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THE THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE OF INDIVIDUAL CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION
AND ITS APPLICATION TO PASTORAL CARE FROM AN EARLY
NORTH AMERICAN LUTHERAN PERSPECTIVE

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Practical Theology
in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of
Master of Sacred Theology


by

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Advisor



Reader

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INTRODUCTION

The two subjects of this study, namely, pastoral care and individual confession and absolution, have traditionally been seen as closely connected. Each has also a unique character. In this study both subjects will be focused on from the perspective provided by the historical analysis of their development within the Lutheran context, specifically that of North American Lutheranism in the nineteenth century. Pastoral care has been greatly developed, particularly in the area of pastoral counseling, in the last fifty years. This parallels the increasing development of the behavioral sciences in this century. The causes and consequences of such rapid growth in pastoral care will be analyzed in the present study. This growth has not been free from tensions; on the contrary, in many ways it has brought the ministry, and the pastor himself, into conflicts and confusion. The solution for this critical situation rests in a correct understanding of the theological principles of pastoral care and of its relationship with basic Christian doctrine. For this reason a solid biblical definition of pastoral care must first be established. It is only on such biblical grounds, and by the guidance of the doctrinal formulations emerging therefrom, that the task of pastoral care and counseling can continue to be accomplished in the faithful use of Word and sacrament (including other Christian resources like confession and absolution, prayer, Christian fellowship and pastoral conversation) and in the discriminating

application of insights from behavioral sciences. Finally, it is only on this biblical basis and the distinction of law and gospel thus provided that pastoral care will serve to accomplish the church's ultimate purpose to be the servant of God's reconciliation with man.

The connection between the two subjects of this study becomes evident since both have precisely the same doctrinal basis (distinction of law and gospel) and the same purpose. Individual confession and absolution as an instrument of pastoral care was emphasized during the periods of the Lutheran Reformation and Orthodoxy, but suffered a continuing decline, almost to the point of disappearance, in the eighteenth and nineteenth century due to reasons which will be presented in this study. This decline happened in spite of the solid basis of individual confession and absolution in Lutheran confessional theology and in spite of significant efforts for its revival in the nineteenth century. An increasing number of recent studies conducted on this problem and the attention that confession and absolution is receiving from secular psychologists and psychotherapists, however, seems to indicate that this instrument of spiritual healing is experiencing a revival. There is no doubt that individual confession and absolution deserves the special attention of Lutherans who maintain a solid confessional theology. This attention must be given, most of all, because individual absolution is an unique and effective means for applying law and gospel to an individual's life, and also for instructing laity in how to apply the gospel to one another in life. Individual confession and absolution is a church practice centered in the application of law and gospel and based on the chief doctrines of the Christian faith,

being a common way for their expression. It would be, therefore, a great loss for contemporary ministry not to utilize this excellent instrument of pastoral care. Failure to utilize individual absolution may be evidence of a lack of clarity regarding basic doctrine or a lack of faithfulness to the gospel. What our Lord has entrusted to the apostolic ministry may not unfaithfully be neglected or diminished or muddled. We are here at the heart of the gospel's bestowal. "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." (John 20:23) Radical law, radical gospel.

The historical context of nineteenth century North American Lutheranism was chosen because it provides an opportunity to study the divergent doctrinal positions espoused in Lutheranism in a period of intense confessional debate. This context and particularly the analysis of the teachings of three representative theologians, Samuel Simon Schmucker, Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther, and George Henry Gerberding, will make it evident that one's doctrinal positions will determine and be reflected in one's understanding of individual confession and absolution. Doctrinal positions also determine the understanding of the ministry, the theological basis of pastoral care, and the kind of pastoral ministry advocated. Walther will be dealt with most specifically because he provides an example of a confessional Lutheran theologian greatly concerned about the two subjects of this study. His position that theology, particularly "pastoral theology," is a God-given practical ability, the clearness with which he distinguishes law and gospel, and his personal activity as a pastor-theologian are deeply reflected in his continuing concern for pastoral care (pastoral theology)

and therein for individual confession and absolution. There is no doubt that he was brought to this commitment by his doctrinal subscription. One must suppose that Walther's theology was also greatly deepened by his search in the Scriptures for answers to the varied questions brought to the foreground in his ministry with people. Finally, the importance played by psychotherapy in the United States on the rapid development of pastoral care practice and pastoral counseling is an additional reason in selecting the location of this study.

The first chapter begins with an overview of the Lutheran history and the views of pastoral care in the theological context of that history. In the second part of the first chapter, an analysis of the main causes and consequences in the development of pastoral care and pastoral counseling in the twentieth century will provide background for a definition of pastoral care. This chapter concludes with a definition of pastoral care. The purpose of this definition is to clarify the theological basis and the practical function of pastoral care. It also has the goal of emphasizing the need to base pastoral counseling in the theology of pastoral care. Such a theological base is essential for the discriminating application of the insights of psychology and psychotherapy. The primacy of pastoral care for pastoral counseling is a fact seldom denied in theory but not commonly observed in practice.

The second chapter presents a historical overview of the doctrine and practice of individual confession and absolution in Lutheranism, particularly in its early North American context (seventeenth to nineteenth century). It will also present the reflections of this doctrine and practice upon contemporary Lutheranism. This overview will be

followed by the in-depth study of the basic doctrinal positions of Walther, Schmucker, and Gerberding, specifically regarding as these affect individual confession and absolution. The reader's attention is directed especially to Walther's biblical and confessional defense of the theology of individual confession and absolution, to his analysis of the issue in church practice, and finally, to his commendation of that practice as having a clear biblical basis.

CHAPTER I

TOWARD A DEFINITION OF PASTORAL CARE

The Lutheran Historical Background

Pastoral care must be studied in light of its historical development because such study provides a deeper understanding of its relationship to Seelsorge (care of souls) and pastoral theology.¹ The development of pastoral care can be traced from the beginning of Christianity² and throughout all of church history, having in each of some eight identified periods a specific function as a catalyst and guiding factor.³ The various periods make evident the constancy with

¹Seward Hiltner, Preface to Pastoral Theology (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), pp. 43-51; John T. McNeill, A History of the Cure of Souls (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1951); Walter J. Koehler, Counseling and Confession (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982), p. 16.

²William A. Clebsch and Charles R. Jaekle, Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1964), pp. 13-31.

³The eight periods of the history of pastoral care according to Clebsch and Jaekle (p. 13) are: (1) Primitive Christianity (until A.D. 180) with emphasis on sustaining; (2) Persecution (until A.D. 306) with emphasis on reconciling; (3) "Cristian" Culture (until the fifth century) with emphasis on guiding; (4) The "Dark Ages" (until the eleventh century) with emphasis on guiding; (5) Medieval Christendom (until the sixteenth century) with emphasis on healing; (6) Renewal and Reform (until the seventeenth century) with emphasis on reconciling; (7) Enlightenment (during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) with emphasis on sustaining; (8) Post-Christendom Era or Religious Privacy (from the nineteenth century on) with emphasis on guidance.

which, under the reconciling function, the modes of forgiveness and discipline appear in the means of different forms of confession and absolution, giving to this function a very notable, stable pattern. The four functions of pastoral care are: healing, sustaining, guiding, and reconciling, and in each period one of them exercised a dominating activity over the others. For the purposes of the present study attention will be concentrated on the period beginning with the Lutheran Reformation and the later development of the Lutheran Church in order to provide the historical background of the early North American situation, and particularly that of the nineteenth century.

The Reformation Period

Prior to the Reformation the care of souls in the Christian church was centered in God's power to heal human beings through sacramental grace, both the inherent and the accidental deformities of human existence. There was a codification of pastoral care around a defined sacramental system, notable in the sacrament of penance. Objective sacramental means embodied sacramental grace for a twofold purpose, that is, to restore man's prior condition of wholeness and health and to grant power for spiritual growth toward the highest good. However, God's power is active in man "ex opere operato" through the sacramental means. It operates in man through the specific sacramental graces (the proprium of each one of the means) cooperating with "something" (aliquid) in man by means of which he appropriates to himself the grace offered (facultas se applicandi ad gratiam). In this way the priest sought

to influence his parishoners, to "elicit from individuals an assurance of their spiritual well being."⁴

In the Reformation the reconciling function of pastoral care was emphasized, receiving a prominence little known either before or since that time.⁵ The question of "reconciling individual persons to a righteous God polarized all of soul care."⁶ Therefore it has been stated by John McNeill that the Lutheran Reformation had its inception in matters concerning the "cure of souls" (Seelsorge).⁷ But to interpret Martin Luther's care of souls as a restoration of the balance in the relations between individual and group interests,⁸ or to say that his fundamental concerns was that medieval Roman Catholicism made the divine-human reconciliation "too easy and too mechanical,"⁹ falls short of the central point. Nor is it valid to relate Luther's view of the function of the sacraments in the care of souls to the challenge by humanism of Roman Catholic "objectified sacramentalism" as a "search for highly personal and varied religious expression."¹⁰ Nor is Luther's concern to be identified with the way in which the mystics posed the question for certainty of personal salvation,¹¹ and for all these reasons to conclude that "Reformation's great upheaval in doctrine and

⁴Ibid., p. 27.

⁵Ibid., p. 13.

⁶Ibid., p. 26.

⁷McNeill, Cure of Souls, p. 163.

⁸Ibid., p. ix.

⁹Clebsch and Jaekle, Pastoral Care, p. 27.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid., p. 26. For the mystics the way to achieve forgiveness was a mode of self-discipline in which "the culminating human endeavor was the arduous achievement of entire integrity of body, soul, and mind with God and his universe."

ecclesiology never generated a corollary revolution in the cure of souls."¹²

Luther's Theology

Care of souls was indeed one of Luther's main concerns and it was completely intertwined with his theology;¹³ this is the reason why, even briefly, some aspects of Luther's theological thinking must be discussed. In this connection "the Reformation may be regarded first of all as a rebirth of the Biblical view of man in his relation to God and to his fellowmen."¹⁴ More than politics, philosophy, historical developments, one's psychological mechanisms, or any other human factor, the Reformation was the result of the theological questioning on how man stands "coram Deo." But as Luther's starting point is a practical-religious question, how is forgiveness received, the Lutheran Reformation is not merely the result of a scholarly critique of doctrines nor a formulation of new church teachings.¹⁵ Luther's theory and practice of the care of

¹²Ibid., p. 13.

¹³Knut M. Enger, "Private Confession In American Lutheranism" (Th.D. dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1962), p. 63; quotes Theodore G. Tappert, Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel (Philadelphia, 1955), p. 21. "An examination of the collected works of Luther make it clear that his spiritual counsel was not simply the application of external technique. It was part and parcel of his theology." David Belgum, "The Theology of Pastoral Care," The Lutheran Quarterly (1959):207-21. "Pastoral Care [in Luther's teaching] is a natural expression of his theology."

¹⁴Enger, p. 58.

¹⁵F. A. Loofs, Leitfaden zum Studium der Dogmengeschichte (Halle: n.p., 1906), p. 685, quoted in Klaus Harms, Die Gottesdienstliche Beichte als Abendmahlvorbereitung (Greifswald: Bamberg Verlag, 1930), p. 9, quoted in Enger, "Private Confession," p. 59.

souls did reflect his understanding of the gospel and his concern that all men receive salvation and freedom through faith. This same concern moved him to translate the Bible, to admonish the Christian nobility, town mayors, and city counselors to do their duty for the sake of Christian people. He also published the Large and the Small Catechism urging fathers in the house and teachers in church schools to fulfill their divinely given responsibility to teach children the Word of God.

Luther came to see the full weight of the fact that every man is a sinner, often living in great trouble:

The same fearful torture of conscience is caused also by the commital of other atrocious sins, and similar feelings are experienced when sadness of soul takes hold of those who have done them. For to such people all creatures seem to have changed. . . . In whichever direction these sinners turn their eyes, all things look dark and horrible. So savage and destructive a beast is a guilty conscience. Unless such unfortunates get divine assistance, they are bound to take their own lives because of despair, anguish, and unbearable distress.¹⁶

Luther, "much . . . stressed the devastation wrought by sin; he was not minutely anxious about separate sinful acts," since he saw man's condition being one of total spiritual corruption. On the other hand, "he had in view the integral liberation, health and enrichment of souls."¹⁷ This happens through justification, that is, that justifying act of God by which, instead of condemning man as he justly deserves, God declares him to be without guilt only for the sake of Christ's redeeming work (solus Christus).¹⁸ God chose to put his Son under condemnation in the place

¹⁶ Martin Luther, D. Martin Luthers Werke (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883-), Genesisvorlesung, 1535 (WA 42, 212, 1ff.; Lectures on Genesis, AE 1, 287), hereafter cited as WA.

¹⁷ McNeill, Cure of Souls, p. ix.

¹⁸ Luther, In Epistolam S. Pauli ad Galatas, 1535 (WA 40 I, 33, 16 ff.; 40 I, 355, 24f.; Lectures on Galatians, AE 26, 223). "By the one

of each single human being by his grace (sola gratia); no human factor whatsoever is involved.¹⁹ This center of Luther's theology involves also his understanding of the Holy Scripture and the distinction between law and gospel. Although man meets God's law in nature, even more clearly he encounters it in the Scriptures. Here, God confronts every man with His Lordship and man's sin. Sin is not an act but a state (sinful nature) in which a man lives and which affects his whole nature.²⁰ This, however, is God's opus alienum, not his main action toward man. God wants to redeem in love his fallen creation (opus proprium). This is what the gospel proclaims, God's grace in Christ.²¹ Thus Luther calls

solid rock which we call the doctrine of justification we mean that we are redeemed from sin, death, and the devil and are made partakers of life eternal." "The article of justification, which is our only protection, not only against all the powers and plottings of men, but also against the gates of hell, is this: by faith alone [sola fide] in Christ, without works, are we declared just and saved."

¹⁹Luther, Sermon von der Beichte und dem Sakrament, 1524 (WA 15, 483, 17f.); Lectures on Galatians, 1535 (WA 40 II, 22, 1ff.; AE 27, 19). "As far as our own abilities are concerned, there is no difference whatsoever between us; but the grace of God alone causes us to differ." "Whoever falls away from grace simply loses the propitiation, forgiveness of sins, righteousness, freedom, life, etc., which Christ earned for us by His death and resurrection. . . . This passage is a powerful support . . . for our doctrine of faith or the doctrine of justification."

²⁰Luther, Smalcald Articles, III, III, 2 in The Book of Concord, ed. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 304. "This the law, then is the thunderbolt by means of which God with one blow destroys both open sinners and false saints. He allows no one to justify himself. He drives all together into terror and despair . . . (Jer. 23: 29). This is not activa contritio (artificial remorse), but passiva contritio (true sorrow of the heart, suffering, and pain of death)."

²¹Luther, Wie das Gesetz und Evangelion recht gründlich zu unterscheiden sind, 1532 (WA 36, 31, 1ff.). "The Gospel is such a doctrine or Word of God as does not demand our works or command us to do anything, but bids us simply receive the offered grace of the forgiveness of sins and eternal salvation and be satisfied to have it given us as a present."

the gospel "the Word of salvation, the Word of grace, the Word of comfort, the Word of joy, the voice of the Bridegroom and the Bride, the good Word, the Word of peace . . . (Is. 52:7)."²² The conviction that true care of souls is wrought through the faithful and correct application of the means of grace (Word and sacraments) is thus central to Lutheranism. The Word and sacraments combine in giving to everyone in Christ the assurance of God's free forgiveness from sin; establishing and maintaining a new personal relationship between God and man through faith. Since God's gracious power is active in these means of grace they are also the true means for the care of souls. The correlation between gospel, faith and pastoral care is thus established.²³ These are related to grace since it is through grace that God accepts man and justifies him in Christ through faith (sola fide) just as it is also by grace that God, through the gospel, creates faith in man's heart so that he can confidently trust in God's acceptance. Faith is not merely the affirmation of certain doctrines, but it is a trusting reliance in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Christ is the content of the gospel and also the object of faith as it is created by the gospel. Faith is not a work of man, by which he might gain merit or add something on his own, but faith being a work of grace, is a gift from God.²⁴

²²Luther, Resolutiones Disputationum de Indulgentiarum Virtute, 1518 (WA 1, 616, 21ff.; Explanations of the Ninety-five Thesis, AE 31, 231).

²³Luther, Am 19. Sonntag nach Trifeltigkeyt, Matt. 9:1-8, 1533 (WA 52, 498, 16f.); Auslegung Johannis im Predigten (1:6-7), 1537 (WA 46, 583, 27f.; AE, John 1-4, 22, 55). "The Word and faith should stand together, for one cannot exist without the other." "Thus there is no other means of attaining faith than by hearing, learning, and pondering the Gospel."

²⁴Luther, Adversus Armatum Virum Cokleum, 1523 (WA 11, 302,

From the time justifying faith is given to man and he becomes a justified sinner, God's divine image is partially given to him affecting a new creation, the "Christian man," as opposed to the natural man. Since justifying faith is given to man by God, the regeneration which is effected through it, as a "donatio fidei," is also God's work. But now, because he is reborn, because something new is created within him, the Christian man longs to live in accordance with the will of God; his personality has now an attitude other than that of the "natural man."²⁵ All those who believe in Christ are brought through the gospel into the Christian church (communio sanctorum) which is visibly identifiable by the pure preaching of the gospel and the proper administration of the sacraments (Augsburg Confession, Art. VII). The responsibility for soul care belongs to the congregation, that is, to each and every individual Christian member as God's royal priesthood. However, for the service of his church and for the sake of order, God has instituted the office of the public ministry. The congregation is to choose for its pastor one who has been rightly called (rite vocatus) to preach the Word, administer the sacraments, teach, and to publicly perform other duties of the office.²⁶ Luther set forth very early a view that may be considered

5ff.). "According to the usage of the Scriptures, grace signifies that favor of God which wishes us well and justifies us. That is, it freely grants us the faith which alone justifies us."

²⁵Enger, "Private Confession," p. 66.

²⁶Luther, Am Tage Petri und Pauli der Heiligen Aposteln, (WA 17 II, 452, 32-53,1); Evangelium am 1. Sonntag nach Ostern: Joh. 20:19-31 (WA 10 I 2, 239,24-240,3). "The Christian church alone has the keys and nobody else. . . . A pastor exercises the office of the keys . . . by which he serves the congregation, not of his own accord but on the behalf of the congregation. For he is a servant of the entire congregation to which the key is given. . . . For if he is acting instead of the

a buiding principle regarding the office of the ministry:

A faithful servant of God, however, is in duty bound not to exceed the authority of his office and not to abuse it for the sake of his own pride but to administer it only for the benefit of those who are entrusted to him.²⁷

Luther's View of Pastoral Care

The unity of scriptural theology and the care of souls was emphasized by Luther. It is only on the basis of Luther's understanding of law and gospel briefly sketched above, that one can correctly understand his concern for soul care. It is also by consideration of Luther's theology and concern for soul care that one can correctly understand what the Reformation was all about.

Holding this law and gospel theology and therewith a true pastoral concern Luther could minister through various means in soul care, depending on each circumstance, but his guiding principle was that "soul-care will always have two centers, the Bible and the man."²⁸ An important aspect of Luther's ministry was to counsel in all kinds of human problems, but of chief importance was the question of man's eternal salvation and in all of his counseling he never lost sight of this question.

congregation, then the church is acting. If the church is acting, then God is acting, for one must have a servant." "Thus if everybody wanted to hear confession, to baptize, to administer the sacraments, how unseemly that would be! . . . Therefore it should be thus: the congregation chooses a suitable person, who administers the sacrament, preaches, hears confession and baptizes. To be sure, all of us possess this power; but none except he who is chosen by the congregation to do so should presume to practice it publicly. In this way one should proceed with this power to forgive and to retain sins."

²⁷Luther, Diui Pauli Apostoli ad Romanos Epistola, 1515 (WA 56, 160,17f.; Lectures on Romans, AE 25, 138-39).

²⁸Enger, "Private Confession," p. 60.

The content of his teaching as well was centered in the forgiveness of sins.²⁹ Because of this perspective the study of the Bible, preaching and teaching God's Word, administering the sacraments, conducting the services, and administering church discipline became main tasks in the care of souls. Several of the concerns of Luther's struggle against the Roman Church are connected with the medieval doctrine of the sacrament of penance.³⁰ This must also be kept in mind when one deals with Luther's evaluation of soul-care. The way in which individual confession and absolution is directly connected with Lutheran theology will be explained later, but it is important to call attention to the fact that Luther expressed very clearly how much God's absolution offered in the various contexts of God's Word, occupied his own thinking and acting. This all explains why in addition to other means of pastoral care as those mentioned above, particularly the preaching and teaching of God's Word and administering the sacraments, Luther greatly commended confession and absolution, agreeing to the use of general or public confession but stressing also the blessings of private or individual confession and absolution in the care of souls.³¹

²⁹Luther, Ein Sermon über das Evangelion Matth. 9:1, 1530 (WA 29, 564, 15ff.). "The summary of this gospel is the great, sublime article called the forgiveness of sin. Correctly understood it makes one a genuine Christian and gives one eternal life. This is the very reason why it must be taught in Christendom with unflagging diligence and without ceasing, so that people may learn to understand it plainly, clearly, discriminatingly. For to do so is the one, supreme, and most difficult task of Christians. As long as we live here below we shall have enough to do to learn this article. No one need to look for anything new, anything higher and better."

³⁰Enger, "Private Confession," p. 58.

³¹Luther, The Eight Invocavit Sermon (WA 10 III, 61, 33-62, 23; AE 51, 97); Lectures on Galatians (WA 40 I, 204, 21ff.); Ein Brief an die zu

The Period of Orthodoxy

Beginning with Luther's writings one can delineate a history of pastoral literature in Lutheranism which has a continuous line throughout the centuries with innumerable works. Some of these can be seen as shaped by the church history epoch in which they were published.³² Even during the period of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) important works were published by the major theologians of the seventeenth century addressing the issue.³³ Again in these theologians' strict view the emphasis on pastoral theology is laid on individual confession and absolution. However, in spite of the good and abundant literature the age of Lutheran Orthodoxy was one of political disorder and of laxity in the Christian life by the princes who exercised most of the ecclesiastical authority. To show the situation Tholuck points to various abuses and to a saying from the previous century, "The binding key is quite rusted away while the loosing key is in full operation" (Sarcerius, d. 1559).³⁴ In fact Orthodoxy appears to have been a time of decline of soul care as well as of other aspects of the Christian life, and this is again related to the practice of individual confession and absolution.

The cure of souls was much neglected and largely confined to a limited amount of visitation and the rather mechanical practice of private confession, on the basis of the catechism . . . for which a fee (the Beichtpfennig) was paid to the pastor.³⁵

Frankfurt am Main (WA 30 III, 569, 6ff.); WA-Tr 4, No. 4362.

³²McNeill, Cure of Souls, p. 181.

³³Ibid. To name a few: John Gerhard (Loci Communes), Paul Tarnov (The Sacred Ministry), John A. Quenstedt (Pastor's Ethics and Pastoral Instruction).

³⁴Ibid., p. 182.

³⁵Ibid.

Seward Hiltner acknowledges that the history of pastoral theology and that of soul-care (Seelsorge), being distinguished, are here intertwined. But he is incorrect, at least concerning these theologians, in his analysis of pastoral theology. Hiltner concludes that seventeenth century pastoral care is mostly motivational and attitudinal and that neither Seelsorge nor pastoral theology provide precise and detailed information about how the theologians of that time stood in relation to the functions and other aspects of shepherding or to the structure of the ministry in general.³⁶ This understanding is incorrect and is due most of all to the fact that Hiltner's view of the ministry is humanistic.

