them. These doubts would attack in times of trouble if the Christian did not know that Jesus Christ had appointed those who preach the Word and distribute the sacraments.

It is only after emphasizing the priority of preaching and hearing and the necessity of ensuring that God himself is working through that preaching that Osiander introduces biblical texts for the office of the keys, Matthew 16:19 and John 20:22. These passages become evidence that the preaching and sacramental activity of the properly called preacher are reliable and trustworthy. According to Osiander, Jesus Christ established the office of preaching; therefore one should see the regular preachers not as simple people but rather as servants and messengers of Jesus Christ. For this reason the Christian should believe what the properly called preachers say and should accept what they do according to the command of Christ when they baptize, forgive sins or distribute the body and blood of Christ. However the Christian should ignore the self-appointed preachers because the Holy Spirit does not work through their preaching.

Osiander seeks to correct any misunderstanding that would subvert the office of the preacher. If preachers preach or do anything other than what Jesus Christ has commanded them, it has no power. Osiander makes clear that the authority and power of the preacher are based in the command and message of Christ, not in the person of the preacher himself or in the act of ordination. Christ commanded them to preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins. If they were, however, to forgive the sins of the unrepentant or unbelieving and retain the sins of the

repentant and believing, they would be doing wrong and would have no power.

Osiander thus begins his sermon with a concern for the establishment of faith and the assurance of the forgiveness of sin, moves to the trustworthiness of the preacher's words, from there to a discussion of the office of preacher and then to a discussion of the limits on the power and authority of the preacher. He concludes the first section by returning to his original concern, the certainty of forgiveness:

For this reason, my dear children, you should console yourselves and strengthen your faith with this, that you can say: God the Lord has sent to me his servant who has preached to me forgiveness of sins in his name and has baptized me for the forgiveness of sins; for this reason I am certain that my sins are forgiven me and I have become a child of God.²⁵

In order to be assured of forgiveness the Christian must have it communicated to him in a reliable way. The entire purpose of Osiander's discussion of clerical calling is to establish this reliability.

Spangenberg also seeks to underscore the reliability of the words of forgiveness but does not require that these be pronounced by a properly called preacher. He does not explicate the office of the keys until his third sermon. However he makes the role of preaching clear in his first sermon. Preaching God's 'sharp threats' produces regret, sorrow and contrition for sin and preaching the gospel produces faith. Unlike Osiander, Spangenberg nowhere engages in a lengthy discussion of the authority of either the preacher or the message. Rather Spangenberg emphasizes that the office of the keys belongs to the entire Christian congregation, drawing on Matthew 18 to show that Christ promised the keys to all who believe in him. Spangenberg uses John 20 to support this further. The 'servants of the Word' have received this authority not on account of their person or their office but on account of the congregation. Spangenberg leaves no doubt as to what this means:

When he through the Word forgives someone his sins, the priest does not do it as his own work but rather God does it through his Word that the priest, or whomever one has in his need, speaks. So also when he excommunicates an unrepentant one, the preacher does not do this for himself but rather on behalf of the whole congregation, and does it from the divine power and command of Christ.²⁶

Thus while both preachers share a concern for the reliable and authoritative communication of the forgiveness of sins, Osiander links this

²⁵ Mueller and Seebass, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 5, pp. 323–4.

²⁶ Spangenberg, *Catechismus*, fol. Mm6v.

strongly to hearing these words from a properly called preacher while Spangenberg emphasizes the words of forgiveness and does not connect this necessarily to hearing them from a priest or preacher.

Contextual issues: general and local

Osiander and Spangenberg deal with issues which threatened their hearers' understandings of consolation, discipline and communication, and thus threaten the reliability and benefits of confession. Both preachers indicate that part of the context in which their sermons are written and preached is lay reluctance to confess and clerical reluctance to excommunicate. Both preachers criticize Catholic theology and practice, and thus seek to clarify important elements of Lutheran thought. This critique is more explicit in Spangenberg, however, perhaps reflecting an increased desire in mid-century to define Lutheran beliefs and practice over and against rival forms of Christianity. Osiander's sermons in particular reflect issues peculiar to their original local context. Each of these issues is important because it relates to the key concerns of these sermons.

These sermons indicate a continued lay reluctance to confess. They also indicate continued controversy surrounding the use of excommunication. Both preachers praise the consolatory benefits of confession in an effort to encourage people to confess. Osiander bemoans the fact that people expect to receive the Lord's Supper without confessing, proof that such attitudes actually existed. His blunt comments about the benefits and disuse of excommunication for public sinners indicate it was not in use. Spangenberg also attacks the reluctance to confess. He mentions people who glorify the gospel but neglect private confession. They claim they have confessed to God and need no other confession. These people are wrong, notes Spangenberg, for they despise God's institution of absolution and the keys. Others claim they are too good to confess like other common people. Spangenberg admonishes them not to be ashamed to confess secretly to another person. He mentions people who come to confession often, ask for absolution, but acknowledge no sin. These people want their faith strengthened and wish to receive the Lord's Supper, but do not admit they have sinned and offer no betterment of life. Spangenberg also attacks ways that public unrepentant (that is, excommunicated) sinners avoid confession and public reconciliation. Some later confess secretly to new and inexperienced preachers. Even if they are penitent at that time, they do not repent their greatest sin and remain unreconciled to the congregation. Spangenberg even suspects that some preachers are bribed into silence! In any case, his comments indicate that laypeople neglected or misused

confession and that excommunication continued to be a controversial practice.