The Period of Pietism and the Enlightenment

The rise of Pietism under the leadership of Philip Jakob Spener (d. 1705) and later of August Hermann Francke (d. 1727) and Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf (d. 1760) among others, is commonly characterized as a reaction against scholastic theology and the formalism of the period of orthodoxy. Through emphasis on the laymen's clear and deep understanding of the Scriptures, on Christian communion, and on the priesthood of all believers,³⁷ the laymen's religious status was elevated. Pastors exhorted laymen to have a strong emotive commitment, born of their regeneration, and to continuously cultivate the religious life. However, there are also critical problems in Pietism's concern

³⁶Hiltner, Pastoral Theology, pp. 43-44.

³⁷The priesthood of all believers was defined as the right bestowed by Christ on each Christian by virtue of which they were to offer spiritual sacrifices to God, to pray for, and to edify each other in God's Word (aedificatio mutua or fraternal counsel).

for personal appropriation of religious truth, subjective religious "experiences," and personal devotional and ascetical discipline. . . . In some way pietism involves the segregation of a certain sphere of life as peculiarly "religious," and the concentration on it.³⁸

Pietism brought a revival of care of souls but also "the split . . . between shepherding as a mere practice standing against systematic theory" which "is finally part of our heritage from pietism."³⁹ Because it was Spener's opinion that "every individual requires a unique approach, in accordance with his psychological constitution,"⁴⁰

many Lutheran ministers under the influence of . . . the Halle Pietists made themselves busy in personal interviews of which they kept a record saying what they have learned in these conversations.⁴¹

Pastors became experts in personal, experimental religion developing types of "pastoral theology" as means for inducing and nurturing a "religion of the heart" in opposition to a merely intellectual one. Psychology of religion was used as a tool in the analysis of the kinds of troubles through which the believer is to be sustained, and of the processes by which conversion occurs. The stress on the pastor's private conversation with people, visits to the homes and to the sick, and use of church discipline as forms of "particular dealing with people" (application to the individual) were the options presented instead of

³⁸James A. Nichols, History of Christianity, 1650-1950 (N.p.: The Ronald Press Co., 1956), quoted in Hiltner, Pastoral Theology, p. 46.

³⁹Hiltner, Pastoral Theology, p. 45.

⁴⁰Albrecht Stumpff, Philip Jakob Spener über Theologie und Seelsorge als Gebiete kirchlicher Neugestaltung (Tübingen: n.p., 1934), quoted in McNeill, Cure of Souls, p. 184.

⁴¹McNeill, Cure of Souls, p. 184.

the practice of individual confession and absolution, which was criticized as a superficial and meaningless procedure because of the way it was conducted.

Parallel to Pietism, but on the other extreme as a reaction to Orthodoxy during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, stands the rationalism of the Enlightenment, that is, an explanation of life and the world without essential reference to God and Christian religion, in which Christianity was compromised in its basic thrust by a concentration on the soul's immortality and an ethical stress which advocated social virtues and the achievement of personal virtue, rather than a concern over reconciliation and sin. The effects of pietism, followed by those of rationalism and their antagonism against individual confession and absolution caused individual confession to be almost completely abandoned before the nineteenth century revival. Pastoral care became primarily a task of sustaining souls through the perplexities, dangers, and pitfalls of temporal existence by soothing the consciences of those in tribulation and relieving the troubled from unpleasant thoughts. It represented an optimistic view of man who is "capable of a new flowering if loosed from the fetters of tradition."⁴²

The Era of Religious Privacy

In the period of religious privacy which followed the Napoleonic Wars and almost covers the nineteenth century, religion and church commitment represented an inviolably private aspect of individual personal life, being a voluntary option within ecclesiastical pluralism. The

⁴²Clebsch and Jaekle, Pastoral Care, p. 29.

political, social, and intellectual revolutions that marked this period brought about nationalism, bourgeois morality, and the beginning of industrial technology. It also brought "social gospel," missionary movements, and a major focus of pastoral concern on family life. The emphasis on personal religion resulted in a variety of religious experiences. A new psychology of religion emerged as for instance that of William James. The study of pastoral theology, which had been developed previously, was taken up systematically, notably by Friedrich Schleiermacher, one of the most influential theologians of this period. Pastoral theology was viewed by him as a part of practical theology, which he defined as "the method of maintaining and perfecting the church."⁴³ It was Schleiermacher's understanding that

the pursuit of doctrine and practical understanding should go together. . . . the more progress made on the first, the more necessary to pay attention to the second. . . . the proper study of practice would illuminate theological understanding itself.⁴⁴

By recognizing that mutual care of souls belongs in the general field of Christian life and morals, even though he did not present a special theory in this area, he gave attention to the different aspects of the care of souls as an activity essential to the existence of the church in which the minister as an able Seelsorger is to confront and communicate with people. Other theologians⁴⁵ who followed this same emphasis on soul-care highly favored the restoration of individual confession and

⁴³Friedrich Schleiermacher, Die Praktische Theologie nach den Grundsätzen der Evangelischen Kirche (N.p.: 1850), p. 25, quoted in Hiltner, Pastoral Theology, p. 47.

⁴⁴Hiltner, Pastoral Theology, p. 47.

⁴⁵McNeill, Cure of Souls, p. 187. He mentions Phillip K. Marheinecke, Klaus Harms (d. 1855), and Wilhelm Löhe (d. 1872).

absolution as part of a wide-reaching activity in this field. Pastoral theology describes only in part the minister's work and the church's work. These theologians contended that both practical and pastoral theology are theological because they applied theological truth in practice, but this did not imply that this study contributed to a basic theological understanding. Practical theology was conceived as an all inclusive discipline, covering the different functions of the ministry, while pastoral theology (poimenics) was regarded as the theory of pastoral care.⁴⁶

The Nineteenth Century in North America

"Early Lutheranism in America presents a picture of diversity,"⁴⁷ both in regard to its confessional positions and church practices. It presents also a picture of scattered congregations served by few pastors who generally came from the same European country as the groups of immigrants they served. Henry Melchior Muehlenberg (d. 1787), who was instrumental in the general organization of the Lutheran Church in the East, had the ideals of Halle Pietism and besides other activities on pastoral care, he tried to institute a firm church discipline with public declaration of guilt, and the practice of individual confession and examination prior to Holy Communion.

In the next century three leaders gained notability. The first was Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther who came from Saxony to America in 1839 and who, after being a disciple of Pietism, drew away from it and

⁴⁶Hiltner, Pastoral Theology, p. 47.

⁴⁷McNeill, Cure of Souls, p. 187.

became known for his careful doctrinal formulations advocating the orthodoxy of the Lutheran confessional documents. His Amerikanisch-Lutherische Pastoraltheologie is considered "a laborious work,"⁴⁸ which quotes extensively a great array of Orthodox Lutheran authors of the past three centuries, thus affirming traditional positions and strongly commending the systematic practice of individual confession and absolution. Under his leadership the Missouri Synod established a firm congregational Christian discipline in which, according to Matthew 18, all of the proceedings, including excommunication, were acts of the congregation.

The other leader is Samuel S. Schmucker, a Lutheran scholar, who, as the first professor at the Gettysburg Seminary, became the proponent of "American Lutheranism."⁴⁹ He strongly appealed for church unity and "maintained that the Lutheran Church, since the time of the Reformation, has now outlived its strict confessionalism."⁵⁰ His position did not

⁴⁸Hiltner, Pastoral Theology, pp. 48, 226 No. 36. Cf. McNeill, Cure of Souls, p. 188; Carl F. W. Walther, Amerikanisch-Lutherische Pastoraltheologie (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1897).

⁴⁹Enger, "Private Confession," p. 177, quotes Abdel R. Wentz, A Basic History of Lutheranism in America (Philadelphia: Muehlenberg Press, 1955), p. 137: "(an effort aiming to) infuse into it (Lutheranism) the vigor of Presbyterianism and the warmth of Methodism." Paul W. Spaude, The Lutheran Church Under American Influence (Burlington, IA: Lutheran Literary Board, 1943), p. 276, quoting Lars P. Qualben, A History of the Christian Church (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1933), p. 478: "(American Lutheranism was defined as) a Lutheranism that had been greatly modified by American Puritanism and American Methodism." Quoting Lehre und Wehre (1873):29: "A new edition of Zwinglianism, which in dishonest fashion, appropriates the Lutheran name."

⁵⁰Paul W. Spaude, The Lutheran Church, pp. 278-79, quoted in Enger, "Private Confession," p. 177.

receive unanimous approval although he continued to maintain it in his book The American Lutheran Church.⁵¹ He was the leader of the group who anonymously published the Definite Synodical Platform,⁵² in which the doctrinal fundamentals of "American Lutheranism" are presented only on the basis of the Bible, the Apostles' and the Nicene Creeds, and an "American Recension of the Augsburg Confession of 1530."⁵³ Only these sources should establish the norm for Christian teaching. The revised form of the Augsburg Confession, being the only particularly Lutheran confessional document acknowledged, is changed in twelve of its articles, and, the last seven on the abuses are completely omitted. Five doctrines in the Augsburg Confession are rejected as being grave "Romish errors":

The Approval of the ceremonies of the Mass; Private Confession and Absolution; the Denial of the Divine Institution and Obligation of the Christian Sabbath; Baptismal Regeneration; The Real Presence of the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharistic.⁵⁴

This document, however, received so little support and caused so many reactions that Schmucker later regretted this position.

At the close of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century came George H. Gerberding, whose major work, The Lutheran Pastor,⁵⁵ follows the pattern proposed previously by some authors

⁵¹Samuel S. Schmucker, The American Lutheran Church (Philadelphia: E. W. Miller, 1852), pp. 233-46.

⁵²McNeill, Cure of Souls, p. 189. Cf. Enger, "Private Confession," p. 154, 178. Samuel S. Schmucker, Definite Platform, Doctrinal and Disciplinarian for Evangelical Lutheran District Synods (Philadelphia: Miller & Burlock, 1855).

⁵³Schmucker, Definite Synodical Platform, p. 4.

⁵⁴Ibid., pp. 4-5.

⁵⁵George H. Gerberding, The Lutheran Pastor (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1902).

in which the attempt to put together systematic material and practical or pastoral theology⁵⁶ was replaced by a growth of material of the "hints and helps" type,⁵⁷ which became very common in the twentieth century. "Such books . . . seemed to have vitality while the older analytical and theoretical works appeared dry,"⁵⁸ and their authors, desiring to be absolutely practical, regarded theory as something irrelevant, standing off against practice. Following Schmucker, and later, F. Springer,⁵⁹ Gerberding did not appreciate individual confession and absolution. He surrounds individual confession with so many "ifs" that he is clearly unwilling to recommend it.⁶⁰ Instead he commends faithful

⁵⁶Hiltner, Pastoral Theology, pp. 50, 227 No. 48. The author notes that only in some Lutheran circles was there serious use of the older systematic works on pastoral theology that "has been out of fashion for half a century." He mentions as example the recapitulation of Walther's nineteenth century work: John H. C. Fritz's, Pastoral Theology (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1933).

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 49. The author notes that Gerberding's book does not develop any new structure but contains a good deal of pastoral Klugheit (pastoral prudence) plainly derogated by J. J. van Oosterzee, Practical Theology (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1878).

⁵⁸Ibid., pp. 49-50. Cf. Gerberding, The Lutheran Pastor, p. ix. "Of course pastoral theology cannot be taught, but we can catch the helpful spirit of the teacher, and gather practical suggestions and principles that each of us only really learns in the school of actual experience."

⁵⁹F. Springer, "Confession," The Lutheran Quarterly, 7 (1877):81-89, quoted in Enger, "Private Confession," p. 155. "Any movement among Protestants of the present day toward the re-establishment of private confession and absolution . . . will be regarded by large number of the most devout . . . Christian workers, both lay and clerical, as a re-enactment of the heathenizing processes of the earlier centuries, when Roman errors first began."

⁶⁰Gerberding, The Lutheran Pastor, pp. 331-32. Cf. McNeill, Cure of Souls, p. 189; Enger, "Private Confession," p. 155.

visitation with confidential interviews for each communicant every three months, as a form of brotherly concern.

The Developments of the Twentieth Century

Pastoral theology has experienced much development and many challenges in the last half of this century. Unfortunately, though, pastoral care has suffered from a lack of identity and confusion in relation to its nature, purpose, and functions. This is due to the convergence of four major factors: (1) the social and behavioral sciences are providing a new understanding of the human situation; (2) increasing interest in psychology and psychotherapy especially in American after World War II; (3) the consequent flourishing of contemporary psychotherapies; and (4) more significantly the growing clinical pastoral education movement (practical training and literature).⁶¹

Signs of a Transitional Period

The twentieth century represents a transitional period in pastoral care history. Serious rethinking of the ambiguities of human existence, the ever-new problems of contemporary society, and the constant search of psychotherapies for answers, is thrusting modern pastoral care into programming, and that brings confusion as to the nature, purpose, and functions of Christian pastoral care.⁶² The widespread openness and attraction of modern pastoral care practitioners ("pastoral psychologists")

⁶¹Howard Clinebell, Basic Types of Pastoral Care and Counseling (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), p. 41. See also Hiltner, Pastoral Theology, pp. 36, 50; Clebsch and Jaekle, Pastoral Care, pp. 80-81; Koehler, Counseling and Confession, pp. 16-20.

⁶²Clebsch and Jekle, Pastoral Care, pp. 73-74.

to popular and theoretical notions of psychology, and supposed new insights into the nature of human problems are often not in accordance with biblically sound theological positions. They may conflict with these same pastors' theological convictions, although the pastoral practitioner may not recognize it.

In addition to the development of a psychology of religion, introduced in some seminaries as part of religious education as early as the beginning of this century, and the increasing growth of pastoral clinical training since the decade of 1920-1930, a third factor needs to be considered, which is the theological climate in North America in the 1920s.⁶³ The widespread openness of pastoral care to psychology and psychotherapy is directly related to the theological polarization which split many American church denominations into "conservative" and "liberal" factions. Conservatives sought to preserve a historic Protestant biblical foundation and authority, maintaining the miraculous in Scripture, biblical inerrancy and human depravity. Liberals accepted rather uncritically new trends in pastoral psychology and in clinical training as best representing the fundamental values of Christianity. Through such means they sought to increase the church's sensitivity in its ministry to people's inner needs in a modern world. Their theology emphasized human potential and action through a program of activism in which psychology, sociology, and politics are authorities along with the Scriptures.

Freudian psychoanalysis, Rogerian clinical psychology, existential philosophy and contemporary psychotherapies share a common

⁶³Koehler, Counseling and Confession, p. 17.

feature in that they do not have "much room for a theology which seriously considers sin, personal salvation, and biblical absolutes."⁶⁴ Having humanistic presuppositions (that is, "a philosophical understanding of human nature and human abilities which is different from that of the Christian faith"⁶⁵), they ignore, redefine, or contradict traditional biblical statements. These developments in psychology and psychotherapy are paralleled in pastoral care and counseling. Because of the openness of liberal theology to these disciplines, there has emerged a situation in which pastoral care, formerly encompassed by pastoral theology, is now centered in pastoral psychology.

The impetus for the new movement has come more from the laboratories of the psychological sciences than from the scholarship of theologians. It is a psychologically oriented Seelsorge.⁶⁶

In opposition to this development conservative and fundamentalist groups are unwilling to minimize traditional Christian doctrine as the normative factor in pastoral care and counseling. Being aware that liberal theology tended, in the clinical pastoral education movement, to move against an authoritative use of biblical theology,⁶⁷ conservative pastors were reluctant to employ modern psychological methods, continuing to use what they perceived to be a direct biblical method of pastoral care.⁶⁸

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 19.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 23.

⁶⁶William E. Hulme, Counseling and Theology (Philadelphia: Muehlenberg Press, 1956), p. 2, quoted in Koehler, Counseling and Confession, p. 19.

⁶⁷Frank C. Peters, "Counseling and Evangelical Theology," Bibliotheca Sacra 125 (January-March 1969):7, quoted in Koehler, Counseling and Confession, p. 20.

⁶⁸Fritz, Pastoral Theology, p. 195. "A pastor should not only

The same factors that were causing an increasing emphasis on counseling in pastoral care⁶⁹ also caused pastoral counseling to be seen as "the chief locus of concern for pastoral theology and pastoral psychology," and "the gate through which new intellectual formulations of pastoring have entered and claimed attention."⁷⁰ As these factors have caused the prominence of the "guiding function" (pastoral counseling) to prevail in pastoral care, at the same time they have also caused it to become a subsidiary of other secular professions and consequently have decreased the ability of counseling to provide a focus for the pastoral ministry.

On the other hand, one can see the emergence of a new epoch as the ministry of reconciling in pastoral care experiences a recovery because its two modes (forgiveness and discipline), after they suffered neglect for a long while seem to be on the verge of an important revival. There are no prominent non-pastoral substitute for these means. Indeed, by polarizing the other pastoral functions, sustaining, healing, and guiding, reconciling can become⁷¹

have a thorough knowledge of the human being as such, but as a true pastor, or Seelsorger, he also must know how to diagnose and treat the peculiar spiritual conditions of an individual soul. His knowledge of the human being as such he gets from a very reliable source--the Bible. The Bible gives us an accurate description of man in his natural condition."

⁶⁹The factors are mentioned on page 25, and are basically the most provocative research in the field of the helping professions causing the emergence of contemporary therapies and the training opportunities provided for clergy by institutions whose central concern is counseling as the chief model for the helping art. Both are conducive to a prominence of counseling within pastoral care.

⁷⁰Clebsch and Jaekle, Pastoral Care, p. 80.

⁷¹Two of Clebsch's and Jaekle's statements, because of their theological implications, conflict with the teachings on man's natural

the best hope for a transformed pastoral care that reveres and is continuously integrated with the history of pastoring, church's theological formulations, open to new psychological insights, and able to meet creatively the aspirations and needs of modern people. . . . Reconciling . . . seems to be the pastoral function, presently most open to experimentation, new discussion, and revived application.⁷²

Finally there has been in more recent times among the theologically conservative groups, besides their "unyielding conviction in matters of the Christian faith . . . a kind of 'coming of age' in terms of educational standards," which cause them to give "more written input into the area of pastoral counseling."⁷³ The next necessary step in the analysis of this paper has to be, then, a closer view of these developments within the dialectics of theology and psychology under the influence of liberal-conservative theological views.

The Influence of Behavioral Sciences on Pastoral Care

That "in our time the Protestant churches are probably putting more effort and work into the task of helping man than ever before,"⁷⁴

sinful state and the simul justus et peccator condition of the regenerated Christians. First, reconciling's polarizing action revitalizes the healing function on the basis of the Christian view that restored relationships are a spiritual advance over the preceding state and over relationships which never suffered breaches. Second, this Christian view coincides with modern man's expectations that life in relationship with other people will increasingly release one's creative powers (p. 82). Finally, in connection with the mode of forgiveness in the form of individual confession and absolution all other three functions seem to have the same importance, even if from the point of view of the other helping professions the healing one seems to have more.

⁷²Clebsch and Jaekle, Pastoral Care, p. 81.

⁷³Koehler, Counseling and Confession, p. 23.

⁷⁴Enger, "Private Confession," p. 1.

is the result of the rapid transformations that pastoral care has passed through and still is undergoing because of the challenges and incentives received from the insights on the problems of the human being developed within sociology, anthropology, and other social, physical or biological sciences, or within the behavioral ones, that is, psychology and psychotherapy. This influence is best seen in the parallel developments of psychotherapy and modern pastoral counseling which, having arrived on the scene about the same time, were affected by many of the same external influences. And they will continue to affect each other's development since they both deal with humanity's basic problems and utilize many of the same techniques.⁷⁵

In general, modern psychology has helped theology to rediscover the organic interrelatedness of the human being. Psychology has also directed pastoral care to be concerned with the whole person and highlighted and underscored the necessity of being more sensitive to and acquainted with the basic expressions of human need at the level of communication and interaction. Besides this, psychotherapy specifically provides insights and resources designed to help pastors to detect the symptoms of various personality disorders and offers increasingly effective techniques through which the pastor can communicate his availability and help people to resolve their conflicts. The most significant contribution which pastoral care, on the other hand, makes to psychotherapy is in the area of theology and faith by calling attention to the immense importance of the spiritual and total dimensions of human needs.

⁷⁵Koehler, Counseling and Confession, p. 18, 25.

To ignore these is not to deal with the whole man. Pastoral care can also make an important contribution by a greater utilization of the church's distinctive resources.⁷⁶

The combination of psychology's basic aims with those of pastoral care, however, does not only open areas of cooperation but also areas of conflict. The similarities and differences between them become major or minor depending upon what evidences are regarded as basic. To say it in other words, "one would discern mainly similarities or mainly differences . . . depending on one's theological position and understanding."⁷⁷

For some the influence of these sciences on pastoral care as well as the similitudes between the two have been so intense that they provide ground for a new speciality, namely, "pastoral psychology" as a creative contribution on how relevant psychological insights affect the whole setting and context of the pastor's work, and how these insights can be properly appreciated and appropriated, instead of being a simple application of psychology to ministerial practice.⁷⁸ Pastoral psychologists prefer to point to the relationship and the significant area of similarities between psychology and pastoral care. However, they avoid discussing any specific or abrupt differences and especially ignore the main tensions in the presuppositions of Christian theology and those of psychology, as if it were only a question of different emphasis or perspectives on an overall, common basis and not two fields sometimes

⁷⁶Ibid., pp. 26-27.

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 27.

⁷⁸Hiltner, Pastoral Theology, p. 36.

diametrically opposed to each other.⁷⁹ Finally, pastoral psychologists feel it is a great advantage that

the Protestant churches have largely abandoned the legalism that has at times attended their methods, and are free to advance along new lines with the aid of modern scientific knowledge.⁸⁰

They maintain that a systematic exploration of psychology and psychotherapy that goes beyond mere practical considerations and establishes a basic theory, checked through certain theological questions, as a real matter of methodology, has become fundamental for the understanding of the Christian faith. They contend also that as "others before us have faced new insights from the behavioral sciences and healing arts, from the philosophies and theologies, of their day" in order to learn and to practice pastoral care inventively,⁸¹ so today pastoral care as it ever has been must stand constantly open to the insights of various and even conflicting psychological theories, as well as to the sources of popular psychology, since they represent a powerful trend in every epoch of pastoring.⁸²

Finally, according to this position, pastoral care results from and is enriched by the furthering of the cooperation between behavioral

⁷⁹Koehler, Counseling and Confession, p. 27-28.

⁸⁰McNeill, Cure of Souls, p. IX.

⁸¹Clebsch and Jaekle, Pastoral Care, p. 3. See pp. 76-79, for a detailed explanation of how in different periods in History Christian pastoral care borrowed and adapted to its own use the various theories of the human soul, since the "theoretical insights from the regnant academic psychologies of the prevailing culture . . . (and) popular psychological notions and terminologies provided the garb in which men's troubles present themselves" (p. 77).

⁸²Ibid., p. 79. See also Belgum, "The Theology of Pastoral Care," p. 219.

science and theology. Since psychotherapists and pastors have discovered how similar are their aims in dealing with a person,

pastoral care has been able to utilize many of the terms and concepts developed by psychology, sociology, and anthropology in understanding the role of the pastor in connection with Holy Communion (particularly to the sick) and the great crises and events of confirmation, marriage, and the funeral.⁸³

Thus pastoral psychologists affirm that as a pastor faces physical, genetic, emotional, social or environmental problems and influences, the understanding of which comes from the social and behavioral sciences or from other sources, "it is legitimate [for the pastor] to direct many questions from the practice of pastoral care" toward these sciences.⁸⁴

In fact, pastoral care is the locus for the continuous dialogue that is to go on between theology and the behavioral sciences as they meet in the theory and practice of pastoral care, which then stands "in the middle."⁸⁵ It is pastoral care's proper function to use resources from both science and theology when psychotic, neurotic, or psychosomatic problems become impediments for the free flow of grace through the channels by which grace is bestowed upon the troubled person. For accomplishing the purpose of removing the impediment(s) pastoral care may employ either individual confession and absolution or/and pastoral counseling, group methods or/and even the help of a psychotherapist.