These sermons show that Lutheran preachers continued to view Catholic theology and practice as a threat. While Osiander's attacks on Catholic theology and practice are implicit, particularly in his discussion of confession and the call and authority of the preacher, Spangenberg is explicit. In his first sermon Spangenberg attacks in detail the whole of Catholic teaching on penance, taking up in turn contrition, confession and satisfaction. The demand for contrition resulted in people pretending to be sorry for their sins but otherwise living as they pleased. The demand for confession of sins, including all the details of those sins, was murderous to the soul for it was impossible to remember all one's sins. The demand for satisfaction laid lightly or heavily on penitents, depending on their situations. If a penitent on his deathbed wanted to escape the fires of hell (made especially hot for the occasion by the priests) it would cost him something. In sum, states Spangenberg, in the pope's teaching on repentance there was no greater sin than to have no money. 'Truly that was a great cross for troubled hearts.'²⁷ Spangenberg reminds his listeners not to forget this misery which their ancestors suffered and to thank God that he has rescued them from it. In the same sermon Spangenberg implicitly contrasts the three parts of Lutheran confession (true regret and sorrow for one's sins, faith and new life as a result) to the three parts of Catholic confession. Explicit polemic is found in Spangenberg's third sermon where he criticizes the pope for expropriating the power of the keys for himself and then misusing it to gain power in worldly affairs. Considering the date of Spangenberg's sermons, it is noteworthy that he spends far more time than Osiander attacking the practice of Catholic confession. Such criticism may indicate a resurgence in Catholic practice which had to be countered, continued lay unwillingness to go to confession in Lutheran areas, or that he simply wanted to remind listeners of how good they had it since confession had been reformed. It is also possible that he was trying to strengthen his listeners' own sense of what it meant to be Lutheran. The central purpose of attacking Catholic practice was to ensure that listeners understood properly Lutheran confession's benefits of consolation and discipline.

These sermons contain concerns rooted in their original local contexts, especially Osiander's. Three aspects of Osiander's sermon relate to local Nürnberg concerns. The emphasis on the necessity of having a properly called preacher pronounce absolution can be seen in the

²⁷ *Ibid.*, fol. L15v.

context of a discussion in Nürnberg over the call of pastors.²⁸ The comments on excommunication relate to a particular disagreement Osiander had with the Nürnberg city council over the right of excommunication.²⁹ The sermon as a whole relates to a debate Osiander had with other Nürnberg pastors and local authorities in which he supported private absolution over and against a public, general absolution.³⁰

It is precarious to speculate how listeners who did not know the local context would have heard these, however some reasonable conjectures can be made. Outside of Nürnberg, Osiander's emphasis on having a properly called preacher pronounce absolution probably was heard as rejecting both the Catholic understanding of ordination as *character indelibilis* and the anabaptist practice of self-appointed preachers. In this Osiander is consistent with Luther. But hearers may easily have concluded that the status or office of the one pronouncing absolution was key. (This emphasis contrasts with Luther's emphasis that any Christian could announce the forgiveness of sins to another.³¹) Thus, given the wide distribution of this sermon and its association with Luther's *Small Catechism*, Osiander may have led lay Lutheran thinking to develop in a direction different from Luther's. If Osiander influenced Lutheran thinking in this direction, Spangenberg's sermons could then be seen as countering that influence and seeking a return to Luther's emphasis.

Listeners in other places probably would have heard Osiander's comments on excommunication as part of a general discussion in Lutheran areas over the continued use, disuse and/or misuse of excommunication.³² It is also likely that listeners would have heard it against the backdrop of Luther's *Small Catechism* which, like Luther's *Large Catechism*, does not mention excommunication. The sermon may have led listeners to consider the use of excommunication more than Luther's catechisms alone would have.

²⁸ See Seebass, *Das reformatorische Werk*, pp. 265–70.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 237–8.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 254–62. See also Ronald Rittgers's, chapter in this volume.

³¹ See, for example, Martin Luther, *The Sacrament of Penance*, in Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (eds), *Luther's Works, (LW)*, (55 vols, St Louis, MO, and Philadelphia, PA, 1955–), vol. 35, pp. 12–13; *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, LW*, vol. 36, p. 87. The *Large Catechism* speaks of the 'secret confession which takes place privately before a single brother'. Tappert, *Book of Concord*, p. 458; *BSLK*, p. 728.

³² On excommunication in sixteenth-century Lutheran Germany see Ernst Walter Zeeden, *Katholische Überlieferungen in den Lutherische Kirchenordnungen des 16. Jahrhunderts* (Münster/Westfalen, 1959), especially ch. 2/I 'Rechts- und Wirtschaftsverhältnisse: Überlieferungen im kirchlichen Recht', pp. 61–6. See also Christoph Link, 'Bann V: Reformation und Neuzeit', in Gerhard Krause and Gerhard Müller (eds), *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* (29 vols to date, Berlin, 1980–), vol. 5, pp. 186–8.