The problem with this liberal position is first, that it generally employs the term "pastoral" in its wide sense as having a moral

⁸³Belgum, "The Theology of Pastoral Care," pp. 211-12.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 213.

⁸⁵Ibid., pp. 218-19.

perspective, holding to Christian values or/and forming a caring relationship.⁸⁶ Secondly and more problematic is the liberal tendency to "consistently employ the humanistic methods of psychotherapy [which] are in effect undermining some basic tenets of Christianity."⁸⁷ Thirdly liberal counselors tend to align themselves to a particular school of psychological thought. This alliance with a specific psychological system and the use of popular language tends not to help solve problems but simply to provide new terms for them. However, history shows that the functions, modes, and means of pastoral care have remained stable in spite of constant revolutions in theoretical and popular psychology.⁸⁸

On the other hand, partially as a reaction to this main line of thought in terms of pastoral psychology within the counseling training movement, there is a theologically conservative group, which, however, is not itself free from internal tensions. Basically,

they are all convinced of a necessary loyalty to the authority of the Bible and to the belief that within the Scriptures the basic needs of troubled people are anticipated. Here the point of tension is the extent to which the Bible should be used as a text book . . . as a literal counseling manual.⁸⁹

To contend, as some conservatives do, that pastoral care and counseling is so different from psychology and psychotherapy in its purpose, means, and objectives that any comparison or cooperation is precluded presents some weaknesses. First, because of holding that "the

⁸⁶ Koehler, Counseling and Confession, p. 14. See also, pp. 25, 27, 31.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 23. See also, p. 29.

⁸⁸ Clebsch and Jaekle, Pastoral Care, p. 79.

⁸⁹ Koehler, Counseling and Confession, p. 33. See also pp. 23-24, 28.

application of the divine wisdom of the Scriptures is superior to the application of human wisdom,"⁹⁰ they use the Bible as "a methodological handbook" and establish a unique evangelical psychology that ignores the insights of scientific psychology. Second, by not acknowledging some of the existent similarities and by not recognizing a legitimate relationship between theology and psychology they fail to give guidance to pastors in the context of pastoral care. But these pastors cannot avoid the use of techniques and methodologies of psychology and psychotherapy, and consequently are left without the necessary sound perimeters of a biblical understanding of pastoral care.

There is also a group of conservative Christian professionals and others who are trained in psychology or psychiatry and theology and who are fully aware of both the "dangers of having a theology which is largely removed from life," and "a psychology which attempts to speak authoritatively to all of man's needs."⁹¹ Because they recognize the need of an acknowledged alliance, they wish to accomplish an integration of aspects of those disciplines within the area of pastoral care, which neither fails to honestly appraise and consider the real differences between both fields, nor the fact that while covering much of the same ground, theology and psychology come to it with different aims and approaches. The techniques and methodologies of psychology and psychotherapy will be used in pastoral care "with discrimination and not at

⁹⁰Ibid., p. 24.

⁹¹Peters, "Counseling and Evangelical Theology: "7, quoted in Koehler, Counseling and Confession, p. 28.

the expense of the theological heritage of the church"⁹² or of the church's unique resources. Notwithstanding this group's efforts, pastoral care's work is still being compromised by those who choose to ignore the contributions of psychology and psychotherapy as well as by those who increasingly apply the insights of these sciences and other related disciplines without adequate theological foundations, with the result that pastoral care is in danger of losing its own distinctive identity and ministry.

Because "pastoral care and counseling failed to fully adjust to the changing needs of people in society" occasion was given to "all kinds of psychotherapies quickly developed to fill the gap."⁹³ One hopes that this situation may be reversed as the church makes greater and better use of its distinctive theological and biblical resources.

Preserving the Integrity of Pastoral Care

One of the basic areas in which it is possible to clearly identify divergences and conflicts between psychology and pastoral care is in the definition of human nature, since it "obviously . . . shapes goals and techniques for psychotherapy [and] the same holds true for pastoral counseling."⁹⁴ As was already stated an anthropocentric view of man or the humanistic presuppositions as to a person's innate capacity to choose to do good and to self-correct any "malfunctioning" are ingrained in most psychological systems and psychotherapies. In contrast to the Christian, pastoral view of God as the primary focus (theocentric)

⁹²Koehler, Counseling and Confession, p. 28.

⁹³Ibid., pp. 26-27.

⁹⁴Ibid., p. 29.

to look at a person's nature, as a sinner hostile to but beloved of God (vertical plane), and at issues such as sin, human abilities, freedom of the will, conscience, guilt, and forgiveness, the humanistic view works on the premise that through insight and self-awareness a person is able to live in wholesome and meaningful relation with oneself and others (horizontal plane). Psychology and pastoral care are also distinct in terms of their ultimate ends. Psychotherapy's purpose is "to bring the individual to a place where he or she is able to . . . 'make it' in meaningful societal living."⁹⁵ The goal of pastoral care is "new and sustained life in Jesus Christ which gives forgiveness of sins, reconciled relationships, abundant living, and salvation."⁹⁶ Thus the specific purposes of a particular psychotherapy may be met while still falling short of Christian goals.

Another area of divergence is in life perspective. Psychotherapy is only concerned with the here and now of this world. Pastoral care and counseling has a sense of purpose which moves both within God's redeemed people who act in history, and toward God's consummation of history into eternity. Pastoral care and counseling effectiveness also has a broader range or scope than that established by the perimeters of psychotherapy in that it is a concern for the total person, spiritually as well as emotionally.⁹⁷

In concrete situations these divergences raise mutual suspicions. On one hand, the suspicion is that the presuppositions of secular psychology supporting the methods of pastoral care and counseling are only superficially adapted and not clearly Christian. This seems to be

⁹⁵Ibid.

⁹⁶Ibid.

⁹⁷Ibid., p. 30.

confirmed by the fact that most books in the field lack theological direction. Their "main concern seems to be interpreting to the pastor the valuable insights of psychotherapy," while "theological issues are not dealt with in any comprehensive way."⁹⁸ On the other hand, there is the suspicion that many issues in the areas of exegetical and systematic theology are irrelevant to meeting human needs, which is demonstrated by the failure of these areas to give direction to pastoral care and counseling, "in terms of greater practical application and consistent theological interpretation."⁹⁹

Because of the conflict between psychology and theology it is important to consider that it is not only the insights that a Christian may draw from psychology or psychotherapy that matters, but even more importantly the exercise of careful and mature theological judgement to assure that the techniques and methodologies of the sciences do not conflict with traditional Christian teaching.¹⁰⁰ Returning to the perspectives of liberal and conservative theology, it is precisely in the way that they approach the individual that "perhaps the largest area of tension in pastoral [care and] counseling lies."¹⁰¹ Liberal theology comes very close to humanistic presuppositions in its emphasis on the use of human wisdom, on achieving man's wholeness and fulfillment through that wisdom here and now, and in its concept of the human being. Conservative theology, however, considers man as completely lost in sin, powerless, and in need of Christ's healing redemption, and salvation. Because this theology strives for biblically centered pastoral care, it faults liberal

⁹⁸Ibid., p. 32.

⁹⁹Ibid.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., pp. 29, 30.

¹⁰¹Ibid., p. 33.

theology for overshadowing and even ignoring the purposes of God's will realized in salvation history and eternal life.

William E. Hulme affirms as a possibility that pastoral care and counseling may have ". . . incorporated much from the psychological disciplines." If it "rather than integrating psychological insights into the ministry of counseling . . . has divorced itself from its traditional base," however it is departing from its ministerial roots and "has lost its uniqueness or even distinctiveness."¹⁰² Walter J. Koehler acknowledges as a fact that which Hulme expresses as a possibility.

Pastoral [care and] counseling has mushroomed so swiftly in the areas of techniques and methodologies, that underlying presuppositions and theology have frequently been neglected. . . . pastoral counselors have been too enamoured by all the scintillating discoveries of psychology to pay much attention to their theological heritage.¹⁰³

Liberal theological positions have indeed led to a depreciation of the Christian theological heritage and have caused pastoral care to depart from its ministerial roots and lose its uniqueness, so that in today's climate of religious uncertainty, moral and ethical questioning, and modern man's keen sense of the difficulty of accomplishing man-to-man reconciliation, doubts have surfaced as to whether or not the wisdom, resources, and authority of the Christian faith still determine a proper posture for pastoral care. This is one of the main reasons why pastors have become apprentices to other helping professionals. Their first step should be the re-appreciation and re-appropriation of Christian traditional ministry. Instead they have separated themselves from

¹⁰²William E. Hulme, Pastoral Care and Counseling (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1981), p. 8.

¹⁰³Koehler, Counseling and Confession, pp. 32-33.

traditional pastor roles and viewed traditional biblical theology as irrelevant.¹⁰⁴

Especially considering the problem of sin, (that is the burden of the guilt resultant from alienation from God and other man) clearly pastoral care has a concern for this problem not shared by other helping professions. By taking broken relationships in the context of man's ultimate breach with God, pastoral care deals with them at a more ultimate level than any helping profession.

Thus, the related matters of guilt, responsibility, relationship, alienation, and reconciliation comprise a genus of modern trouble for which the reconciling ministry is peculiarly well suited.¹⁰⁵

The minister can enter into conversation with psychologists and psychiatric social workers as a practitioner of the pastoral care discipline also from the vantage point of an accumulated wisdom gained through centuries of study and practice. But what is more important, pastoral care also occurs "within the framework of the church's mission" and utilizes the means of grace - the Word and sacraments.¹⁰⁶ Hearing confession and pronouncing the forgiveness of sins is, for example, an ancient resource of pastoral care¹⁰⁷ applied under divine mandate. As a way to bring reconciliation between God and people, it brings a dimension to the pastoral ministry in its therapeutic function unavailable

¹⁰⁴Clebsch and Jaekle, Pastoral Care, pp. 75-76.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., p. 82.

¹⁰⁶Koehler, Counseling and Confession, p. 35.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., p. 36. The author mentions other distinctive Christian resources, "prayer . . . pastoral conversation and consolation, Christian fellowship, liturgical formulae, Christian teachings and theology, signs and symbols, and benedictions."

to the secular psychologist. Pastoral care has its basis in that it is a channel for the reception of God's healing grace.

The Development of New Helping Professions

The development of new helping professions as one aspect of these four major factors has had a great influence on pastoral care. With the growth of professions like psychiatry, clinical psychology, psychotherapy, and psychiatric social work many of those responsibilities which were previously of pastoral care have been reassigned. Because these helping professions "have developed terminology, rationales, and techniques that seem superior to those of the pastor, leaving him in a position of uncertainty,"¹⁰⁸ not only do many people look upon them "as some kind of wise teacher or a more-or-less secularized 'spiritual' pastor,"¹⁰⁹ but also pastors seem to be turning over to them their role as moral and spiritual guides. More recently it has become common for clergy to establish themselves as counselors either within church structures or independent of those structures and even of proper academic credentials or government licensing. This situation certainly raises serious questions on the distinctive pastoral character of their work.

On the other hand, it is a fact that the professional mental health workers' objectives of alleviating emotional distress and of helping persons to fulfill their potential as human beings by resolving conflicts, reducing anxiety, alleviating symptoms, helping in holding a job or becoming a responsible citizen, are to some extent in close

¹⁰⁸ Harold Haas, Pastoral Counseling with People in Distress (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970), p. 53.

¹⁰⁹ Koehler, Counseling and Confession, p. 30.

contact with all of the pastor's ministerial functions of visiting the sick, guiding youth, preaching, teaching, and evangelism. However, one is to be aware, first, that the demand for more expert helping persons in the helping professions, required by the very concreteness of the work of identifying and describing personal troubles, causes a short-handedness that will always leave to pastoral care a significant assistance to render. Second, while the pastor's ministry includes some of the goals of the helping professions, there is a uniqueness in it that justifies the pastor's claim for a specific role in helping people. The pastor's ministry is directed to the individual's spiritual welfare, his concern is for the individual's relationship with God and with his fellowmen, and his basic goal is to be instrumental in bringing man unto a right relationship with God through the gospel.

The psychiatrist, psychologist, and social worker commonly alleviate distress and help a person realize his potential by helping him understand his feelings, his strengths and weaknesses, and by helping him cope with life more effectively. The pastor's work is more basic. It gets at the root of the problem, because it resolves the essence of man's difficulty, his separation from God.¹¹⁰

Pastoral care does not aim only at making people feel good or helping people to change their behavior. By proclaiming law and gospel it fundamentally seeks to create a new person. While in most kinds of psychotherapy the helping professional relies on the theory, techniques, and on his own skills as well as on the individual's capacity of self-correction, in pastoral care all these are only tools and resources through which God is working. The Holy Spirit accomplishes this change primarily through all those means through which God's forgiveness of

¹¹⁰ Haas, Counseling People in Distress, p. 56. See also, Koehler, Counseling and Confession, p. 36.

sins is granted to the individual. These means are entrusted by God through the church, the body of Christ, to each pastor for the ministry of pastoral care as representative of this same body. Thus, even when it is true that a Christian psychotherapist or psychiatrist can also deal with spiritual issues from a Christian perspective, it does not happen because of his professional responsibility but because of the therapist's spiritual character. In pastoral care, however, these issues are an integral part of the therapeutic process and are organically integrated in the pastoral care structure.

This leads one to an analysis of why psychology has such an influence on pastoral care, one in which "the United States has taken the lead."¹¹¹ In the United States, in addition to training in theology, much emphasis is placed both in the seminary and in the parish, on clinical pastoral education, on understanding of human personality, counseling techniques, and other related areas by which pastors are thought to be enabled to improve their ministry.

The Training of Pastors

It has only been within the last fifty years that the discipline of pastoral care, because of the increasing interest in counseling, has grown to the point that today all major theological schools in the United States include it in their curriculums. One has to agree that as systematics requires training in philosophical thought and exegetical theology utilizes philology and archeology and presupposes grammar, pastoral theology is to include both theology in its relationship to human

¹¹¹Enger, "Private Confession," p. 1.

dynamics and in pastoral use of specifically religious resources for soul care (Scripture, the sacraments, individual confession and absolution, prayer), and psychotherapy in the development of clinical skills through the use of psychological insights as a tool for a better understanding of the human being.

The psychology involved in pastoral counseling is actually an application of its theological base, since pastoral theology is focused on ministry. It needs, therefore to incorporate a knowledge of the dynamics of intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships.¹¹²

It has been already acknowledged that pastoral care has to continue to be primarily theologically oriented in all of its aspects and that there is mutual tension between the disciplines of pastoral care and systematic and exegetical theology.¹¹³ This is enough to show that there is a challenge in the task of balancing, within the program of theological schools, the justifiable emphasis on intellectual training and the concrete experience in pastoral care as well as "opportunities for emotional and spiritual growth."¹¹⁴ It is in this balance that the theological issues (sin, guilt, salvation, love, suffering, death, and so forth), clearly dealt with (systematic theology) become meaningful and relevant to the pastor and to the problems of people (practical theology). It is also in this way that the student can gain a positive basis for his identity as pastor and become willing to take responsibility for inquiring what this identity means for him personally. The

¹¹²Hulme, Pastoral Care and Counseling, p. 84.

¹¹³See p. 37-38 and Koehler, Counseling and Confession, pp. 25, 32.

¹¹⁴Carroll Wise, The Meaning of Pastoral Care (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 77.

emphasis on communication through relationships should, of course, not deny the importance of the pastor's vigorous intellectual training, but neither is the emphasis on the latter to become detrimental or exclude relational aspects of the ministry. "Sound knowledge is one dimension of a helping relationship with his [the pastor's] people."¹¹⁵

General observation and scientific study indicate clearly that if a student is not involved (integrated) in the process and the structures he is studying he will not learn creatively but only by rote and the contents will not be incorporated into his thinking and acting. The importance of this observation relates to the disciplines of theology that have been dealt with above, since both the theological integration of religious principles with the counseling discipline, and of "the theological dimension of pastoral care to the personal dimension . . . occurs within the person of the pastor."¹¹⁶ This means, in order that the future pastors may really learn theology it is necessary that both teacher and student should be involved in the ongoing life of a parish, a process in which the laymen also participate. However, the need for the student to be involved with the subject he is learning requires that the teacher's way of relating to the student should reflect for the student that kind of relationship which he will experience with people as a pastor. This neither requires more courses nor merely "experience" unrelated to his studies, but an understanding of a real parish situation and how it functions. One should keep this in mind

¹¹⁵Ibid., p. 120.

¹¹⁶Ibid., p. x. See also Hulme, Pastoral Care and Counseling, p. 8.

later when the importance of the teaching and practice of individual confession and absolution at the seminary will be raised.

Summary

In conclusion one is reminded by the study of the history of pastoral care,¹¹⁷ first, that its goal of reconciling is also present in the church's theology and liturgy as well. For this reason the minister's ritual function is an indispensable pastoral procedure since it announces and renews his authority as one particularly called to establish and restore significant relationships between God and man, and between man and man. If modern pastoral care would disregard its ritual inheritance, there would be a sharp discontinuity within the Christian tradition of ministry. It would probably more impoverish than free modern pastors, since history shows that when "pastoral ritual diminishes, pastoral authority proportionately wanes."¹¹⁸

Second, history makes it evident that since Christianity did not produce a unique psychological system of its own, pastoral care has used, transformed, and advanced the insights of current psychologies. Especially in the last half century, the debate on the quality and interpretation of the relationship between pastoral theology and psychology began with the development of the pastoral counseling movement under the influence of psychotherapy. The two main positions in this debate are the one adopted by liberal theologians as a sense of the potential for pastoral care of the new insights of psychology and of

¹¹⁷Clebsch and Jaekle, Pastoral Care, pp. 68-69.

¹¹⁸Ibid., p. 68.

the scientific study of the human being; and the other of the more conservative which views the influence of the behavioral sciences and of the professionals that use them as a threat to the authority of the Scripture and to the ministry of the Christian church and its pastoral office.¹¹⁹ The first group points to the long and rich heritage of pastoral care, which includes both healing and growth, and concludes that "to appreciate traditional pastoring is to stand ready to adopt and adapt current psychological insights and applications without abdicating the distinctly pastoral role."¹²⁰ They also state that the pastor's care and counseling ministry should gain a deeper dimension from this heritage in order that while they "learn all that they can from contemporary sources . . . their self-identity should be molded by their time-tested tradition of shepherding, not by the recent model of psycho-therapist."¹²¹

While Lutheranism does not regard the studies on the psychological and social aspects of man's life as a psychosomatic being as if they were of small importance, in its view the church's main ministry will always be to "reconcile man to God by proclaiming the Gospel."¹²² For this reason pastoral counseling is to "be evaluated in terms of accomplishing authentic pastoral care,"¹²³ as well as to its call and

¹¹⁹Bruce Narramore, "Perspectives on the Integration of Psychology and Theology," Journal of Psychology and Theology 1 (January, 1973): 3, quoted in Koehler, Counseling and Confession, p. 9. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹²⁰Clebsch and Jaekle, Pastoral Care, p. 69.

¹²¹Clinebell, Pastoral Care and Counseling, p. 41.

¹²²Enger, "Private Confession," p. 62.

¹²³Koehler, Counseling and Confession, p. 9.

resources to meet human primary need of reconciliation with God, no matter its wide spread acceptance in the parish setting and at the seminary training or the significance and direction for the church's functional ministry. Lutheranism contends that pastorally dealing with matters of sin and guilt will be both theologically and functionally inadequate if pastoral care draws too heavily from psychology and psychotherapy. On the contrary, at the very center of pastoral care is the use of God's Word, law and gospel, to guide man to the recognition of his sinfulness and to an acceptance through faith of God's forgiveness. One immediately recognizes also at this point that "this is, in essence, the Lutheran concept of confession of sins and absolution."¹²⁴

Thirdly, as Koehler notes, the lack of consensus regarding the domain of pastoral care and counseling not only clouds the effecting of authentic pastoral care, but also the determination of what constitutes the public ministry.¹²⁵ Because of this "blurring and overgeneralization of the entire ministry" and the consequent "loss of specific pastoral authority," and "generalization of pastoral work," pastors have been thrown (driven to) "back upon the patterns, procedures, and functions of the various other helping professions."¹²⁶ For this reason it is of fundamental importance that pastoral care be defined as distinct from both other ministerial work and the other helping professions.¹²⁷ It is a pastoral care posture or attitude as a helping profession that

¹²⁴Enger, "Private Confession," p. 1.

¹²⁵Koehler, Counseling and Confession, p. 10.

¹²⁶Clebsch and Jaekle, Pastoral Care, p. 68.

¹²⁷Ibid., p. 69.

distinguishes pastoral care from the institutional-administrative, liturgical, homiletical, and educational functions. On the other hand, as one has already seen in the two first points, it is by the exercise of all the ritual functions as public ministerial roles that pastors sharpen, renew, and enact their pastoral authority role as fully capacitated representative persons in the use of the wisdom, resources, and authority of the Christian faith. But the pastoral ministry is most of all distinguished by centering pastoral care in God's Word, as law and gospel, directing it towards the work of improving the individual's relationship with God and his fellowmen. The pastoral ministry has its starting point in the God-given ability (habitus practicus), and carries pastoral care out within the framework of the church's mission. Being, thus, clearly distinguished from doctors, lawyers, psychiatrists, psychotherapists, counselors, and social workers, pastors should not act as if they were merely apprentices and imitators in arts that properly belong to others.

The hard task that lies ahead for pastoral care is . . . to understand itself as having quite definite services to render. . . . an effort to distinguish them clearly from the church's liturgical, homiletical, educational, institutional, evangelistic, and community responsibilities. . . . to make a clear demarcation between the pastor as a professional helping person and his colleagues in other helping professions . . . insofar as he [the pastor] simply imitates their postures, he abdicates his own.¹²⁸

Fourthly, as one sees all these conclusions closely interrelated, there is the indication that the reconciling function is the center of the other pastoral functions as sustaining, guiding, and healing. Christian ministers in dealing with troubled people have used these four

¹²⁸Ibid., pp. 74-75.

functions in novel ways of pastoral care as one or another of the functions attracted the others around itself capturing the imagination of pastors because it proved to be more viable for the cultural and personal conditions.¹²⁹

The normative feature of pastoral care in historical perspective is neither a uniquely Christian psychology nor a particular language in which human trouble must be described but it is the constancy of the pastoral posture and the four pastoral functions of healing, sustaining, guiding, and reconciling.¹³⁰

Finally one has to emphasize the necessity of recovering mandated pastoral practices, like individual confession and absolution, and emphasize the fact that the prominence of the reconciling function described above is directly connected to its use in the two historical modes of forgiveness and discipline.

A Definition of Pastoral Care

Our study of pastoral care from an historical perspective, especially in the developments of the twentieth century, has brought into focus the fact that there is tension in critical areas. It has been made clear also that a definition of pastoral care needs to take into account this tension as well as be determined by the theological presuppositions in which it is rooted. One of the aspects of this tension is the diverging positions of conservative and liberal theology. But not all the terms of this tension are mutually exclusive. In fact, sometimes they reflect a very delicate and incipient (not well delineated) relationship or they call for the precedence of one aspect over the other, like the following: the areas of cooperation and conflict in pastoral care and

¹²⁹Ibid., pp. 11-12.

¹³⁰Ibid., p. 79.

counseling between pastoral theology principles and the methods and insights of psychology and psychotherapy; in the focusing of pastoral care primarily from the point of view of the ministerial functions or from that of the human being's basic or natural needs; the relation between God-given aptitudes and human innate (natural) abilities; and on more specifically theological issues like that of ministry as being a ministry of the congregation or as an autonomous office; and even the aspects of the mediated ministerial vocation as a God-given disposition and aptitude or one worked together by God and man as an inner call, starting from innate natural, and spiritual endowments.

The Definition of Pastoral Care and its Setting

Since C. F. W. Walther's and G. H. Gerberding's respective positions on individual confession and absolution are taken in this study as representative of nineteenth century Lutheranism in North America, their understanding of pastoral theology will be treated here to illustrate some of the areas of tension in pastoral care. One must keep in mind that pastoral (practical) theology in their time was understood as an all inclusive discipline, being the theory of pastoral care.

Walther defines pastoral theology as:

a God-given ($\theta\epsilon\omicron\sigma\sigma\omicron\tau\omicron\varsigma$) practical aptitude of the soul (habitus) acquired (acquisitus) by means of certain aids whereby a minister of the Church is enabled validly (rato) and legitimately (legitime), for the glory of God and his own and his hearers' salvation, to perform all the functions incumbent upon him by virtue of his office.¹³¹

¹³¹ Fritz, Pastoral Theology, p. 1. Cf. Walter, Pastoraltheologie, p. 1.

It is a habitus (Gewohnheit) which is essentially (principaliter) present in the person's soul, that is, connected to a subject or concretum, who rightly has the name of a theologian. Being an aptitude (habitus; ἐξάρτισις) theology is not only the sum of the knowledge of the Christian doctrine of justification in Jesus Christ, but also a disposition, a developing skill (ἐξέλιξις) of supernatural origin. "The true theology consists more in the disposition than in bare knowledge,"¹³² or more specifically, true and saving knowledge from God is both the confession of faith and the heart's disposition put into practice. It presupposes justifying faith and is activated by regeneration as God's gracious act by the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 2:16; 3:5-6) and not through human power or devotion. It includes also the gifts of faith which a pastor needs for his own spiritual life (sanctification) as well as the charismata (spiritual gifts) for the faithful performance of his official duties (Jas. 1:17; 1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Cor. 12:4-11; 2 Cor. 3:5). However, while the gifts belong to the fulness of the Holy Spirit's indwelling grace (faith), the ministerial charismata have their source in God's external grace (Word and sacraments) as the teaching and activity of the Spirit. Coming from the Holy Spirit, the gifts and charismata must be distinguished from human wisdom (Jas. 3:15; ψυχικὴ σοφία). But, on the other hand, the charismata must also be distinguished from the apostles' and prophets' extraordinary immediate equipment which they received by the quickening, directing, and restraining action of the Holy Spirit through means (1 Tim. 4:13-16). Through

¹³²Walther, Pastoraltheologie, p. 4. "Die wahre Theologie besteht mehr in der Gesinnung (in affectu), als in blosser Erkenntniss."

the study of God's Word and by the assistance of the Holy Spirit a trained faculty is developed in an individual to distinguish what is correct and what is in error (the goal of pastoral theology), enabling each Christian grounded in the gospel of Jesus Christ to be a teacher for others (Heb. 5:12, 14). Much more, the true and faithful servant of the church will need extensive preparation and intensive study through which he is equipped (2 Tim. 3:17; 2 Cor. 3:5; ἵκανότης) to aptly enter the ministerial office. Here, then, "it is not enough to have mere appearance or seriousness, and a sanctified life, rather also theological knowledge is called for."¹³³

Walther's definition and understanding, therefore, lead back to the conclusions of the previous section. First, a spiritual attitude and aptitude are essential to pastoral care because they are God-given instruments of his working. Human natural abilities must also be developed through one's own effort often requiring much training. Second, the integration of theological principles with the insights of psychology in pastoral care happen within the pastor as theologian when those psychological insights are processed through the "God-given practical aptitude of the soul." Concerning the pastor's role and authority, Walther's definition brings the functions, modes, and means used by the pastor into their proper perspective by considering them not as symbols but as effective instruments for accomplishing his divine call.

There is a lack of understanding on the part of those who still today insist on defining pastoral theology as a field of theological

¹³³Ludwig Hartmann, Pastorale Ev. (Norimb., 1697), p. 237, quoted in Walther, Pastoraltheologie, p. 6. "Denn hier genügt blosses persönliches Ansehen oder Ernst und Heiligkeit des Lebens nicht, es sind vielmehr auch theologische Kenntnisse erforderlich."

knowledge systematically organized around principles derived from reflection on reality or from the "shepherding" perspective. They consider it to be "a theory of cure of souls,"¹³⁴ which remains relevant only in the constant and discriminating dialogue with culture, particularly the study of the material available in the behavioral sciences. Walther answers this line of thought by stating in the explanation of his definition that pastoral theology is a thoroughly practical habitus in its roots, means, and relations and not merely a theoretical or a cognitive one, like a science which has its ultimate purpose in knowledge per se. Pastoral theology has as its general objective leading sinners through faith to salvation, while its specific objective is to equip the man of God in the practice of the ministerial office

¹³⁴Hiltner, Pastoral Theology, p. 20. Pastoral theology is that "field of theological knowledge and inquiry that brings the shepherding perspective to bear upon all operations and functions of the church and the minister and then draws conclusions of a theological order from reflection on these observations." See also, pp. 7, 15, 20-22, 33. Wise, Pastoral Care, pp. 1, 8. "Abstract concepts of pastoral care have been developed through the centuries under such labels as 'pastoral theology,' but these concepts have been powerless to create effective pastors." Pastoral theology is "a set of principles for the conduct of specific activity," and as such distinct from pastoral care. Richard R. Caemmerer, ed., The Pastor at Work (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1960), pp. v-vi. "Pastoral theology does not qualify as an exact science. . . . A prudent pastor will . . . learn from the experiences and opinions of others, and these, together with correct basic principles of pastoral theology, should aid in determining what is best . . . for some individual soul looking to him for direction in a given case." Hulme, Pastoral Care and Counseling, pp. 14, 19. This author comes closer to Walther's definition. "Pastoral theology--the unique perspective by which one views life as a Christian . . . a functional description of the Christian faith in its particular references to the ministry of pastoral care and counseling." In distinction from the other areas of theology, it is "the body of knowledge that has resulted from reflection on the revelation of God in Christ as it relates to the intra-personal, inter-personal, and group dynamics of human functioning. As such it is the cognitive material from which the ministries of pastoral care and counseling take their shape."

(ministerium ecclesiasticum); both objectives are really inherent to pastoral theology (1 Cor. 10:31; 1 Tim. 4:16)

The objective of Pastoral Theology is the salvation of man and the glory of God. With this in mind the pastor should apply the Law and the Gospel. Whether he baptize a child, make a decision in a case of divorce, or officiate at a funeral, the pastor acts as Seelsorger, a curate of souls.¹³⁵

Since pastoral theology is the guiding discipline over the "practical" disciplines,¹³⁶ pastoral theology must be practical itself. Its practical character becomes evident as it unites doctrine and life, bringing the results of the practical disciplines into life itself, and manifests the living power the practical disciplines have when they are of the right kind.¹³⁷ Thus, as theology is something living, pastoral theology is said to be its most active (alive) aspect. Pastoral theology, in relation to its starting point (habitus) and specific objective (equipping the man of God), is related to the person of the minister, and in relation to its general objective (justification), is related to the life of people.

Gerberding's approach to pastoral theology is quite different, "it is not an exact science. . . . It can only lay down general principles and give general counsels."¹³⁸ The objective of "a pastoral

¹³⁵Fritz, Pastoral Theology, pp. 2-3.

¹³⁶Ibid., p. 1. Cf. Walther, Pastoraltheologie, p. 3. It includes catechetics, homiletics, and liturgics.

¹³⁷Rudelbach and Guericke, "Den Begriff der Theologie und den der Neutestamentlichen Isagogik," Zeitschrift 1848 (1):27-28, quoted in Walther, Pastoraltheologie, p. 3. "Diese vermittelt nun . . . die Lehre mit dem Leben, trägt die Ergebnisse jener in dieses hinüber, und macht sie nicht erst lebendig (das müssen sie an sich sein, wenn sie rechter Art sind), sondern zeigt ihre lebendige Kraft."

¹³⁸Gerberding, The Lutheran Pastor, p. 5 (emphasis added).

theology is to enable men to be true pastors,"¹³⁹ by learning from books and from his own and others' experience so that he can master the basic principles of theology and help solve the problems of individuals by applying the right principles at the proper time. This is synthesized in the expression pastoral Klugheit, "a sanctified common sense," or a natural insight into things as they are, an intuitive understanding of men and situations; an innate capacity to deal practically with all sorts, conditions, and combinations of men and their problems with discernment, exercising good, prudent, and practical judgment.¹⁴⁰

Gerberding maintains that the ministry has always existed in the church, coming directly from the apostolate and, thus, directly from Christ, neither from man nor from the church. The ministry exists for the sake of God's Word and has the function of bringing the individual into a personal, saving relationship and union with Christ (reconciliation between God and man) and of edifying him in Christ (growing in sanctification). In this way the body of all believers is gathered, edified, and kept unto the end. This ministry of the Word includes the sacraments which are "dependent on, conditioned by, and effective through the Word."¹⁴¹

The vital questions for him are:

What, then, is a proper call to the ministry? Or how can anyone know that he is rightly called? Who has a right to desire the office of a bishop? Who should prepare himself for this work? . . . Who, then, has the inner or preparatory call? . . . What are the qualifications and indications to show that God wants a person in His ministry? Or what are the marks of the inner or preparatory call?¹⁴²

¹³⁹Ibid., p. 6 (emphasis added).

¹⁴⁰Ibid., p. 50.

¹⁴¹Ibid., p. 22.

¹⁴²Ibid., pp. 38, 45, 46.

From these statements it is evident that besides the outward call from a congregation there is an "inner call" which precedes it and without which the outward call "is not in the full sense the Lord's call."¹⁴³

The inner call is defined as "a true movement of the Holy Ghost upon the mind of the individual in leading him, through the study of the outward Word of God to the conviction that it is his duty to seek the holy office."¹⁴⁴ It is an abiding and growing conviction that the Lord has chosen him and a demand of conscience brought about by the Holy Spirit through the Word. The rejection of this conviction takes away inward peace endangering the soul's salvation. The inner call is recognized through natural gifts and spiritual endowments. The natural gifts for the ministry are: a sound body, a vigorous and well trained mind, common sense, moral courage, earnest activity, and a tender and sympathetic heart. A lack or defectiveness in these gifts is at least a strong indication that there is no call. It is, however, by the spiritual endowments that the inner call is more clearly emphasized and manifested to the candidate. These spiritual endowments are: "a living, deep, and fervent piety," which involves true evangelical, heartfelt repentance toward God and a living faith in Christ; and "a clear and heartfelt conviction that it is God's will that he should serve Him in His holy office."¹⁴⁵ Thus, the inner call is neither a mere preference, nor an

¹⁴³Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁴⁴Henry E. Jacobs, The Lutheran Doctrine of the Ministry, p. 26, quoted in Gerberding, The Lutheran Pastor, p. 42. See also pp. 63-65.

¹⁴⁵Gerberding, The Lutheran Pastor, p. 58. See also pp. 47-63.

intellectual decision, nor a temporary emotion, but the outgrowth of the conviction brought about by the Holy Spirit which is desired and demanded by the Lord. This conviction presupposes the personal and experiential relationship with the Lord, that is, faith.

Gerberding is very quick, when dealing with the issue of the "external call" to oppose both hierarchical succession and the confusion of the priesthood of all believers with the ministry. He faults Luther for lack of clarity concerning this issue, and also Walther for being an adherent of the "transference theory" (Uebertragungslehre), which makes the office of the ministry originate in the congregation as a function of the congregation.¹⁴⁶ This idea of course was advocated among other Lutheran theologians. But he evidently misunderstands Walther's position, probably because of his own incorrect position in the doctrines of church and ministry. However a careful study will show that here the disagreement between the two theologians is to be found in Gerberding's presupposition that neither the divine call, nor the spiritual endowments are exclusively God's action and gift, but that man somehow works together with God and participates in this "inner call." This is not the only point at which he disagrees with Walther. Secondly, in explaining the meaning of pastoral theology, Gerberding uses this term in two senses. One, pastoral theology is a branch of theology, a kind of teaching (doctrine) or field of knowledge, and two,

¹⁴⁶Ibid., p. 77. The transference theory teaches that "the ministry is nothing more than an exercise of the rights and powers which belong originally to the universal priesthood, which rights and powers that priesthood has delegated to the minister, merely for the sake of order. . . . The minister, thus, becomes a mere mouthpiece of the congregation. He is its servant and amenable to it for all he does."

pastoral theology is a type of theological literature. Walther rejects this twofold division of pastoral theology as doctrine or literature. For Walther the term pastoral theology is used to describe the God-given practical aptitude in the pastor's soul. Only in a figurative or relative sense will he agree to use the term "pastoral theology" as descriptive of doctrine or literature.¹⁴⁷

The preceding exposition also explains why the definition of pastoral care presented in this study is deeply grounded on Walther's definition of pastoral theology. Pastoral care may, then, be defined as the caring which is accomplished within the ministry of forgiveness (reconciliation) entrusted by Christ to the local congregation and extended through a call to a pastor as God's representative to be publicly performed. Pastoral care is accomplished through the application of law and gospel in the use of the means of grace for specific situations and problems in the life of a congregation or an individual member to the final goal of bringing reconciliation with God. The minister is enabled by God to accomplish this task through the divine gift of practical aptitude as well as through the natural abilities developed and oriented by theological disciplines and informed by insights, techniques and methods of the behavioral sciences. Briefly, a biblically grounded pastoral care will reflect the insights of the theological disciplines and the insights of the behavioral sciences as they are united and processed in the person of the redeemed pastor-theologian.

¹⁴⁷Walther, Pastoraltheologie, p. 1.

The Implications in View of Some
Contemporary Definitions

The definition given for pastoral care has the clear purpose of regaining a sound theological basis for pastoral care and for the reorientation of pastoral counseling in this direction. It may be surprising, but the fact is that even among more liberal, theologically oriented authors the need of a theological basis and orientation is acknowledged. Howard Clinebell, for example, says it very plainly:

Pastoral counseling must find a new level of self-identity and maturity by deepening its theological roots, broadening its methodology, and discovering its unique contribution to the helping of troubled humanity with reference to both its own heritage and the other helping disciplines.¹⁴⁸

The problem, then, is not in the area of recognizing the need to fill this gap, but, as Koehler has pointed out,¹⁴⁹ in the kind of theology that has been used for this purpose.

In analyzing some of the current definitions of pastoral care one cannot fail to notice that there has always been movement within the care of souls toward more emphasis on man's need than God's purpose and on man's action rather than God's action within and through man. Today it is still possible to identify this tendency toward humanism and toward an anthropocentric view of the ministerial work. This humanistic approach is at fault for the obliteration of fundamental biblical concepts such as sin, guilt, law, gospel, reconciliation (justification),

¹⁴⁸Clinebell, Pastoral Care and Counseling, p. 17. Cf. Basic Types of Pastoral Counseling (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966), pp. 16-17. "If the pastoral counseling renaissance is to become the powerful force for renewal . . . certain decisive changes must occur. Pastoral counseling must come of age in both theory and practice."

¹⁴⁹Koehler, Counseling and Confession, pp. 28-30; 32-33; 35-36.

means of grace, regeneration, forgiveness and many others. This happens, first, because these definitions generally make the person's need a "hermeneutical tool" for the understanding and application of the gospel. Christian shepherding, for example, is viewed as a focal concept in considering the ways of bringing the gospel to the particular needs of men in their problems and sins, and one of the modes of the gospel's outreach to men in need.¹⁵⁰ Shepherding preserves its Christian character by starting from an understanding of the Christian faith, and its relevance by a constantly renewed study of the sense in which its roots are contained in the gospel itself. However, for the gospel to be relevant to the situation one must start from a shepherding perspective and its deeper meaning can only be grasped as one takes into consideration the context of each situation. Or more clearly and concisely: "Pastoral care is the art of communicating the inner meaning of the Gospel to persons at the point of their need."¹⁵¹ One comes, then, to a crucial point when it is stated that pastoral care, the ministry of care of souls,

consists of helping acts done by representative Christian persons, directed toward healing, sustaining, guiding, and reconciling of troubled persons whose troubles arise in the context of ultimate meanings and concerns.¹⁵²

In pastoral care "Some form of the Christian confession of faith becomes an essential ingredient," and it involves the use of "the resources and

¹⁵⁰Seward Hiltner, The Christian Shepherd (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1959), pp. 14-16.

¹⁵¹Wise, Pastoral Care, pp. 8, 67.

¹⁵²Clebsch and Jaekle, Pastoral Care, p. 4. Cf. pp. 8, 75. The pastoral care task is "to find itself as one specific posture employing certain special functions, and then to discover in its work with individual human beings in real-life situations how its resources actually help troubled persons."

wisdom and authority of religion" for the solution of a person's trouble, hurt, and confusion.¹⁵³

The common feature of these definitions is that they all fail to equate clearly and explicitly the gospel with the Christian faith, with Jesus Christ, his redeeming work as God's gift and as the manifestation of his grace. It is therefore not surprising that Luther's use of the confessional is commonly explained along this line of thought mostly as compulsive action and as a result of his scrupulosity. The fact, however, is that his action was fundamentally based on his conception of individual confession and absolution and of all the doctrines related to this issue, primarily his recognition of sin.¹⁵⁴ Consequently his "tower experience" is nothing else than the discovery of the centrality of the gospel for which the biblical exegetical principle of the distinction between law and gospel in the Scriptures was fundamental. Thus, if Luther's experience is of some validity for the specific application of the resources of the Christian faith to an individual person's need "in the context of ultimate meanings and concerns," it teaches that the pastor's task is to apply correctly law and gospel in every pastoral care situation and also to "help all members of his church to discern their own function as ministers of Law and Gospel to one another."¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³Ibid., pp. 5-6.

¹⁵⁴Bernard Lohse, "Die Privatbeichte bei Luther," Kerygma und Dogma 14 (1968):212. "So ist doch von grösserer Bedeutung die theologische Problematik gewesen, die Luther zu diesen Skrupeln veranlasste, so dass man sagen muss dass seine sogenannten Skrupel nicht die Ursache, sondern die Folge seiner zugrundeliegenden theologischen Auffassung von der Beichte und den andern, mit ihr zusammenhängenden Lehrstücken waren. Insbesondere ist hier auf sein Sündenverständnis zu verweisen."

¹⁵⁵Caemmerer, The Pastor at Work, p. 12. Cf. pp. 8-10.

A second reason for the obliteration of fundamental biblical concepts, and closely related to this first one, is a misunderstanding of the function of the means of grace. When the gospel is called "the integrating factor"¹⁵⁶ of the ministry, this is said from a point of view affirming that if the different forms and activities through which the gospel is presented do serve other purposes, "the integrating factor will not be present." The use of the sacraments thus requires, they maintain, an understanding of the psychological processes that condition the person's response to them. Moreover, "the counseling experience, essentially one of confession, can become a sacrament even though it may not be officially and theologically recognized as such,"¹⁵⁷ and so also any human relationship lived within the context of the gospel has a sacramental nature. A corollary of this redefinition is that "the Gospel is communicated in preaching only when the ideas and concepts of the sermon find reality in the experience of both speaker and hearer."¹⁵⁸ They conclude therefore that it is only through the experiences in which both pastor and people are involved in pastoral care that the gospel of redemption becomes real. Although Carrol Wise would maintain he does not minimize the Word of God, he is indeed minimizing the Word of God and the work of the Holy Spirit by insisting that the quality of relationship between pastor and people established in pastoral care and expressed in the sermon or in other pastoral activities will determine their effectiveness or ineffectiveness. This is true for him because he is reacting against a theological interpretation of preaching that

¹⁵⁶Wise, Pastoral Care, p. 71.

¹⁵⁷Ibid., p. 72.

¹⁵⁸Ibid., p. 69.

credits all of its effectiveness to God or to the work of the Holy Spirit as a form of defense and escape from responsibility.

This issue leads also to the third cause of the obliteration of biblical precepts, namely the distorted emphasis on relationships caused by an undue stress on love and sanctification which is detrimental to the primacy of faith and justification. This is evident when the main task of pastoral care is considered to be that of transmitting to the human soul the grace of God, keeping and sustaining it in this state for maturity, but no mention is made of faith and of knowledge of Jesus Christ.¹⁵⁹ It is also distinctly stated in the following definition:

Pastoral care is more a living relationship . . . more a matter of being than of doing. It is manifested in the relationship between pastor and persons . . . of a quality of love which points to and gives a basis in experience for the realization of the love of God.¹⁶⁰

On the basis of the preceding analysis it is possible now to move to an issue closely connected with current terminology in the area of pastoral care, because only now it is possible to understand why the meaning given by Walther to the term "theology" has been almost lost and the terms "pastoral" and "care" have been so misused. It is the misuse of these two last terms that evidences a lack of understanding

¹⁵⁹Willibald Demal, Pastoral Psychology in Practice, trans. Joachim W. Conway (New York, 1955), p. 6; quoted by David Belgum, "The Theology of Pastoral Care," The Lutheran Quarterly 11 (1959):210.

¹⁶⁰Wise, Pastoral Care, p. 8. Cf. pp. 2-3: the author mentions God's reconciliation with men through Christ, but in describing the ministry of reconciliation, because of the emphasis on experiencing it into relationships, he stresses the fundamental goal of reconciliation in pastoral care only in terms of personal, social, ideational, and political reconciliation. The thought is concluded with the statement that the higher gift, which is indispensable in any form of ministry, is the gift of love.

the pivotal Christian doctrines mentioned above as well as of those that will be analyzed in the following sections: the church, the ministry, and the call.

Pastoral Care is an Exclusive Function
of the Office of the Ministry

It is fundamental for a correct understanding and practice of pastoral care to recognize clearly what the church is, particularly the local congregation. According to the biblical framework pastoral care is to be developed within the context of the church's teaching, mission, "structure" and resources. A Christian congregation is the church on earth to whom the Lord Jesus Christ entrusted "the Office of the Keys with all that this office implies . . . the preaching of the Gospel, the administration of the sacraments, the forgiveness and retention of sins"¹⁶¹ (see John 20:21-23; Matt. 18:15-19; 1 Cor. 5:1-5; 2 Cor. 2:5-11). Those who lack a clear understanding of the means of grace and this biblical definition of the church are not able to describe in accordance with the Scriptures the nature, the function or the mission of the Christian congregation.¹⁶² Rather they will present a picture of the Holy Spirit working in and through individuals, without recognizing that the Spirit of God always works through means.

The concept of the "priesthood of all believers," important as it is, has been unfortunately the cause of much confusion, which is plainly evidenced in expressions like "lay pastorate" and "the universal

¹⁶¹Caemmerer, The Pastor at Work, p. 374.