The third theme in Osiander's sermon that related to a specific Nürnberg controversy – the validity of public versus private confession and absolution – may have been heard by listeners in other places in the context of the differences between Lutherans and Reformed on this issue. The Reformed rejected private confession; Lutherans continued to uphold its usefulness.³³ Osiander himself came down strongly on the side of private confession and absolution.³⁴ The impact of the sermon may have been ambiguous. Its emphasis on hearing the words of absolution from a properly called preacher could have been heard as upholding the validity of public, general absolution. For if the words and the one speaking them were what was truly important, what did the context matter? It is only in the shorter, second part of the sermon that Osiander makes clear that he is discussing private confession.

Specific local concerns in Spangenberg's sermons are less obvious. Clearly excommunication is a contentious issue. Spangenberg complains that the rulers gladly see the loosing of sins but do not want to allow the Church to excommunicate public sinners, fearing that this will hit them personally. Spangenberg's advocacy of the Church's use of excommunication and his criticism of rulers for not allowing its use is consistent with his other writings from this period.³⁵

Osiander and Spangenberg both centre their preaching on the consolation offered by confession. In this they follow in Luther's footsteps. But this study suggests that Lutheran preachers did not always accent the same things Luther accented. Osiander's strong emphasis on the necessity of having a properly called pastor to announce forgiveness and hear confession contrasts with Luther's assertion that any Christian could do this. Spangenberg's extensive exploration of the grounds for and function of excommunication both for the individual and the community

³³ On the difference between Lutherans and Reformed see Ernst Bezzel, 'Beichte III. Reformationszeit', in G. Krause and G. Müller (eds.), *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* (29 vols to date, Berlin, 1980-) vol. 5, pp. 421–4. See also the chapters by Raymond Mentzer and Charles Parker in this volume.

³⁴ This can be seen, for example, in a 1538 booklet for the dying in which he emphasizes the consolation that such confession and absolution would bring. Andreas Osiander, *Unterricht an ein sterbenden menschen* (Nuremberg, 1538), fol. B2r.

³⁵ See Cyriacus Spangenberg, *Zwo Predigten Von dem rechten Christenlichen Banne. Item Ein bu(o)szpredigte ...* (1563). Spangenberg complains that pastors lose their jobs if they exercise the power of the keys to bind in his introduction to Jodocus Hocker, *Von Beiden Schlu(e)sseln der Kirchen/ Das ist/ Der Excommunication und Absolution/ Kurtzer und gru(e)ndlicher Bericht ...* (Ursel, 1568), fols B1r–B2r.

finds no parallel in Luther's catechisms³⁶ or in Osiander's brief mention of the subject. At the least, these differences suggest that Lutheran theology and practice developed in different ways in different sixteenth-century contexts.

Both Osiander and Spangenberg stress repeatedly the consolation which flows from confession. Osiander in the 1530s spoke of how the preacher's words of forgiveness strengthen faith, help and advise the poor troubled conscience that had fallen into sin, and help it resist the devil's attacks at the time of death. The result of private confession is peace in one's conscience and a happy faith which can withstand temptation. A generation later Spangenberg retains the emphases on consolation, strengthening of faith, and certainty. However he spells out the practical social results from confession and absolution when he discusses both a secret and a public excommunication and reconciliation to the neighbour and community.

Spangenberg spends far less time than Osiander talking about the authority of the preacher or the one speaking the words of absolution. Spangenberg seems more consistent with Luther in emphasizing the words and results of absolution, rather than the authority of the one speaking it. Future research will want to discover whose emphases – Luther's or Osiander's – dominated the teaching and practice of confession at various places and times in the sixteenth century.

The sermons tell us less about actual practice than we would like to know. Both preachers protest the apparent continued reluctance of people to confess. Both have to explain the purpose and function of excommunication. While both criticize secular ruling authorities for their unwillingness to allow excommunication, it is possible that such criticism also indicates that laypeople were reluctant to see excommunication used.

Neither discipline nor consolation is effective unless communicated. Osiander states several times that the sinner cannot assure himself of God's forgiveness; he must have someone else speak that forgiveness to him. For Spangenberg private confession offers the opportunity to hear the words of forgiveness spoken personally: 'And it is very useful and consoling that each one in particular, as often as he stumbles, is assured of the grace he received in baptism, and the promise is renewed when one says "Your sins are forgiven you".'³⁷ For both preachers the external spoken Word is the only word with true authority and power. It both judges the sinner and conveys consolation and certainty of

³⁶ Luther upheld the use of excommunication in *A Sermon on the Ban*, *LW*, vol. 36, pp. 7–22.

³⁷ Spangenberg, *Catechismus*, fol. Nn2r.

forgiveness; the chief accent remains consolation. Thus Lutherans from the 1530s to the 1570s were taught by their preachers to view private confession as a God-given opportunity to hear the forgiveness of their own sins declared individually to them.