¹⁶²Gibson Winter, "Pastoral Counseling or Pastoral Care," Pastoral Psychology 8 (February 1957):18.

pastorhood of all believers."¹⁶³ This confusion, as will be explained, has to do with the ambiguity with which the term "pastoral" is being used, but it certainly is also the result of a misunderstanding of the biblical notion of "priesthood," especially in relation to the doctrine of the ministry. It is true that "all Christians have a ministry because they are Christians,"¹⁶⁴ sharing in the responsibility for God's "spiritual work." "Pastoral care . . . is a function of the entire congregation."¹⁶⁵ For this reason,

the aim of the church's pastoral care program should be to develop a dynamic climate of mutual loving, enlightened concern, which gradually leavens the whole congregation.¹⁶⁶

The training of laymen "for caring is one of the keys to the revitalizing and growth of a congregation."¹⁶⁷ One has to agree also with those who consistently call attention to a revitalized application of the concept of the "priesthood" to the many ministries of the congregation, because it is indeed to be a ministering body. But it is more than this, it is the "body of Christ." The work must center in Him, His Word and His sacraments. For this reason one must agree that it is deplorable that "the congregation as a local community of faith is the most unused, undeveloped, and unorganized of all the unique resources of the pastoral counselor."¹⁶⁸ One also agrees that it is deplorable because it is the

¹⁶³Hulme, Pastoral Care and Counseling, pp. 156, 160. Hiltner, Pastoral Theology, pp. 25, 37. Cf. Clinebell, Pastoral Care and Counseling, pp. 396, 398.

¹⁶⁴Clinebell, Pastoral Care and Counseling, p. 394.

¹⁶⁵Ibid., p. 395.

¹⁶⁶Ibid.

¹⁶⁷Ibid., p. 396.

¹⁶⁸Hulme, Pastoral Care and Counseling, p. 153 (emphasis added). See also pp. 28-29.

pastor's responsibility to develop the church's ministry to, for, and with the people of God. This is God's own purpose, and will be of great profit for both members and pastor. It is the caring of the congregation for one another and for those outside that gives support for the pastor's ministry of pastoral care so that any action in this area can and must refer always to the "environment" in which it is developed. But, on the other hand, it is a mistake to think of mutual ministry in terms of "lay-pastoral care" as if it were possible for "lay persons [to] become informal pastors."¹⁶⁹ To say that "the principal form of pastoral care of the fellowship is togetherness in Christ,"¹⁷⁰ is to wrap up all of the doctrinaire misconceptions already mentioned and the ambiguity of the term "pastoral" in one single sentence.

"Pastoral" is a word directly connected with the office of the holy ministry and to the divine call to this office. Thus, as laymen do not regularly preach, nor administer the sacraments, nor hear individual confession and pronounce absolution, they also do not accomplish pastoral care which is also related to the public (publice) exercise of the office of the ministry by a person who, through a divine call extended by the congregation, is fully authorized by the congregation itself to carry on this function on its behalf.¹⁷¹

At this point our analysis reaches the very heart of the matter concerning the ambiguous use of the term "pastoral." It is the lack of

¹⁶⁹Clinebell, Pastoral Care and Counseling, p. 396 (emphasis added).

¹⁷⁰Winter, "Pastoral Counseling or Care," p. 18.

¹⁷¹See n. 26 for Luther's commentary on the issue.

understanding of what the ministry really is. More specifically it is the lack of a biblical doctrine of "the call" which results in misconceptions about the office and function of the ministry and consequently a misuse of the term "pastoral." What Scripture says of the ministry and the many biblical terms used to describe it, make it clear that "pastors are organically, as well as structurally, a part of the caring community" of believers.¹⁷² Every Christian, but even more so the pastor, is to think of himself as a servant of people to edify them in the body of Christ. The pastor dare not use his supervisory office to excuse himself from this task. In fact,

he not only is one of the priests but is facilitating the role the others must play; he is the agent through which all build one another up in the faith to be a sweet-smelling sacrifice to God.¹⁷³

Particularly in Ephesians 4:11-16 Paul suggests that pastors are an essential gift of Christ to his church to help God's people carry out the task of fostering in one another the unity of their common life and faith in God through the Holy Spirit. The way the apostle Paul describes the function of the pastor includes what is today encompassed under "pastoral care." As the definition of pastoral care has stated, being a Christian marked by those special characteristics which are common to all other Christians, the pastor at the same time is in "a position singled out from the rest of the congregation, involving special respect . . . a dignity . . . by virtue of his work. . . . he has a special duty toward

¹⁷²Hulme, Pastoral Care and Counseling, p. 29. See also, Caemmerer, The Pastor at Work, pp. 2-7.

¹⁷³Caemmerer, The Pastor at Work, p. 7.

them all."¹⁷⁴ The members of the congregation, by calling a pastor for the public administration of Word and sacraments and as a leader in the mission which the Lord has entrusted to them, do not abdicate their privileges, rights, and powers by virtue of having called the minister. But in calling the pastor they are being faithful to the Lord's commandment; they are following his good and pleasing order in their service to the Lord, and are making the best use of the gifts entrusted to them by the Lord.¹⁷⁵

To summarize the Biblical cues for the meaning of "pastor," we can say: (1) His position is one of importance and esteem in the congregation; (2) His work is to feed Christians with what keeps them in the body of Christ - the Word of God; hence he is a teacher; (3) His work, furthermore, comprises the equipping and guiding of Christians to carry out their ministry toward one another; (4) His guidance is to be exerted not by force but by the terms of the Word which he speaks and by the spiritual life which he fosters.¹⁷⁶

For this reason that view which focuses on pastoral care from a purely "practical" point of view or that stresses the pastor's authority, his being a part of the clergy hierarchy by ordination, training as a specialist, or his competence in relational techniques as the basis of the public ministry represents a poor theology.

Pastoral Care Provides the Theological Setting for Pastoral Counseling

At the beginning of this study it was stated that pastoral care incorporates elements of both care of souls and pastoral theology. The definition of "pastoral" and "care" involve some tension and definite

¹⁷⁴Ibid., pp. 4-5.

¹⁷⁵Fritz, Pastoral Theology, pp. 28-30.

¹⁷⁶Caemmerer, The Pastor at Work, p. 5.

theological presuppositions. William Hulme contends that "the uniqueness of pastoral care and counseling is focused on the meaning of the word pastoral."¹⁷⁷ Koehler provides a six point scale from the broadest to the narrowest sense of this term.

1. It deals with situations involving spiritual values and moral guidance.
2. It refers to the consideration and embodiment of Christian values.
3. It "refers to the process and empathy (and loving concern) involved in forming a caring relationship."
4. It has a restricted sense as limited to the care and counseling performed by recognized spiritual leaders in the service of the church as an arm of the ministry.
5. "Pastoral counseling designates specifically the ordained clergy of a formal religious group."
6. Finally in its strictest sense it designates the care and counseling done by a person involved in the pastorate of people who seek him for counsel because he is their spiritual shepherd.¹⁷⁸

Only the sixth point begins to reflect a biblical understanding of pastoral care.¹⁷⁹ The first five points reflect a clouding of "a

¹⁷⁷Hulme, Pastoral Care and Counseling, p. 13 (emphasis added).

¹⁷⁸Koehler, Counseling and Confession, pp. 14-15.

¹⁷⁹Hiltner, Pastoral Theology, p. 15. A good example is provided here: "From the days of the Reformation the term 'pastoral' has been used . . . as the functional extension of the noun 'pastor.' . . . this would have meant either an imperialism of shepherding over other possible ends or else a loss of the original biblical metaphor of shepherding as the exercise of tender and solicitous care" (emphasis added). Thus, in his understanding, "pastoral" transcends the office of the pastor!

meaningful determination of what constitutes both the public ministry and the effecting of authentic pastoral care."¹⁸⁰ If pastoral care is explained as if "care" expresses concern and as if "pastoral" gives depth and direction to that concern making pastoral care distinctly different from other helping professions,¹⁸¹ the term "pastoral" is being loaded with meanings that are not its own to carry, but still, then, fails to embrace what "pastoral theology" really means. "Pastoral" is to be understood in that

narrow and definite sense which limits "pastoral" to those who are ordained pastors and clergy leaders of the church engaged in public ministry, whose aims include the aims of the church, and who come under the direct auspices of the church.¹⁸²

Pastoral care is an aspect of the pastor's total ministry, specifically including pastoral calls on all the members of the congregation, especially the sick, the shut-in, the dying, the bereaved, and all those in spiritual distress, the delinquent, and the lapsed to help "them [to] apply Law and Gospel to themselves" as well as "to discern their own function as ministers of Law and Gospel to one another."¹⁸³

One is then drawn back to Walther's definition to see that it is "theology" as a habitus that encompasses the content, the practice, the gifts, and charismata for pastoral care. It is on this basis that one has to establish the relationship and distinction between pastoral

¹⁸⁰Koehler, Counseling and Confession, p. 10.

¹⁸¹Wise, Pastoral Care, p. 8.

¹⁸²Koehler, Counseling and Confession, p. 15.

¹⁸³Caemmerer, The Pastor at Work, pp. 9, 12.

care and pastoral counseling and to provide theological direction to the latter.

While one realizes that pastoral care and pastoral counseling are intrinsically connected and interdependent, it is also imperative to acknowledge the distinction between them. The correspondence of their concerns is clearly seen in the fact that pastoral counseling is a specific type of activity and a particular way of application, a dimension and subcategory within the larger area of the ministry of pastoral care. Conversely, pastoral care is the foundation and the nurturing and empowering context of pastoral counseling. In practice one experiences that they overlap each other, requiring that the pastor shifts from one to the other so that it is difficult to separate them.¹⁸⁴

The difference in practice evidences their distinction. Pastoral care "is much less time appointed and much less structured, thus allowing for many options and approaches," including unplanned contacts and telephone conversations to provide rapid solution for a problem. Pastoral counseling on the other hand generally is "a time-limited, frame-of-reference-bound arrangement,"¹⁸⁵ including only situations where there is a mutually agreed to relationship and an established series of meetings is arranged to deal with some specific problem(s). Another significant distinction is that pastoral care, at least by tradition and

¹⁸⁴ Koehler, Counseling and Confession, pp. 15-16; Hulme, Pastoral Care and Counseling, pp. 9-10; Clinebell, Pastoral Care and Counseling, pp. 10, 14, 26.

¹⁸⁵ Koehler, Counseling and Confession, p. 15; Haas, Counseling People in Distress, p. 59.

until recently, is more directive and applies more promptly and immediately biblical resources into the relationship.

The pastor's basic objective and his responsibility do not permit him to renounce completely all rights to express his own ideas about what is best for the person or what God's Word says or what the implications of a person's decision or acts are.¹⁸⁶

Pastoral counseling, on the contrary, as counseling in general, operates on the principle that people have to work out for themselves the solutions to their problems in such a way that not only the distress is removed but also, if possible, the psychological conditions that produced it.

In pastoral counseling, while concern for the person's spiritual welfare is not hidden or relinquished, it is not necessarily drawn immediately into the conversation by the pastor. The person is there to work out his problems. It is hoped, if he is a Christian, that he will make his own applications of God's Word to his situation.¹⁸⁷

Both the correspondence in concern and the differences in practice make it evident that pastoral counseling is "the special case" even within the ministry of pastoral care. Particularly the differences in practice raise the problem that "the atypical case is becoming the norm of the Church's pastoral function," and is gaining primacy in the clergyman's specific role.¹⁸⁸ There seems to exist a pressure to balance the emphasis on impersonal administrative, bureaucratic or "social" activities, with more personal activities dealing with the individual in terms of counseling. This, however, creates time conflicts for the pastor. The abundance of articles and books on the relationship between pastoral

¹⁸⁶ Haas, Counseling People in Distress, p. 64.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 61.

¹⁸⁸ Winter, "Pastoral Counseling or Care," pp. 16, 20.

care and psychotherapy and counseling witness to this dilemma. One result is an overemphasis on pastoral counseling. The causes of this phenomenon are the same outlined above, under the heading "The Developments of the Twentieth Century." Theological liberal movements still prevail emphasizing the development of pastoral care and an openness to the new insights of the behavioral sciences and the innovative techniques of psychotherapy.¹⁸⁹ Within the structures of the church itself and society further causes may be identified: the superficiality of the congregation's fellowship life, the individualistic philosophy of American culture, and the increasing amount of information and training in counseling techniques not balanced by an emphasis on the effective use of the church's unique gifts and resources.¹⁹⁰

The contention of this study is that it is pastoral theology, as it is understood within Lutheran confessional theology, that stands as the foundation and the balance for the sound practice of pastoral care and counseling as they receive discriminatingly the insights, methods, and techniques from psychology and psychotherapy, keeping in mind that which is the ultimate goal of all theology: the correct application of God's Word, as law and gospel, to each individual's life and to God's ultimate purpose, the eternal redemption of sinners.

In the present situation it is regrettable that Koehler's otherwise excellent book may give the impression that the use of individual confession and absolution is best related to pastoral counseling. This

¹⁸⁹Clinebell, Pastoral Care and Counseling, p. 17.

¹⁹⁰Winter, "Pastoral Counseling or Care," p. 21.

makes individual confession and absolution an unusual practice, like counseling itself, in the pastor's ministry.¹⁹¹ But this is not the position of the Lutheran confessions. In the next chapter precisely this issue will be developed as this study deals with theology and practice regarding individual confession and absolution within nineteenth century Lutheranism in America.

¹⁹¹Koehler, Counseling and Confession, p. 76. The author himself regrets that: "The viewpoint which generally prevails in the Lutheran Church is that individual confession and absolution should be only used in exceptional situations. . . . [individual confession and absolution] as a regular practice and continuous resource in congregational life is unheard of in most quarters."

CHAPTER II

THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE OF INDIVIDUAL CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION IN NINETEENTH CENTURY NORTH-AMERICAN LUTHERANISM

An Historical Setting

The theology and practice of confession and absolution in its various historical forms, being mainly related to church discipline and participation in the Lord's Supper, can be traced back to early Christianity. It was in the period which preceded the Reformation that individual confession and absolution became the dominant form, since it was established as canon law as mandatory by the Lateran Council of 1215. This action, besides the many errors in doctrine and practice, mainly the prevailing idea of work righteousness, with which individual confession and absolution was associated, turned it into the source of many abuses. However, for the purpose of this historical survey of the doctrine and practice of individual confession and absolution in the North American Lutheranism in the nineteenth century, attention will be focused on the position it held in Lutheranism since the Reformation and through the following centuries.

From the Reformation to the Nineteenth Century

The very central biblical doctrines of sin and grace, faith and works, justification and forgiveness, office of the keys and means of grace, and church and ministry, as understood in Lutheranism, find

expression through the teaching of confession and absolution. To understand the essence and necessity of confession and absolution one has to understand Christian faith and liberty.¹ This explains why Martin Luther insisted that it should be preserved in spite of all the abuses practiced in individual confession and absolution by the Roman Church and the opposition to its continual practice by other reformers before and during the Reformation. He saw in individual confession and absolution a resource for the preservation of the doctrines of the Christian church and the improvement of pastoral care. For this reason he dedicated much effort, as in the case of the Lord's Supper, to the reformation of its doctrine and practice.

Besides opposing all the erroneous doctrines which are based on the Roman Church's practice of auricular confession, Luther opposed particularly two of its aspects; first, the emphasis given to contrition, confession, and satisfaction and thus to work righteousness, detrimental to absolution, which points to faith and righteousness in Christ through the gospel. This was a denial of the truth of the gospel. The second aspect was its obligatory character, which was a denial of the gospel's Christian liberty. The Reformer was aware of the fact that both the legalistic and coercive use of individual confession and its denial and misuse under the assumption of being either a Romanist error or a right

¹Bernard Lohse, "Die Privatbeichte bei Luther," Kerygma und Dogma 14 (1968):207. "Die Privatbeichte ist ein Kristallisationspunkt für zahlreiche theologische und kirchliche Probleme. . . . Nicht zuletzt ist die Antwort, die man auf die Frage nach dem Wesen und der Notwendigkeit der Beichte gibt, eine Probe auf das Verständnis von christlichen Glauben und von der christlichen Freiheit." See also Knut M. Enger, "Private Confession in American Lutheranism," Th.D. diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1962, p. 74.

of Christian liberty were but denials of the pure and true gospel. Thus he admonished against both attitudes with the same strength.² Very illustrative of his position concerning the use of individual confession and absolution and the value he personally attributed to it are his action and words in returning to Wittenberg from the Wartburg to restore order in the city church, against the "fanatics" (Schwärmer):

This confession is commanded by the pope. It is this urging and forcing which I condemned when I wrote concerning confession, and I refuse to go to confession simply because the pope has commanded it and insists upon it. . . . Nevertheless I will allow no man to take private confession away from me, and I would not give it up for all the treasures in the world, since I know what comfort and strength it has given me. . . .

. . . Therefore . . . I will not let this private confession be taken from me. But I will not have anybody forced to it, but left to each one's free will.³

In this same sermon appears also the basic reason why Luther so strongly recommended individual confession and absolution as a means for

²The Large Catechism, Brief Exhortation to Confession, The Book of Concord, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), pp. 457-61.

³Martin Luther, D. Martin Luthers Werke (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883-), Sermon am Sonntag Reminiscere, 1522 (WA 10 III, 61-62; Eight Sermons at Wittenberg, AE 51, 88-89), hereafter cited as WA. Cf. The Large Catechism, Brief Exhortation to Confession, The Book of Concord, pp. 457-61. "Concerning confession, we have always taught that it should be voluntary and purged of the pope's tyranny. We have been set free from his coercion and from the intolerable burden he imposed upon the Christian church. . . .

. . . Unfortunately, men have learned it only too well . . . and take advantage of their freedom, acting as if they will never need or desire to go to confession anymore. . . .

. . . Further, no one dare oppress you with requirements. Rather, whoever is a Christian, or would like to be one, has here the faithful advice to go and obtain this precious treasure. If you are no Christian . . . we shall leave you to another's power. . . .

. . . But those who ignore it (individual confession and absolution) and do not come of their own accord . . . we do not regard them as Christians."

pastoral care. He saw it as connected directly with the gospel, as God's promise of forgiveness, and thus, to the other means of grace, the preaching of the Word and the sacraments, and also with prayer. Elsewhere he points to it as the clearest way of applying law and gospel to one's life:

For our God . . . has left . . . many absolutions in the gospel. . . . we have this in the gospel (preaching). . . . in the Lord's Prayer. . . . A third is our baptism . . . Then we have private confession, when I . . . receive a sure absolution as if God himself spoke it, so that I may be assured that my sins are forgiven. Finally, I take to myself the blessed sacrament . . . he gives me his body to eat and his blood to drink, so that I shall not and cannot doubt that I have a gracious God.⁴

⁴Ibid. (WA 10 III, 63, 5-64, 7; AE 51, 99). See The Large Catechism, The Creed, 54, The Book of Concord, p. 417. "Further we believe that in this Christian church we have the forgiveness of sins, which is granted through the holy sacraments and absolution as well as through all the comforting words of the entire Gospel." Sendschreiben an die zu Frankfurt am Main, 1533 (WA 30 III, 569, 11-570, 18; SL 17, 2021-22). "Christians must hold to confession (individual confession and absolution), because it is the most necessary and profitable learning whereby they learn how they should understand and practice God's Word and their faith in such a powerful way as does not happen in public teaching and preaching.

The second part of confession is the absolution, which the priest speaks . . . it is nothing but God's Word whereby he comforts and strengthens our heart against a bad conscience, and we are to believe and rely on it as in God himself. . . .

This part, then, is not for the young or simple people only, but necessary and profitable for everyone. It should be despised by no one no matter how wise and holy he may be. . . .

Thus, we need confession as a Christian exercise. In the first part we practice the law, in the second the gospel. Because in the first part we learn how to use the law correctly . . . to acknowledge and detest our sins. In the second part we exercise ourselves in the gospel, we learn not only to get hold of God's promises and consolation, but also to put to work what is preached from the pulpit. . . . And even when the hearer hears all of both parts in the sermon, he will grasp it much more firmly and with more certainty when it is said to him particularly as one person alone." (Die Beicht sollt von den Christen genommen werden. Denn sie ist der Christen erste nöthigste und nützlichste Schule darin sie lernen Gottes Wort und ihren Glauben verstehen und üben welches sie nicht so gewaltig thun in öffentlichen Lectionen und Predigten.

Das andere Stück in der Beicht ist die Absolution die der Priester

An examination of the Lutheran confessions will not only make evident that none of these documents omits the issue of individual confession and absolution but also will prove clearly that in the Reformation's very beginning the Lutherans steadfastly advocated its continual use. Following Luther's directives, at the same time they opposed Roman Catholic teaching, they emphasized the importance of individual confession and absolution. By adopting the two catechisms of Luther they made a point that pastors and lay people should be taught about the value of individual confession and absolution and urged to use it. That this is the case

we are forced to conclude. . . . Teaching and practice of Private Confession have a strong confessional basis in Lutheranism and in so far as the confessional writings are significant in Lutheran teaching, it seems evident that the practice has to be taken seriously.⁵

The general acceptance of the Book of Concord laid the foundations for the following period of Orthodoxy. According to Luther's and the confessions' advice the Lutherans followed the practice of the

spricht . . . ist sie nichts anders denn Gottes Wort, damit er unser Herz tröstet und stärket wider das böse Gewissen, und wir sollen ihr glauben und trauen, als Gott selber. . . .

Und dies Stück ist nicht allein der Jugend und dem Pöbel, sondern jedermann nütz und noth, und soll's keiner verachten, er sei wie gelehrt und heilig er wolle. . . .

So brauchen wir nun der Beicht als einer christlichen Übung. Im ersten Stücke üben wir uns am Gesetz, im andern am Evangelio. Denn im ersten Stück lernen wir das Gesetz recht brauchen . . . die Sünde erkennen und hassen. Im andern Stück üben wir uns am Evangelio, lernen Gottes Verheissen und Trost recht fassen und bringen also ins Werk, was man auf der Kanzel predigt. . . . Und obwohl der Zuhörer auch alles beides in der Predigt höret, noch fasset er's viel stärker und gewisser wenn's ihm insonderheit, als einer einzelnen Person, gesagt wird.)

⁵Enger, "Private Confession," p. 57. See Augsburg Confession, Art. XI, XXV; Apology, Art. XII; Smalcald Articles III, Art. III; Formula of Concord, Art. XII.

combined use of individual confession and absolution with the examination (exploratio) in the Christian faith before participation in Holy Communion three or four times in a year, which had become a custom by the time.⁶ On the same basis and in the same way the "communion of the sick" was largely practiced. Individual confession and absolution was recommended in preaching as a primary means for pastoral care.

Unfortunately, however, it seems that in this period the practice was increasingly used in a legalistic way, and thus what was a use out of pastoral concern became more a pedagogical function and a way of church discipline. Besides this fact there was also the perfunctory practice of individual confession and absolution in the large parishes and the increasing use of public confession (more related to the Reformed usage) in a preparatory service for Holy Communion which caused the decrease in the use of individual confession in the following century.

The great opposition to its use came with Pietism and Rationalism on the basis of the argument that if one is repentant he has been already forgiven by God, and if he did not repent, the declared absolution would not help him at all, but only would confirm him in his error. There was also a widespread opposition to any compulsory use of individual confession and absolution. Philip J. Spener criticized it from the point of view of his emphasis on the priesthood of all believers and on the brotherly instruction, edification, care and discipline, as well as on the Christian daily living. Instead of individual confession and

⁶Theodore Tappert, "Orthodoxism, Pietism, and Rationalism," in Christian Social Responsibility, ed. Harold C. Letts, vol. 2: The Lutheran Heritage (Philadelphia: Muehlenberg Press, 1957), quoted in Enger, "Private Confession," p. 133.

absolution he recommended the announcement of the intention to participate in the Lord's Supper.⁷ The absolution was conditioned on one's true repentance. Also the practice of a confessional sermon was introduced. Thus, as strange as it may seem, opposition to individual confession and absolution in Pietism came from a deep concern for a widening of pastoral care. In Rationalism (Enlightenment), on the contrary, opposition came out of humanistic views and the stress on the individual's freedom in ethical decisions. Pastoral care was here seen as an ethical function.

Walter Koehler presents seven main factors for the decline of individual confession and absolution, almost to the point of extinction. (1) Its doctrine and practice was not clearly delineated, and it was not established as an independent office. (2) It was directly connected with the exploratio (Pflichtbeichtverhör) and was considered a preparation for the Lord's Supper. (3) The Thirty Years War (1619-48) caused long vacancies in churches, disrupted Christian education, destroyed Christian worship and teaching materials. (4) Confession was enforced legalistically and for the purpose of punitive church discipline which stigmatized the confessant and thus drove people away from it. (5) The theological debates that surround the absolution formula and the collection of alms (Beichtpfennig, confessional money) caused offense to many people. (6) Individual confession and absolution was gradually replaced by public or general confession. (7) "Pietism and Rationalism dealt the heaviest blow to the practice of individual confession and

⁷Enger, "Private Confession," p. 140. See also New Schaff-Herzog, IX, 56.

absolution and brought it to the lowest point in its history."⁸ But even during this period individual confession and absolution was never entirely discarded and was especially maintained in connection with the "communion of the sick," the special rite for the pastoral act of bringing the Lord's Supper to sick parishioners.

In the nineteenth century, when individual confession and absolution experienced a revival, it was no longer a compulsory act. This attempt and others later on unfortunately were short-lived; they brought, however, a renewal in the church. A man who played an important role in this revival and who is especially notable for his influence on North American Lutheranism is William Loehe. He introduced individual confession and absolution in preparation for the Lord's Supper, made reference to it in his sermons and wrote both devotional books for this purpose and doctrinal ones on its meaning and value. He also recommended individual confession and absolution independently of Holy Communion and extolled its benefits.⁹

⁸Walter Koehler, Counseling and Confession (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982), pp. 51, 86-87.

⁹J. L. T. McNeill, A History of the Cure of Souls (New York: Harper & Bros., 1951), p. 187; Enger, "Private Confession," pp. 146-48; 208-209. See Wilhelm Loehe, "Simple Instruction in Confession for Christians of the Evangelical Lutheran Communion," trans. Delvin E. Ressel, Una Sancta 10 (No. 2, 1951):1-9; (No. 3, 1951):10-23. Wilhelm Loehe, Einfältiger Beichtunterricht für Christen evangelisch-lutherische Bekenntnisses (Kropp, Schleswig: Buchhandlung des Kropper Kirchlicher Anzeiger, 1881); idem, Beicht-und Kommunion-Buch für evangelische Christen (Nürnberg: Gottfr. Loehe, 1871); idem, Drei Bücher von der Kirche (Gütersloh: Druck und Verlag von C. Bertelsmann, 1904), pp. 121-23; idem, Agende für christliche Gemeinden des lutherischen Bekenntnisses (Nördlingen: C. H. Beck, 1884), p. 15; (2nd part) pp. 51-56.

From Early North American Lutheranism to the
Nineteenth Century

As an overall statement on the doctrine and practice of individual confession and absolution in North American Lutheranism until the nineteenth century it can be said that it followed rather closely the prevailing European patterns. Three important leaders gave it support: Henry Melchior Muehlenberg, Wilhelm Loehe, and Carl F. W. Walther, but others had little or no concern at all for it, and there were even those who openly opposed it. The very early history of North American Lutheranism presents some evidence of a more frequent teaching and practice, but it is recognized that individual confession and absolution generally occupied a weak position among these churches. In spite of the strong witness given to it in the Lutheran confessions, and the fact that it appears in some of the catechisms used for instruction as well as in agendas, handbooks, and other worship and devotional material which indicate that it was widely known, there is no evidence that it was much practiced in the congregational life. In some forms, what was retained was only a semblance of individual confession and absolution, which for all practical purposes was replaced by other forms of pastoral care (announcement for Holy Communion, visitation, counseling), by other liturgical forms (confessional services, public confession), and specifically the Lord's Supper was regarded as rendering absolution redundant. However, what evidence there is of any increase or stronger position in its teaching and practice in a certain period or among some churches can be related to both confessional faithfulness and the use of teaching and worshiping material that emphasized individual confession and absolution. It must be acknowledged that to present an accurate

"history of Private Confession in American Lutheranism is an extremely complicated, if not an impossible endeavor,"¹⁰ which would require the study of a large amount of documents. Our purpose here, however, is to provide a background for the better understanding of three theologians who are the subject of this study: Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther, Samuel Simon Schmucker, and George Henry Gerberding.

Since in the seventeenth century there was a strong confessional character to the national churches of the first Lutheran groups (Dutch, Swedes, and Germans) who immigrated in that century to the United States, they would have brought that character with them. The Lutheran confessions are acknowledged in the doctrinal basis of the churches they established. One may therefore suppose that there was a regular practice of individual confession and absolution among them even more so because with few exceptions their catechisms and worship material make provision for it. In the first half of the next century a large number of Germans immigrated to the East Coast, giving occasion to the first efforts toward the organization of a synod. The presence of Zinzendorf with his pietistic profanities among them in 1741, brought some confusion because of his relationship with the Reformed and the Enthusiasts. The next year he was replaced by H. M. Muehlenberg, who played a decisive role in the organization of the Evangelical Lutheran Ministerium of North America (The Pennsylvania Ministerium), which had the Book of Concord in its confessional doctrinal basis and which required from pastors and candidates the pledge to this confession.

¹⁰Enger, "Private Confession," p. 128.

How strict was this adherence is another question. The facts are that after Muehlenberg's death (1784), the three factors that since the middle of the century had caused the deterioration of the confessional basis, namely, Pietism, Rationalism, and the tendency towards unionism (close and unrestricted cooperation with Reformed churches and other denominations) became fully evident.¹¹ When the Ministerium was reorganized in 1792, the Augsburg Confession and other confessional documents were omitted in the doctrinal basis and the pastors were no longer expected to pledge their fidelity to them. Especially because of Rationalism there was in the following decades an open disregard for the Lutheran doctrines in the New York Ministerium. Worship material was characterized by a "complete falling away not only from the historical, conservative order of service, but also from positive Lutheran doctrine, in the orders for baptism, communion and ordination;" and the absolution was followed by this admonition: "If we are impenitent . . . all our confessions and promises will be unavailing."¹² However, people were still asked to announce their intention of participating in the Lord's Supper and public confession was maintained as the only form of preparation for it. All of these developments may have been a reflection of

¹¹Ibid., p. 171. Enger indicates as sources, Abdel Ross Wentz, The Lutheran Church in American History (Philadelphia: United Lutheran Publication House, 1923), pp. 83-97; Henry E. Jacobs, A History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States (New York: Christian Literature Co., 1893), p. 310; F. Bente, American Lutheranism, I (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1919), pp. 13-16; Paul W. Spaude, The Lutheran Church Under American Influence (Burlington, IA: Lutheran Literary Board, 1943), p. 307.

¹²New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia, vol. 7, p. 86; A Collection of Hymns and a Liturgy for the Use in Evangelical Lutheran Churches (Philadelphia, 1814), pp. 54ff., quoted in Enger, "Private Confession," pp. 202, 201.

the enforced "union" of Lutherans and Reformed in Germany, and they affected all the Lutheran churches in the Eastern United States. The "internal discord" which characterized the history of the General Synod established in 1820, is evidence of the tension between the traditional confessional position and the liberal one that regarded conservatism as a danger, and the doctrinal differences between Lutheran and Reformed as not divisive.¹³

The role played by Samuel S. Schmucker at that time has already been explained.¹⁴ His proposals were opposed by the majority of the synods and theologians, but the General Synod's intrinsic disregard for the confessions caused its continual splitting until 1867. It was only at the end of the century that the General Synod presented a movement toward a confessional stand, basically the adoption of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. Meanwhile the two other bodies that resulted from the split, namely the General Synod of the South and the General Council, had respectively moved from an open endorsement of the Augsburg Confession in the case of the first, and a strict one, in the case of the second, toward the acknowledgment of all the Lutheran confessions by the same time. They finally merged again in 1918. The apparent causes for this return to the Lutheran confessions are the widespread movement of Revivalism, a renewed interest in history and doctrine, and the arrival

¹³Abdel Ross Wentz, Basic History of Lutheranism in America (Philadelphia: Muehlenberg Press, 1955), p. 99; Spaude, The Lutheran Church Under American Influence, pp. 274-88, quoted in Enger, "Private Confession," p. 174.

¹⁴See Chapter I, p. 22.

in the United States of Lutheran groups of immigrants from Germany and Scandinavia who strongly subscribed to the confessions.¹⁵

By the time of their merger these synods published an agenda which showed a deep concern for Lutheran doctrine and for the value of confession and absolution, asking those in charge in the church to carefully examine those who intended to go to Holy Communion. Individual confession and absolution was recommended as a means for deepening the acquaintance of pastor and members, for instruction and encouragement, and for people's growth in knowledge and grace. But their catechism did not contain either the section on the office of the keys or Luther's liturgical instruction on confession. However, it is clear that their confessional position was not or did not continue as a strict one because even nowadays an unreserved subscription of the confessions is considered a "super confessional ground."¹⁶

Among the Lutherans that came in the nineteenth century from Germany and settled in the Midwest, Carl F. W. Walther exercised notable

¹⁵Spaude, The Lutheran Church Under American Influence, pp. 378-95; Wentz, A Basic History of Lutheranism in America, p. 106; Jacobs, A History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States, pp. 354ff., quoted in Enger, "Private Confession," p. 184.

¹⁶Wentz, The Lutheran Church in American History, p. 290, quoted in Enger, "Private Confession," p. 184. One has to call attention to the fact that Enger (p. 193) in distinguishing between a confessionalism that emphasizes fidelity to the Lutheran Confessions historically understood and one that uses the confessions legalistically, seems to advocate the first one as a true confessional position. However, Francis Pieper in his Christian Dogmatics, 4 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 1:354-56, makes clear that a subscription "in so far as" (quatenus) expressed in the formula "historically understood," in fact "annus the Symbols as a Confession of faith." The true confessionalism implies an acceptance without qualifications (unrestricted) of the doctrines of the confessions "because [quia] it is the doctrine of Scripture."

leadership as the Missouri Synod was organized. Besides being the first president and occupying the post again later for many years, he was a leading professor of the theological seminary in St. Louis and the editor of the synod's two periodicals, Der Lutheraner (the Lutheran) and Lehre und Wehre (Doctrine and Defence). As a faithful confessional church body the Missouri Synod became the largest and most influential of those gathered in the Synodical Conference. Like the other synods in the Midwest, the Joint Synod of Ohio, the Iowa Synod, the Norwegians, and the Buffalo Synod, the Missouri Synod had a strict confessional stand. The catechisms used among them generally contained the parts on the office of the keys and confession and absolution. However, their liturgical material varies more, and many did not have a special order of service for individual confession and absolution except for that of the "communion of the sick." The Ohio and the Iowa Synods used the special order for preparation for Holy Communion; the Buffalo Synod used penance for church discipline only. It can be deduced from observations done at the end of the past century and the beginning of this one that even in the most orthodox and conservative Lutheran synods individual confession had experienced decline, but there was a conscious effort, on the basis of the Lutheran confessions, to recover its profitable practice.¹⁷

¹⁷Friedrich Lochner, Liturgische Formulare (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1895), p. 138, quoted in Enger, "Private Confession," p. 157. "In our time the practice of Private Confession has become a rare occurrence." Memoirs of the Lutheran Liturgical Association vols. 1-4 (Pittsburgh, PA: Published by the Association, 1906), vol. 4, p. 65, quoted in Enger, "Private Confession," p. 155. "In modern times it [confession and absolution] has degenerated to a simple service preparatory to the Lord's Supper and nothing more. This undervaluing of so important a service is a direct undervaluation of our Lutheran Reformation."

From the study of the history of individual confession and absolution in North American Lutheranism one comes to the following conclusions: (1) It was never very frequently practiced, since American Lutheranism followed the patterns of the European churches until the last century. (2) It found supporters and proponents in Muehlenberg, Loehe, Walther and some other theologians, and especially in the Midwest synods influenced by the confessional revival. (3) It was openly rejected by some theologians in the Eastern Lutheran churches due to the influence of Pietism, Rationalism, and Reformed churches. (4) It was a major controversial issue only among the Norwegians, but a matter of constant concern and discussion in the past century in the publications of the Missouri Synod. (6) It was preserved at least partially in almost all of the catechisms used for instruction and thus was never completely neglected or ignored. It was also connected with the "communion of the sick" in liturgical material, but seldom used as a special order of service. Only in the Lutheran churches in the East did it become established in the beginning of this century as a widely known special order of service.

Knut M. Enger came to the conclusion that the more decisive factors for the preservation or increasing in the use of individual confession and absolution in North American Lutheranism during the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries were: (1) A strict confessional position that regards the confessional books normative for the church's teaching and practice and that requires that pastors and congregational members of the church body make a pledge of faithfulness to the confessions; (2) The degree of instruction and acquaintance the members have with

individual confession and absolution through educational (especially the catechism) and worship material (agendas, hymnbooks) as the pastor uses them, as well as his references to it in sermons and other forms of teaching.¹⁸ He conducted a survey of the 1960's which confirmed these conclusions. Individual confession and absolution is practiced more by conservative Lutherans, in congregations where there is clear instruction on the office of the keys and outstanding frequency of Holy Communion. The frequency of the use of individual confession and absolution depends primarily on the pastor's understanding of its value for himself and his ministry, on the guidance he received on this practice, and on the method that he applies in the practice of individual confession. At the congregational level the more effective tools for introducing and increasing the practice of individual confession and absolution along with preaching on the topic proved to be instruction and education on the basis of the catechism (with the section on the office of the keys) in confirmation classes, adult groups, and lay members that conduct Sunday School, Bible classes, and group meetings. Also, as mentioned above, the more frequent celebration and participation in the Lord's Supper influences the practice of individual confession and absolution; tradition in a congregation seems to be more a hindrance than a help for its practice. Essential for improving the practice of individual confession and absolution is the pastor's attitude toward it. The fundamental factors for developing a positive attitude are: (1) His confessional theological position, largely influenced by his education at the

¹⁸Enger, "Private Confession," pp. 166-67; 194-95; 249-53; 359-62.

seminary and by the extent to which the confessions are regarded as normative by the institution and its synod; (2) Related to the first factor is the teaching on confession and absolution and the training for its application in pastoral care; (3) A third factor is the pastor's understanding and appreciation for individual confession and absolution, particularly his personal use of it. Here a very significant figure of ninety percent of the pastors indicated that they would like to have individual confession and absolution practiced more than it is presently. Compared to other forms of confession it was rated fourth, following confession to God, public confession and absolution and confession to the offended brother, but preceding confession in counseling and individual public confession. Finally, it was not possible to identify any significant relationship between the practice of individual confession and absolution and the influence of psychology and clinical training on the pastor's education. It seems to be an indication that the practice is primarily a matter of pastoral concern. However, the fact that the methods commonly used tended to be either a biblical directive or a "client-centered" one seems to reflect the two theological tendencies identified in the first chapter, the conservative and the liberal one.

Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther

Carl F. W. Walther played a key role by leading the German settlers in Missouri in the organization of their church body and in guiding the Missouri Synod through its first and stormy years. For them the understanding of the doctrine of the church was more than merely a theological concern; it was what any fundamental doctrine must be, scripturally foundational. Along with this issue other fundamental doctrines

were deeply studied and explained, including that of confession and absolution. Walther's position, officially endorsed by the synod, was that in Christ's church all authority lodges in the hearts of His believers and is exercised by them, jointly and separately, whether they be clergymen or laymen.¹⁹ This ideal of a church in which the humblest believer has a personal right of decision and exercise of it under Christ's supreme authority through His Word, and in which both ministers and laymen regard each other's rights, freedom, and responsibility as God-given ones, was that envisioned in the Reformation era. However, for churches hierarchically oriented, where the laymen's right of decision was arrogantly and wickedly denied, and living under the sovereign control of kings and princes in Europe, this ideal seemed a deviation. It was charged with being a tendency toward the popular idea of democracy fostering a dangerous independent spirit among church people, with being unscriptural and unlutheran, and, finally, with being a way for proselytism. Nevertheless Walther, through his works and articles published in the synodical magazines (Der Lutheraner and Lehre und Wehre), brought understanding, encouragement, and certainty to Missouri Synod members and many other people. Walther's teaching is mainly explained in three important books: The Voice of Our Church on the Question of Church and Ministry (1852), The Form of a Christian Congregation (1863), and The True Visible Church (1866).²⁰

¹⁹Wm. Dallman, and W. H. T. Dau, translators and contributors, and Th. Engelder, translator, contributor, editor, Walther and the Church (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1938), p. 49.

²⁰Carl F. W. Walther, Die Stimme unserer Kirche in der Frage von Kirche und Amt (Erlangen: Verlag von Andreas Deichert, 1852); Die rechte Gestalt einer vom Staate unabhängigen Evangelisch Lutherischen

They contained the doctrinal principles which are basic for establishing in proper form a local church independent of the State . . . and . . . to set forth the practical application of these doctrines and to show that they do not lead to conditions of anarchy, mob-rule, Anabaptistic independence, and disorder . . . but rather form the firm foundation upon which a local church may build itself in proper form.²¹

It certainly was God's gracious guidance through those difficult days that brought about this clear vision of the scriptural principles by which it was possible to establish an evangelical relationship between pastors and congregations. Without this vision and respective relationship the question on confession and absolution, particularly individual confession and absolution, would stand in real danger of being continually misunderstood as an attempt of the clergy to abuse the gospel and to rule over lay people in the church.

The Relationship between Absolution and The Fundamental Christian Doctrines

The statement that Walther's theology is biblical and confessionally Lutheran is no more than an obvious conclusion of even the most superficial reading of his books and articles. They are filled with biblical passages: references, texts, and interpretations, with pertinent quotations from the Lutheran confessions and from many theologians. Particularly it is Walther's theological method that reveals the biblical and confessional character of his theology. There is a twofold process of centripetal and centrifugal argumentation: to the Bible, and from it to the Lutheran confessions and outstanding theologians; to the doctrine

Ortsgemeinde (St. Louis: August Wiebusch & Sohn, 1863); Die Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche die wahre sichtbare Kirche Gottes auf Erden (St. Louis: August Wiebusch & Sohn, 1867).

²¹Dallmann, Walther and the Church, p. viii.

of soteriology, and from it to comparison with the main doctrines of the Christian faith.

According to Walther there is scarcely to be found in his time of incredulity and enthusiasm another doctrine that has been so generally misunderstood and contradicted as the doctrine of absolution. He doubts that those who reject this doctrine could still believe in the Bible and trust it as God's Word. On the other hand, for one who is convinced of being spoken to by God in the Holy Scriptures, any doubts that God is speaking in a humanly spoken absolution will fall by themselves.²² In his argumentation what is foremost is the correct interpretation of the sedes doctrinae that deal with the doctrine of absolution without twisting the words of Christ and subverting the truth and assurance contained therein.

The second step is to elucidate the objections through a study which takes as a rule the analogy of faith (Rom. 12:6, 7). In this regard Walther stated that one reason why he was engaged in the discussion of the issue was that even among Lutherans in his day (and surely in our's also) the doctrine of holy absolution was neither known in its incalculable importance nor in its "inseparable connection with the entire teaching of God's counsel for our salvation."²³

When the central article of justification is denied or vitiated, all articles must be given an unscriptural meaning. Where it is honestly

²²Walther, "Die heilige Absolution," Der Lutheraner (4 April 1846):62.1, 2.

²³Ibid., (21 March 1846):59.1: ". . . in ihrem unzertrennlichen Zusammenhange mit der Gesamtlehre von dem Rathe Gottes zu unserer Seligkeit erkannt wird."

maintained its clarity, ultimately will rectify the error that has crept in elsewhere. Walther says:

Every heresy that has sprung up was caused by the heretic's inability to believe that man becomes righteous in the sight of God, and is saved by grace alone.²⁴

One may say that Christ is the only and total Savior, but he denies this truth in his teaching and practice when he asserts that absolution is only the

authority to preach the conditions of the reconciliation and of the forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus . . . and . . . the power of the keys is nothing else than the explanation of the conditions under which God saves or condemns men.²⁵

With such an understanding one cannot truly believe that Christ has freely redeemed all mankind. Consistency in this position requires one to understand that Christ did not redeem men because all that He has really done was to point men to the conditions they must fulfill to be saved. This is to deny complete salvation, God's free grace and unconditional forgiveness in Christ. This is to put man's salvation into his own hands and effort.

To say that Christ has redeemed us completely means that He worked out and suffered what man would have to suffer and that He was in all aspects our substitute and there is nothing that was left undone for our salvation (2 Cor. 5:21, 14; Rom. 5:18).²⁶ By Christ's resurrection

²⁴Idem, The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel, trans. W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1929), p. 163.

²⁵Idem, "Die heilige Absolution," p. 62, 2: "Autorität, die Bedingungen der Veröhnung und der Vergebung der Sünden durch den Glauben an Jesum zu predigen. . . . Die Schlüsselgewalt sei nichts anders als die Darlegung der Bedingungen, unter welchem Gott die Menschen selig macht oder verdammt."

²⁶Idem, "Wie gross und verderblich der Irrtum derjenigen sei,

all men really are publicly declared free of any guilt, absolved, justified, and reconciled with God (Rom. 4:25). This treasure of God's grace, already obtained for all, is "embodied" in the Word and in the sacraments, amidst the church, to be shared through these means. Nothing in man explains his salvation, not even the faith foreseen by God, because conversion is altogether and in every respect God's work in us. Faith alone justifies because it is based on "grace alone" and is the receiving of Christ's gracious offering of the free gift of the payment of our debt. It is not faith by itself, but faith in Christ, in the redemptive act of Christ by which God has shown His love, in the promise that all Christ's merits are already given and bestowed on us. This is important because as long as one believes that he has been redeemed by Christ, justified before God, and saved only by grace through faith, the comfort of the holy absolution will be available to him. It will not sound strange to him that a person can, in God's name, really grant and assure forgiveness of his sins. He will desire the absolution and take it by faith as God Himself speaking to him. Then empty talk or vain thoughts against the power of absolution will not move him.

Walther also recognizes the integration of the doctrine of absolution with that of the gospel. In his Synodical Address of 1848²⁷ Walther affirmed that his confidence was always in God's action through His Word. He opposed the attempt of displacing the gospel by placing the

welche den Predigern des Evangeliums die Macht absprechen, auf Erden Sünde zu vergeben," Der Lutheraner (19 March 1850):115.1. (Hereafter quoted: "Die Macht Sünde zu vergeben.")

²⁷ Idem, "Synodical Address - 1848," Concordia Theological Monthly (July-August 1972):430-37.

strength of the church in the heirarchical order. He also warned against every movement or tendency to supplant the preaching of the gospel with something one could imagine as more powerful or effective, for instance, church activities. He confessed with other pastors in the Missouri Synod:

If His Spirit and power were not with the Word, we ourselves could not accomplish anything, not even with our preaching of the pure Word, much less through the weight of our office or the scaffolding of order and ordinances.²⁸

Therefore for him the preaching of the gospel is not an empty shell and a powerless word. It is not a void communication apart from which the Holy Spirit works and brings forgiveness, but the preached Word is lively and powerful in imparting God's forgiveness. It does not matter if it is spoken to many or to each one individually.²⁹ The gospel can be summarized as

. . . a general absolution brought from heaven to all the world through men, sealed by Christ's blood and death, and gloriously and solemnly ratified by God Himself through Christ's resurrection and thus really fulfilled. . . . It is a preaching of forgiveness of sins to which God says yes and amen.³⁰

Elsewhere Walther says: "When absolution is pronounced to a person, the gospel is brought to that individual; for the gospel is nothing else

²⁸ Dallman, Walther and the Church, p. 35.

²⁹C. F. W. Walther, "Ist ein wesentlicher Unterschied zwischen der Predigt des Evangeliums und einer Privat-Absolution?" Der Lutheraner (4 April 1848):125. ". . . das gepredigte Wort lebendig und kräftig sei und eine die Vergebung mittheilende Kraft habe, es möge dasselbe nun zu vielen oder zu einem einzelnen Menschen (privatim) geredet werden." (Hereafter quoted "Evangelium und Privat-absolution").

³⁰Idem, "Die Macht Sünden zu vergeben," p. 115. ". . . eine der ganzen Welt durch Menschen vom Himmel gebrachte, mit Christi Blut das herrlichste und feierlichste nicht nur bestätigte sondern schon einmal wirklich vollzogene allgemeine Absolution."

than absolution."³¹ His conclusion from the Scriptures' clear testimony is that the office of forgiving and retaining sins is the same office of preaching the gospel which indeed belongs to the whole church and was given for the purpose of edification of the church.³²

At this point the argumentation reaches the focus of the debate, namely, the doctrine of the church, and the office and function of the ministry. The main emphasis in the biblical passages (sedes doctrinae) on absolution (Matt. 16:16-19; 18:1-20; John 20:21-23) and some related to it (Luke 10:13-16; Matt. 10:40, 41; 9:8; John 17:20) is that the authority to proclaim forgiveness entrusted to the church comes from God, through Christ Himself. Christ says that the Father sent Him and He was sending the disciples. Whoever hears and receives them is hearing and receiving Christ. Christ has made known the gospel of God, now anyone who hears and believes on it, believes in God the Father and on Him. The power to forgive sins really is only from God, but God, through Christ, has established an office for the administration of this power. This office was entrusted to the apostles and to all in Christ's church who, after them, clearly and purely proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. This office is not bound to the persons of the disciples, but goes on to the whole church.

A word of clarification is necessary here. Church is the fellowship of all believers, the universal (catholic) church, the "communion of saints." Church is also a local congregation, a group of true believers gathered in a certain place where, however, also hypocrites are

³¹Idemn, Law and Gospel, p. 174.

³²Idem, "Evangelium und Privat-absolution," p. 126.

mingled. To underscore his position, Walther quotes Martin Chemnitz:

. . . so that the highest power of the Word and the sacraments stands with God; then the office stands with the church through which God mediately calls, elects, and sends the ministers. Thirdly and finally it stands with those who are regularly elected and called through the church as are the servants, to whom is commended the use and administration of the office of the Word and of the sacraments.³³

He also quotes Luther to make evident that the distinction between the right and power of the keys, and the use of the same, is nothing but "an unscrupulous and blasphemous talk that falls down by itself."³⁴ In the words referring to the keys (sedes doctrinae) Christ is addressing each and every Christian, not only giving the power and the use of the keys, but also ordaining and commanding their performance. The words "to you" (ὁ ὡς σοι), "as you" (λέγω ὑμῖν) and "I tell you" (λέγει ἄπο τῶν) show that the keys belong to the whole congregation and to each one who is a member of a Christian congregation. They possess the power as well as its use in every way that this is possible. Therefore, this power is effective for private brotherly reconciliation between Christians, and in brotherly admonition and consolation.³⁵ When a Christian person announces the gospel and exhorts his brother to put his

³³Idem, Kirche und Amt, p. 91: ". . . so dass die höchste Gewalt des Wortes und der Sacramente bei Gott stehe; sodann das Amt bei der Kirche, als durch welche Gott mittelbar die Kirchendiener beruft, erwählt und sendet; drittens endlich bei denen, welche von Gott durch die Kirche rechtmässig erwählt und berufen sind, als bei den Dienern, welchen der Gebrauch und die Verwaltung des Amtes des Wortes und der Sacramente befohlen ist." (Examen conc. Trid. p. 222b-223a).

³⁴Ibid., pp. 38, 39. ". . . leichtfertiglich geredt."

³⁵Idem, "Evangelium und Privat-absolution," p. 126: ". . . ein jeder frommer Christ dem andern privatim und insonderheit seine Sünde vergibt."

confidence only in Jesus Christ he is using the office of the keys. The person who receives this message of the gospel by faith is receiving and grasping also the forgiveness of sin. Finally, this right and duty is exercised through the minister they have called, according to Christ's order and under the Holy Spirit's direction. Also for the sake of order and decency, in the public worship of the congregation (Öffentliche Gottesdienst der Gemeinde), or in any act in which the church is publicly and officially exercising this office of the gospel (Öffentliche Dienst am Evangelium), its servants are entrusted and are responsible for the administration of the power of forgiving and retaining sins. The ministers are absolving in the name and on behalf of the congregation, "by the authority of peasants and tradespeople" because "there are no people on earth more distinguished than the Christians."³⁶

Another word of clarification must be said at this point. One dare not set the ministry above the lay Christians, nor to restrict forgiveness and salvation to the fellowship of one specific visible church, nor make the validity of absolution dependent on the right ordination of the ministrant, because by these statements the dignity which justifying grace confers to the lay people is despised. These statements clearly contradict the article of the justification of the sinner by faith alone.³⁷

A very helpful and concise review of the doctrinal bases for the practice of absolution is given by Walther: 1. Jesus Christ, the Son of God and very man, took upon Himself by imputation all sinners' sins;

³⁶Dallman, Walther and the Church, p. 35.

³⁷Walther, Kirche und Amt, p. 161.

2. Through His humiliation, suffering, and death on the cross He achieved a complete redemption, so that no man is excepted from this salvation; 3. By the resurrection of His Son Jesus Christ from the dead, God the Father put the stamp of approval on the work of reconciliation which Christ accomplished on the cross; 4. As Christ commanded His disciples to preach the gospel to every creature He was entrusting to them a message of forgiveness for all men; 5. The apostles, as servants of the gospel, received a special commission (right and duty) to minister God's comfort to each individual who repentantly asks for it; 6. This same commission is entrusted to every Christian no matter who he is, because it is Christ's work and power that is effective in this absolution.³⁸

Finally it is necessary to look at the relationship of the means of grace as they are covered by the broader sense of the use of the office of the keys. One cannot fail to see how those who abuse and misuse the sacraments are the same who also abuse confession and absolution, and that those who despise and invalidate the sacraments as means of grace are the same that deny this power to absolve. This simple assertion is evidence of the relationship between the preaching of the word, the sacraments and absolution. But what proves their real connection and importance is their mutual relation to the article of saving grace. They are the means which bring to us the grace achieved by Christ, who confers the forgiveness of sin upon us through them. Therefore in the rejection or acknowledgement of the power of absolution much is at stake. One's position at this point determines if God's Word is simply

³⁸Idem, Law and Gospel, pp. 169-170.

application of true Christianity and the holy sacraments are simple, powerless ceremonies and symbolic exhibitions, acts and symbols without real essence, or, if both Word and sacraments are real means of grace, that is, if they are instruments, the hands of God by which God's grace and forgiveness of sins are abundantly offered and sealed. Then it is vitally important that the sinner makes full use of all of them.

Walther explains how and in what manner the power of forgiving sins was entrusted to the apostles, and through them to the whole church, in this way:

Christ sent out his apostles with the command (mandate) and authority to preach His gospel, and to consecrate through Baptism and to make disciples of those who embrace the gospel by faith, and to strengthen their faith through the Lord's Supper; that is the true and heavenly way to forgive sins.³⁹

To this same point one can add the quotation Walther used from Luther on how God forgives sins.

This is done, first, in Baptism, which is connected with God's command . . . with the promise. . . . True . . . this water is not alone; God's Word goes with it. Likewise, when you go to your pastor, who has been given a special commission or to any Christian and desire to be comforted and absolved from your sins, and he says to you: I, in God's place, announce to you through Christ forgiveness of all your sins--when this happens, you are to be certain that by such external word your sins are truly and surely forgiven. . . . Therefore thank God for [He] . . . wants to forgive sins in no other way than is here written, viz., by the giving the power to do it to men. (Luther, House Postil, Gospel for the 19th Sunday after Trinity, St. Louis Ed. XIIIa, 917)⁴⁰

We conclude with the application of Walther's renowned distinction

³⁹Idem, "Evangelium und Privat-absolution," p. 126: "Christus hat seine Apostel ausgesandt mit dem Befehl und Vollmacht, dass sie sein Evangelium annehmen, durch die Taufe weihen und zu Jüngern machen und ihren Glauben durch das Abendmahl des Herrn stärken sollen; das ist die wahre und himmlische Weise Sünde zu vergeben."

⁴⁰Idem, Law and Gospel, p. 182.

between law and gospel to the teaching of absolution. This distinction is the application of the article of salvation by grace alone to the needs of the terrified sinner. The helpfulness of this distinction is that the emphasis is always on the gospel as the only source from which personal holiness, all spiritual life, and power flow. Walther could hardly say this more clearly.

Where the grace of God is preached people will notice that wonderful things are happening among them. Alas! many ministers do not meet with these wonderful experiences; their hearers remain sleepy; their misers stay stingy. What is the reason? Not sufficient Gospel has been preached to them.⁴¹

This understanding is very important when we look to the function and use of confession and absolution in our congregations especially when one thinks on individual confession and absolution.

The Efficacy and Consolation Of Absolution

The singular position of the Lutheran Church in contradistinction to the Roman Catholic and the Reformed Churches concerning the Sacraments can be validated by looking at their teachings on confession and absolution. From one side, the Lutheran teaching has been considered a vestige of the papacy, as an invention of preachers eager for ruling, or as a pillow to rest on for carnal and secure people who do not really want to repent. These critics commonly raise the objection, how can a minister forgive sins? On the other side, one can see the meaning of the words of Christ being forced to prove that the priest possesses the power of which Christ speaks in a way that whatever the priest speaks in his judgment to the person and in whatever manner he says it, this must

⁴¹Ibid., p. 406.

come to pass because he has said so. What should Lutherans do? Walther answers. They are to remain in the immutable foundation of God's Word and to show the great and damnable error, greater than man can imagine, of those who reject or misuse the power given to the preachers of the gospel to forgive sins. As a result of their erroneous ideas the detractors of absolution deny the perfection of the salvation of Christ, they contradict the clear words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and they rob Christians of the most high and necessary comfort.⁴²

The objection of those who deny the power of forgiving sins can be compared to the Pharisees' foolish objection (Matt. 9:3). They lack faith and true knowledge. They ought to believe that absolution is valid because God commanded it. On the other hand, we must point out that the true interpretation of Christ's words is that they establish the authority of those who believe by the power of the Holy Spirit in these words, not of the person who speaks them. If in any way Christ were not risen, no one could administer absolution because there would be no basis for it.

As in any other theological question, here also, when one asks about the effectiveness of absolution, the answer will be in God's Word. The Lutheran confessions, beginning with the Small Catechism, point consistently to three basic biblical texts; Matt. 16 :19, where Jesus speaks as the Son of the living God to His disciples; Matt. 18:18, where He speaks as the breath of truth to all His disciples; and John 20:21-23, where Jesus, after the resurrection speaks as the victor over sin, death, devil, and hell in His first appearance among the disciples.

⁴²Idem, "Die Macht Sünden zu vergeben," p. 113.

What is important in these texts is the mandate and instruction that Christ has given to the apostles. Jesus did not simply speak to them, but He breathed on them the Spirit which is the spirit of power. This He did, first, to show and to make known that He truly is alive; then, to teach that He is truly God, He by His power and strength through this act with his words of forgiveness gave the gifts of the Holy Spirit into the hearts of His disciples, lest they thought they had lost it by their denial.

The gift of faith created by the Holy Spirit, grasps the words and enables the believer to accomplish the task of forgiving sins assigned them by Christ. These words do not speak of building an earthly kingdom or organization, neither do they speak of judging people with the Mosaic law, nor of anointing priests, but these words say that the disciples were to receive the Holy Spirit and the gifts and the office of the Holy Spirit for this purpose:

. . . to forgive and to retain sins, that is, in order to preach the gospel so that each one may be able to believe in the gospel, to receive forgiveness of sins, and also that the sins of each one who does not believe be retained.⁴³

To absolve or to forgive sins means to declare someone free of his guilt and, therefore, of the deserved punishment. To retain sins means to withhold forgiveness and, therefore, to sentence to the deserved punishment. The expression "to bind," "to loose," and "keys," which Christ uses, are indeed metaphorical, that is, not literal, but figurative expressions. However, they are not ambiguous and unknowable but so clear that even a Christian child can realize what is indicated by them. Sins

⁴³Idem, "Evangelium und Privat-absolution," p. 126.

are many times compared with ropes and chains in the Bible to exemplify the way Satan binds and takes people captive to their damnation (Pv. 5:22; 1 Tim. 6:9; 2 Tim. 2:26).⁴⁴ In this way to unbind or to absolve spiritually is no other than the power to forgive sin and to loose the bonds of sin and condemnation with which they were tied.

Jesus, after His resurrection and ascension, remained no longer in a visible way in this world. He sent His apostles to all the world in His name and ordained that people take their words as His, He Himself being present and speaking to them. It is, therefore, unquestionable that Christ gave to the holy apostles and all His followers the power to forgive and to retain sins, to open and to close the kingdom of heaven, to declare free and saved, and to condemn. They are supposed to do this in a way that what they do here on earth will be done in the same way and at the same moment in heaven. It is to be as done by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

Walther quotes in this connection a notable passage from Luther's book on The Keys (St. Louis Ed. XIX, 943-46).

Christ says: 'Whatever ye shall bind on earth,' etc. Observe that He promises most assuredly that what we bind or loose on earth shall be bound or loosed. These keys work without a fault. He does not say: What I bind or loose in heaven you shall bind or loose on earth . . . then the keys would be useless and their application futile. . . . But this is what He says: Bind and loose on earth, and I shall bind and loose in heaven. . . . when ye have done it, it shall be accounted as done, and there will be no need of My doing after you. . . . Your work and Mine shall be one identical operation, not two operations. Do your work, and Mine shall already be accomplished. Bind and loose, and I shall have bound and loosed. He obligates Himself to enter into our work. Yea, He commands us to do His own work. Why, then, should we make everything uncertain by inverting the process and claiming that He must first bind and loose in heaven? As if His binding and loosing in heaven were

⁴⁴ Idem, "Die heilige Absolution," p. 126.

different from our binding and loosing on earth. . . . These ideas of two kinds of keys arise when men do not regard God's Word as God's Word, but as men's word because it is spoken by men. . . . Cling to the words of Christ, and be assured that God has no other way of forgiving sin than by the Word which He commanded us to speak.⁴⁵

These words of Luther indeed touch the root of the question. Anything one may say after this statement is only to touch other points on the issue, but certainly the answer to the main and central question is given here.

How the apostles and the Christian church understood Christ's words is clear from their writings (Acts 22:16; 9:15; 1 Cor. 5:1-5; 6:9-11; 2 Cor. 2:5-11; 5:17-21; Gal. 3:26; Eph. 2:8; 1 Pet. 2:9, 10). They acted as those to whom has been given the power of forgiving and retaining sin, explicitly in words and actually in the exercise of this power in the proper form. Two of the most notable examples of this are in Paul's life and ministry. First is the incident when he himself was baptized and forgiven of his sins by Ananias. Second is the example when he gave direction to the church in Corinth to deal with a manifest sinner. Paul, however, is very clear on the point that his word of forgiveness is given "in sight of Christ" and "for your sake" (2 Cor. 2:10), as even before he carefully stated: "Not that we lord it over your faith" (1:23,24).

Therefore, when Christ gave the apostles the keys of the kingdom of heaven, the apostolic office of forgiving and retaining sins for the purpose of the edification of this kingdom, they were to preach the gospel as delegates, as servants of Christ, as housekeepers, and only as

⁴⁵Idem, Law and Gospel, p. 189.

stewards of another's goods entrusted to them. They were not to work in their own name, power and authority, but they were to preach the gospel of Christ, who alone reconciles God and man and grants forgiveness to those who believe. In fact, they did not act on their own opinion or arbitrariness taking sin as righteousness and retaining sins when they were to give forgiveness; they did not act as if they were gods or lords over heaven and hell, over salvation and damnation. When they forgave or retained sins, this was carried on under the Lord's precise instruction and mandate, what they then said was as valid as if Christ in His own person had spoken it. Their words of absolution were a delivery of what Christ had said (Matt. 9:2), and what he had given them to say (John 20:23).

Thus there is no reason for the common objection that only God can forgive sins, or the question if each can receive a valid absolution from a preacher of the gospel, because in the correct teaching of absolution it is not denied that God, as Lord, is the only one that forgives sins, nor that it is He who is offended by each one of them. Then, the answer to the question is that as the gospel, by virtue of the accomplished perfect salvation of Christ, is the absolution of all people, and is to be made known to all the world, certainly it is valid also when announced to each one individually by the pastor.

The real and final question, as Walther points out, is one raised by Luther: Does God want to forgive sins through the proclamation of a human being, or not?⁴⁶ This is just what the Lutherans maintain, indeed in full agreement with the Scriptures (1 Cor. 3:9; 4:15; 2 Cor. 6:1;

⁴⁶Idem, "Die heilige Absolution," p. 63.

Gal. 4:19; 1 Tim. 4:16). This is exactly what Paul meant when he says that the preachers of the gospel are God's co-workers and co-operators, spiritual fathers, and that they can save their hearers.

For those who deny the power of the office of the keys these are overstated expressions because only God can regenerate and save, and what is expressed is that the preachers of the gospel can only explain the conditions of regeneration and salvation. But this argument, as is evident in the previous section, overturns the most fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith.

In the Lutheran teaching, however, not only are those doctrines firmly established but also the doctrine of the ministry is seen in the full magnificence. God Himself has established in the church the office of the ministry and it is powerful; it is so powerful and efficacious that the voice of a preacher of the gospel is not a bare human voice but is God's own voice. The ministers are tools and instruments through whom God works in man's souls. It is God alone who saves, calls, illuminates, gives faith and forgives; but He effects reconciliation through the office of the Word.

Following this line of thought, starting from the right understanding of the Holy Scripture, one will have walked the way that Walther paved under the guidance of God's Word, and arrived, as he has, at this conclusion:

To understand correctly the true meaning of this doctrine we must ponder in the following way its relationship with the total picture of Christian doctrine.⁴⁷

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 71: "Die wahre Bedeutung dieser Lehre, in ihrem Zusammenhange mit dem ganzen Vorbild der Christlichen Lehre, recht einzusehen, müssen wir folgendes erwägen."

It is certainly clear now how faithful Walther was to the theological method he learned from the Lutheran confessions and theologians and how much one can learn following his steps.

This method guides anyone to a biblically sound understanding and teaching. It is worthy to follow again, briefly, his argumentation.⁴⁸ Christ, one person, true God and man, was, as substitute for all sinners, crucified and resurrected from the dead. His death was the atonement and His resurrection the justification for us so that all sinners have their debt paid and are reborn and justified in Him (1 Cor. 5: 14; Rom. 5:18, 19). Also through this sacrifice all sinners' relationship with God is now restored; their sins are blotted out; reconciliation, forgiveness, justice, life, and salvation are fully obtained. Now all can come to a real possession, enjoyment, and appropriation of that to which they have a sure right.

All gifts of grace, however, are offered, delivered and acquired through the preaching of the gospel and the holy sacraments which are the channels of the gospel (Luke 24:46, 47). First, repentance must be preached to all people. By the law their damnable state and God's wrath over their sins must be attested. After that the forgiveness of sins must be preached to them. God's grace, justice, and salvation obtained by Christ, are to be revealed to them by the gospel. When they receive all these by faith, they are made alive, reborn, sanctified and renewed.

In addition to the general preaching of the forgiveness of sin, Christ has established the way of preaching it to each sinner who wants this forgiveness, because Christ knows well how difficult it is to a

⁴⁸Ibid.

terrified sinner to believe that the grace proclaimed to all can also apply to him. This is what happens, according to Christ's institution (John 20:23) in absolution. The only difference is in the manner of presentation.

Over this immutable foundation of God's Word and of the analogy of faith the Lutheran Church establishes its doctrine of the efficacy of absolution. Its power and validity stands not in the office of the ministry but in God's Word, entrusted to the whole church; thence it does not matter if a called minister or a Christian layman proclaim it.

To quote the confessions:

In addition to this, it is necessary to acknowledge that the keys belong not to the person of one particular man, but to the Church, as many most clear and firm arguments testify. Therefore, he grants the keys, principally and immediately to the Church, just as also for this reason the Church has principally the right of calling. For just as the promise of the Gospel belongs certainly and immediately to the entire Church so the keys belong immediately to the entire Church, because the keys are nothing else than the office whereby this promise is communicated to every one who desires it just as it is actually manifest that the Church has the power to ordain ministers.⁴⁹

From Christ's words it is clear that the power to forgive sins on earth is given to the church and through it to its ministers. Therefore, those who refuse to acknowledge this truth act wickedly. Those who doubt this or put their certainty of the effectiveness of forgiveness in their sufferings, or penance and repentance, in their tears or struggles, or in good works, or in a disposition and willingness to improve their lives, are being deceived by Satan as were their forefathers.

⁴⁹Idem, "Die Macht Sünden zu vergeben," p. 117. Cf. Smalc. Art. in Concordia Triglotta (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), p. 511.

Our assurance of the effectiveness of forgiveness does not rest in our works, nor in the faith of the confessor, nor in his office, but in the action of the Holy Spirit through the church by the Word.

There is no doubt at all that nobody retains or forgives sins, but only he who certainly has the Holy Spirit, this you and I know, as these words of Christ here totally convince us. This is no other than the Christian church, the assembly of all believers in Christ. The Christian church alone has these keys; you should not be in doubt about this. Of this same church everyone may be certain that it has the Holy Spirit, as Paul according to Christ and all the Scripture richly demonstrates, and is briefly stated in the Creed, where we say: "I believe, that there is one holy Christian church." It is holy because of the Holy Spirit, whom it surely has. . . . But here is what you should do, as Christ says (Matt. 10:41). . . . Even if a stone or a piece of wood were to absolve me in the name of the Christian church, I would take it, . . . For this reason our Creed is thus arranged, that the article "forgiveness of sin" must come after the article "one holy Christian church," and prior to the latter must come, "I believe in the Holy Spirit" so that it can be understood that without the Holy Spirit there is no holy church and without the holy church there is no forgiveness of sin.⁵⁰

Walther has correctly stated that probably no other article of faith has suffered so many objections. In spite of so clear a testimony from God's Word some raise the question: How dare a miserable person

⁵⁰Idem, Kirche und Amt, p. 36: "Da ist kein Zweifel an, dass niemand Sünde bindet oder vergibt, denn allein, der den hl. Geist so gewiss habe, dass du und ichs wissen; wie diese Worte Christi allhier überzeugen. Das ist aber niemand, denn die christliche Kirche, das ist die Versammlung aller Gläubigen Christi; die hat allein diese Schlüssel, da sollst du nicht an zweifeln. . . . Von derselbigen Kirche ist jedermann gewiss, dass sie den hl. Geist habe, wie das Paulus nach Christo und alle Schrift reichlich beweisen, und auf kürzeste verfasst ist im Glauben, da wir sagen: Ich glaube, dass da sei eine heilige christliche Kirche! Heilig ist sie um des hl. Geistes willen den sie gewisslich hat. . . . Aber so sollst du thun, wie Christus sagt Matth. 10, 41: . . . Also wenn ein Stein oder Holz mich könnte absolvieren im Namen der Christlichen Kirchen, wollte ichs annehmen. Darum ist unser Glaube also geordnet, dass der Artikel, Vergebung der Sünde muss stehen nach dem Artikel, Eine hl. christliche Kirche, und vor dem, Ich glaube in den hl. Geist, auf dass erkannt würde, wie ohne den hl. Geist keine heilige Kirche ist, und ohne heilige Kirche keine Vergebung der Sünden ist. (Büchlein an der Beichte, Hal., Tom. XIX, 1051-1054).

like a pastor presume that he, like God, can forgive sins? This objection has been answered above, but to the main argument one may add the following one: It is necessary to differentiate between the landlord (Jesus) and the housekeeper (ministers), and thus the difficulty is overcome (Heb. 3:5, 6, compare 1 Cor. 4:1). As the poorest man in the position of the housekeeper administers the greatest treasure of a kingdom, so a sinner can distribute forgiveness, the greatest treasure of the rich heavenly Father, when placed as a minister (housekeeper). In spite of the many differences one can point out between the apostles and ministers of today, in regard to the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments, as the means of obtaining grace, forgiveness and salvation, their office remains the same. As the former were called immediately by Christ, the latter are being called mediately by means of the church, to whom indeed the means of grace have been entrusted until the end of the world. Like the apostles, today's ministers are servants not of men but of God and of His church (1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11, Acts 20:28) because God remains the principal efficient cause of the ordinance of the public office of the ministry; it is God's authority which is conferred on the person of the minister by the congregation through a regular, legitimate call. Even the apostles recognized this power from the congregation.

Especially the members of the congregation should take the words of his mouth as if Jesus Christ Himself had spoken them whether the minister is admonishing, reproofing or comforting, publicly or privately. For this reason, they owe him unconditional confidence and obedience, as the person God uses to make known His will to them and to guide them.

to eternal life (1 Cor. 4:1; 2 Cor. 5:18-20). Surely the minister should be faithful to this and not waver or doubt this authority, otherwise he becomes a reason for wavering and uncertainty in the house of God.

Chiefly when the minister is announcing the forgiveness of sins, or absolving a sinner, and communicating to him the knowledge that Christ has interceded for him, and has restored him to favor, the congregation and each individual member is being reminded what great consolation absolution brings to anxious consciences. Not that the very words of absolution are taken directly from the Bible, neither is the form nor the manner which are used today found in the apostolic age, but the fact (die Sache) and the truth remain, as the words used today express: By virtue of my office, as a called and ordained servant of the Word, in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, and in the name of the triune God.⁵¹

There is such a richness of consolation in absolution that each Christian should run after it and ask for it, says Walther, but sadly he has to make this comment:

If we only truly believe in absolution, with what joy would we attend Church wherever it is pronounced! But few, very few, there are, even among Lutherans, who truly believe in absolution.⁵²

One would think that ministers somehow fear this tremendous moment of truth when the sinner is confronted with God's Word in such a personal manner. Will the Word of God, through him, be able to overcome the hardness or the profound sorrow in a man's heart? But is this not the most glorious battle he has been called to fight as a soldier of Christ?

⁵¹Idem, "Die heilige Absolution," p. 63.

⁵²Idem, Law and Gospel, p. 173.

The confessions call this absolution, particularly individual absolution, the "blessed word of comfort."⁵³ That is indeed a marvelous designation! Moreover, there is no better opportunity than this to learn how to distinguish and to apply law and gospel in his teaching and preaching.

But someone may still ask if absolution is really necessary when the church has the Word, Baptism and the Lord's Supper! Walther answers:

Indeed they have these, but when they reject absolution spoken by man, they also take away the comfort that is in each of God's means of grace.⁵⁴

In this life of troubles and temptations, failures and doubts, one needs constantly the reassurance of the gospel and certainly, sometimes, in a very personal way. Moreover, absolution is designed to give to the Christian a comforted heart until the day of judgment when the book will be opened and each one will be judged, because he knows that he will hear from the mouth of God the same words he has already heard: You are forgiven, God's kingdom is open to you!

There are still two questions that some ask. One concerns those who are unrepentant within their hearts: How can the minister check the repentance and sincerity which is necessary for the utterance of absolution? This objection shows a great ignorance because it takes absolution as if it were a judgment of the confessor on the penitent, or as if someone had to qualify for and be worthy of the forgiveness, or

⁵³Concordia Triglotta (Apology XII, 39), p. 261.

⁵⁴Walther, "Die Macht Sünden zu vergehen," p. 116: "Es ist wahr, sie haben dies, aber indem sie die durch Menschen gesprochene Absolution verwerfen, so nehmen sie den Trost, der in jenen Gnadenmitteln liegt, heraus."

even as if absolution were dependent on knowledge of a divine judgment of a man's heart. As in the Lord's Supper, absolution's validity and efficaciousness comes from Christ's perfect salvation and does not depend on man's attitude. The minister proclaims the forgiveness to each one privately even if he does not know whether law and gospel have worked contrition and desire and certainty of forgiveness. Each one who receives absolution must know his own heart, that he is responsible before God. Those who despise or abuse absolution certainly give proof of how deserved is their punishment.

The exception is, naturally, when the minister knows for certain by visible indications (public sins, obduracy), that someone is impenitent, because in this case to proclaim forgiveness would be a mockery.

The other question is whether the proclamation of forgiveness should be conditional. That some Lutheran theologians (like Tarnow) have stated this is certainly a misunderstanding of biblical and confessional teaching. All of God's words are true and reliable, so also absolution always opens heaven and the divine and paternal heart of God who stretches His arms of divine compassion to the sinner.⁵⁵

One comment on the wording of absolution is to be made on a statement from the Apology:

The Power of the Keys administers and presents the Gospel through absolution, which proclaims peace to me and is the true voice of the the Gospel. . . . for it is practically an epitome of the Gospel, an extract drawn from it which treats of faith and Christian justification. Its quintessence is the single statement: in Christ's stead I forgive thee all thy sins in the name of . . . (Art. XII, 39 Trigl. Conc., p. 261)⁵⁶

⁵⁵Walther, Law and Gospel, p. 115.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 175.

Especially on the wording of absolution Walther makes these important remarks:

We keep the precious words of absolution but we also seek to offer the kernel to those who seek absolution and invite them to relish it. . . . But they were not told to come . . . and to believe that the door of grace was open to them and that they need only to accept what was offered to them. If these latter facts were emphasized, there would be more Christians.⁵⁷

Being aware of the many false ideas and misunderstandings around confession and absolution, especially among simple people, one should look carefully at the wording of absolution. It is to emphasize the efficacy and consolation it brings, as in the following example: According to the institution of Christ, who presented to God complete satisfaction for the sins of all mankind and conferred to the Christian church on earth the power to forgive sins, proclaiming it through its called and ordained servants to the penitent sinner who trusts in Christ's grace alone, your sins are forgiven in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Individual Confession and Absolution as an Adiaphoron

One issue which necessarily has to be discussed in this topic is the appreciation given by Walther to individual confession and absolution even from his confessional definitions of adiaphora.

From what was said in the preceding sections it is clearly evident that a high value is given to absolution by the Lutheran Church.

Walther boldly affirms:

. . . our church in its glorious confession lays such a great importance on the doctrine of absolution that he who renounces this

⁵⁷Ibid., pp. 180; 174-75.

doctrine cannot claim the name Lutheran, rather he has a completely different spirit than our fathers, and must stand upon a completely different doctrinal foundation.⁵⁸

The Evangelical Lutheran Church can be eminently distinguished by its doctrine of the Christian church and of the ministry on which is based its teaching of the power to forgive sins entrusted to its called and ordained servants. Luther's Small Catechism not only emphasizes confession and absolution by including it together with the sacraments, but also gives brief direction on individual confession as the minister addresses each penitent with the question: "Do you believe that my forgiveness is God's forgiveness?" The Lutheran representatives at Augsburg had testified to their belief in this peculiar power of the church:

Confession is of human right only, not commanded by Scripture, but ordained by the churches. (Art. XXV, Trigl. Conc., p. 71)

Of confession they teach that private absolution ought to be retained in the churches. (Art. XI, Trigl. Conc., p. 47)⁵⁹

And at the explanation on this point in the Apology:

We also retain confession, especially on account of absolution as being the Word of God which, by divine authority, the power of the keys pronounces upon individuals. Therefore it would be wicked to remove private absolution from the church. (Trigl. Conc., p. 281)⁶⁰

What Luther said on individual confession and absolution as a profitable practice of the church is still more specific and instructive:

⁵⁸Idem, "Die Macht Sünde zu vergeben," p. 113: ". . . unsere Kirche in ihrem herrlichen Grundbekenntniss auf die Lehre von Absolution ein so grosses Gewicht gelegt, dass der, welcher sich von dieser Lehre lossagt, unmöglich auf den Namen eines Lutheraners Anspruch machen kann, sondern einen ganz anderen Geist, als unsere Väter haben, und auf einem ganz anderen Glaubensgrunde stehen muss."

⁵⁹Idem, Pastoraltheologie (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1897), p. 155.

⁶⁰Ibid.

If I had a thousand and thousands more of worlds, I would lose them all before I would be willing to permit the least part of this confession to leave the church . . . Because it is first, the most necessary and profitable school for Christians, where they learn how to understand and to practice God's Word and their faith, which does not happen so powerfully in general teaching and preaching.⁶¹

And again:

Because we have indeed experienced how the common people and the youth learn very little from the preaching, when they are not asked and examined privately. (Admonition to those in Frankfurt, 1533, Luther's Volksbibl. Bd IV, 61)⁶²

On the basis of these directions Walther once again manifests his sound biblical-confessional principles and pastoral wisdom as he establishes these two parameters. (1) The introduction or use of individual confession is not a conditio sine qua non for the existence of a Lutheran congregation. Although, the pastor without depriving the congregation of the preaching of the gospel but using an evangelical way of instruction, admonition, and commendation, is to urge the practice of individual confession and absolution. First, it is to be used along with public and general confession and absolution, and afterwards, where it is possible and advisable, maintain it as an exclusive [ausschliessliche] practice. (2) The pastor is to yield in no way nor agree with

⁶¹Ibid.: "Wenn tausend und aber tausend mein wäre, so wollt ichs alles lieber verlieren, denn ich wollt dieser Beicht das geringste Stücklein eines aus der Kirchen kommen lassen. . . . Denn sie ist der Christen erste, nöthigste und nützlichste Schule, darinen sie lernen Gottes Wort und ihren glauben verstehen und üben; welches sie nicht so gewaltig thun in öffentlichen Lectionen und Predigten."

⁶²"Verhandlung über die Lehre von der Absolution," Synodal Bericht, 1860, p. 38: "Denn wir wohl erfahren haben, wie der Pöbel und die Jugend aus der Predigt wenig lernet, wenn sie nicht insonderheit gefragt und verhört wird." See also notes 3 and 4 in this chapter.

those who because of obduracy opposes themselves, since it "would be wicked to remove private absolution from the church."⁶³

Quoting Brochmand (System, Universae th., Tom II fol. 520) he defines adiaphora in the following way:

In the strict sense, however, is understood by adiaphora those church usages, which God has neither expressly ordained nor forbidden, but are established by the church freely and in a proper way, partly for the sake of order and decency, partly for the sake of edification in grace, and which we certainly maintain only as long as there is the opinion that they are profitable and absolutely necessary for the worship and the edification, or we may put them away if the love owing to the neighbor is being infringed.⁶⁴

Concerning adiaphora one ought to know that all external ordinances in the church, established for the sake of order, be they good even as individual confession and absolution is, they may be wrongly used. In misuse usages surely do not help the church, because all that pertains to the order, life, dignity, power and action of the church is to be done correctly. Also, it is to be noted that the non-observance of a human church

⁶³Walther, Pastoraltheologie, p. 155: "Doch hat er in evangelischer Weise durch Belehrung und Ermahnung, sowie durch Anpreisung derselben (Privat-beichte), darauf hinzuwirken, dass sie vorerst neben der allgemeinen Beichte fleissig gebraucht und, wo es möglich und rätlich ist, endlich wieder als ausschliessliche Sitte eingeführt und, wo sie besteht, aufrecht erhalten werde. Jedenfalls darf er einer Gemeinde, welche den Gebrauch der Privat-Beichte und Absolution selbst nicht von Seiten einzelner Glieder gestatten wollte, unter keiner Bedingungen weichen, denn die Absolution also aus der Kirche abthun wäre allerdings wider Gott."

⁶⁴Walther, Grundlegende Sätze über die Kirchenordnungen und Kirchenregimentsfrage (Leipzig u. Dresden: Justus Naumann's Buchhandlung, 1864), p. 3: "Im engere Sinne aber versteht man unter Adiaphoras kirchliche Gebräuche, die Gott in seinem Wort weder ausdrücklich geboten noch verboten hat, sondern von der Kirche frei und auf ordnungsmässige Weise eingerichtet sind, theils um der Erbauung willen, [partim vero aedificationis gratia (p. 3f. Brochmand)] und die wir, so lange nur die Meinung, als gehörten sie sum Gottesdienst, oder die Einbildung, als seien sie verdienstlich und schlechterdings nothwendig, ferngehalten und die dem Nächsten schuldige Liebe nicht verletzt wird, gewiss beibehalten können."

order is not sin by itself on the part of the believing Christian. It will be a sin, however, when through it the mandate of love is infringed (Thesis XIII).⁶⁵ Luther is quoted by Walther, who gives the wise guidance:

Love is empress over the ceremonies, and . . . love is not to yield to the ceremonies. As Christ Himself placed the Sabbath under the mandate of love. . . . Therefore in simple ceremonies love is to be judge and mistress, but not in faith and in God's promises. On the contrary, faith should be lord over love, and love give way to faith.⁶⁶

One should note that both aspects are to be considered on this issue, namely, concerning absolution there is a rule of faith, concerning individual confession and absolution, a rule of love. Moreover, Walther wisely examines the question also under the aspect of an adiaphoron to show that even here individual confession and absolution should be regarded not as a burden but as a help for growing in faith, acting in love and taking into consideration man's sinful state. Walther says:

A Christian should voluntarily renounce the use of his freedom where it does not promote the benefit of the neighbor, or the brother, and this so long as no injury is done to the faith.⁶⁷

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 12: "Das Nichthalten einer menschlichen Kirchenordnung ist dem gläubigen Christen nie an sich Sünde. Sünde wird es allein, wenn dadurch das Gesetz der Liebe übertreten wird."

⁶⁶Ibid., pp. 12, 13: "Die Liebe ist Kaiserin über die Cerimonien. . . . nicht aber die Liebe den Cerimonien weichen. Wie Christus den Sabbath unter das Gesetz der Liebe wirft: . . . Darum soll in blossen Cerimonien die Liebe Richterin und Meisterin sein, aber nicht im Glauben und Verheissungen Gottes. Sondern der Glaube soll Herr sein über die Liebe, und ihm soll die Liebe weichen, . . ." (Luther: Some Words on the Council of Obstant, Erlanger Ausgabe XXXI, 400)

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 11: "Ein Christ soll sich, wo es der Nutzen des Nächsten oder der Brüder fordert, des Gebrauchs seiner Freiheit willig begeben, so es ohne Verletzung des Glaubens geschehen kann,"

One is bound by the law of love, constrained by Christ's love, and indebted to care for the improvement of the poor people and of those not well instructed in God's Word (Rom. 15:2; 1 Cor. 6:12; 14:10). Finally, it is not to be denied that a church is orthodox if there is the correct teaching on the forgiveness of sin and the worthy use of the Lord's Supper without the practice of individual confession and absolution.

Another aspect by which Walther analyzes individual confession and absolution is as a practice for examination, under the guidance of the Lutheran confessions, in preparation for the Lord's Supper. Although no one should be hindered from hearing the preaching of God's Word, concerning the Lord's Supper, however, there are restrictions because it requires a worthy reception by faith to be profitable for salvation and the strengthening of faith. To participate in the Lord's Supper for full benefit one must have come already to repentance and to faith, received grace, and become a real Christian, that is, he is already a child of God. One dare not forget that because of their biblical understanding of the content and meaning of the Lord's Supper the Lutheran confessions and Lutheran theologians, including Walther, always took into consideration the aspect of the manducatio impiorum (indignorum), even though it is not the first emphasis. Moreover, they also rightly understood that communion in the holy things (sacrament) is "an act of confession of faith."⁶⁸ Therefore, as far as it can be known one should be certain that those who partake of the sacrament really embrace the gospel and thoroughly believe in it and are standing firm in their faith. As far as possible all doubts should be removed.

⁶⁸ Idem, Pastoraltheologie, p. 145.

The recommendation of this practice is a maturely considered matter. This is easy to discern from the reasons given for the use of the examination (exploratio): (1) to provide an opportunity for the pastor to talk to each one privately who intends to go to the Lord's Supper having time for teaching and admonition, (2) to provide for the member the best opportunity to make some special request or to examine his conscience, and (3) to provide an opportunity to apply in an individual way God's grace and forgiveness of sin, which are presented generally in the gospel.⁶⁹ The Augsburg Confession (Art. XXV) attested that among Lutherans it was not usual to give the Lord's Supper to people that were not previously examined. From various biblical passages Walther draws this conclusion:

In order that the Word of God may have full scope in the congregation it is furthermore incumbent upon the congregation that its members . . . frequently ask and receive the comfort of the absolution and the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ (John 20: 23; 2 Cor. 2:10; 1 Cor. 11:20, 26) and that after previous exploration (examination) and confession (Heb. 13:17; cf. 1 Cor. 4:1; Matt. 7:6).⁷⁰

On the content of such an examination or exploration Walther mentions some practical examples. Two are presented here in a succinct form.⁷¹ (I) 1. The confessee's knowledge of the meaning of the Lord's Supper; 2. recognition of his own sinful state; 3. true faith in God's Word; 4. hearty desire for grace and forgiveness of sins through the Lord's Supper; 5. earnest intention to follow and to imitate Christ in a holy and blameless life. (II) 1. Does the confessee understand what

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 150.

⁷⁰Dallman, Walther and the Church, p. 99.

⁷¹Walther, Pastoraltheologie, pp. 143, 149.

the sacrament is? 2. Does he understand the value and the gifts of the sacrament? 3. To what purpose does he want to use it? 4. Does he recognize his sins with a troubled conscience, and/or is he afflicted by temptations of the flesh, the world, and of the devil? 5. Is he hungry and thirsty for the Word of grace and salvation given by God Himself through the office of the ministry, to be consoled and fortified?

This kind of examination was not for use indiscriminately with all people. Those of mature knowledge and understanding were to be examined only once in a lifetime or indeed never; the simple and the young people once a year. Naturally the Christian life of the members and their habits were to be observed as a demonstration of their faith and understanding.

A final and wise observation is made by Walther concerning the examination, namely, that the minister should take care lest the simple minded be disturbed and those who are unwilling to come to private confession be antagonized by turning this friendly talking into a rigorous examination or into a torture. On the contrary, it should be as informal as possible, especially when the minister is introducing the practice in a congregation.⁷²

In clear contrast with Walther's theological method in which there is a continual appeal to the confessions and to orthodox Lutheran theologians for the clarification of a doctrinal issue, stands Samuel Schmucker's position pleading for an "American Lutheranism." This was basically a revision of the confessions and their fundamental doctrines to make easier the approach to the Reformed and other Evangelical

⁷²Ibid., p. 149.

churches. His position represents such an extreme disregard for the confessions that even within his own church body provoked protests.

Samuel Simon Schmucker

Samuel S. Schmucker came from a different background than C. F. W. Walther. He was a professor at the Gettysburg Seminary and a distinguished spokesman for the General Council in the development of the Lutheran Church in America. From his writings it is easy to detect that his theological thoughts were influenced by Pietism and the theology of other Reformed churches in America. As a consequence the General Council and he himself refused to acknowledge the Lutheran confessions, although they professed to uphold the chief doctrines of Lutheranism. Yet at the same time he spoke of an American church which was developing an organization and doctrine of its own to match American conditions.

Basic Doctrinal Positions

In one of his major works Schmucker presents a brief historical review of the position of the Lutheran Church regarding the Lutheran confessions in the following terms:

1. The patriarchs of the church in America, first, professed the symbolic books of the Lutheran Church in Germany, especially the Augsburg Confession.
2. They soon relaxed from the rigor of symbolic requisition, referring only to the Augsburg Confession and to Luther's Small Catechism.
3. Neither they nor their successors ever formally adopted the symbolic books as binding in the church as tests of admission or discipline.
4. About the beginning of the nineteenth century they ceased to require

assent to even the Augsburg Confession at induction and ordination, demanding only faith in the Word of God, and rejecting (as they thought they had the right to do) all symbolic books as tests.

5. The actual (at that time) doctrinal position is one of adherence to the fundamental doctrines of Scripture as substantially taught in the Augsburg Confession with dissent on minor points, which they believed wrong, as Luther and other Christians had done in the sixteenth century.
6. All moral obligations to assent to the Augsburg Confession that may have been imposed were annulled by common consent.
7. The Lutheran Church in America was founded without any human symbols as tests of admission or discipline. The Augsburg Confession is occasionally referred to as a substantial exhibition of its doctrinal stand.⁷³

He goes on to say that even if his church would have taken other doctrinal stands on the confessions, his own position would not be altered for these reasons: 1) Religious and ecclesiastical obligations are not hereditary; 2) Only to believe and to teach the cardinal doctrines and not subscription to the symbolical books is essential to Lutheranism; 3) Each generation or individual has the moral right to decide what pledges he would assume: 4) "As freemen and servants only of Christ they felt that they had the right and duty to worship God, and to conduct the

⁷³Samuel S. Schmucker, The American Lutheran Church (Philadelphia: E. W. Miller, 1852), pp. 157, 158.

affairs of His church according to the dictates of their own conscience, guided by the Scripture."⁷⁴

He concedes that the judgment of the early church was right in establishing a creed of fundamentals, because it is necessary for the purity of the church and harmony of its operations, or at least useful, if properly employed. For him an external unity is enough. The fewer the points of a doctrinal stand, the better is the "doctrinal basis," because a strictness in minor points⁷⁵ will bring about divisions in the church.

As the difficulty of all assenting to any creed is increased just as we augment the number of minor and less important specifications in it; and as even the Augsburg Confession contains a few minor items, which the great mass of our ministers and laymen do not believe, it would be evident folly to attempt to bind us to books containing ten times as many more such minor and doubtful points. The attempt would unavoidably give rise to endless contentions, and most necessarily terminate in divisions of the church. Moreover, as our church has been signally blessed of God with doctrinal purity and doctrinal harmony under the General Synod's doctrinal basis why should we not adhere to it and devote our energies to supplying the destitute of our church over the land with the preached gospel?⁷⁶

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 160: A similar position is held by Schmucker in this same book on pp. 155-59; 163-68, 171-200, and in other works: Definite Platform, Doctrinal and Disciplinarian for Evangelical Lutheran District Synods (Philadelphia: Miller & Burlock, 1855), pp. 3-6; 23-29; 32-42; American Lutheranism vindicated (Baltimore: T. Newton Kurtz, 1856), pp. 24-46; 61-67; 161-68; Lutheran Manual on Scriptural Principles (Philadelphia: Lindsay & Blakiston, 1855), pp. v-x; The Church of the Redeemer, as developed within the General Synod of the Lutheran Church in America (Baltimore: T. Newton Kurtz, 1868), pp. 60-67; 142-67; 225-41.

⁷⁵These minor points include the denial of the baptismal regeneration, of the Real Presence in the Lord's Supper, of the power of absolution, and of man's corrupted state. On the other hand, points of praxis are stated as doctrinal position: observation of Sunday, confirmation, etc.

⁷⁶Schmucker, The American Lutheran Church, p. 181.

Other "reasons" are adduced: not all Lutheran Churches in different countries subscribed to all the confessions and some refused them very early; at Luther's time "no symbolical books at all, except the Bible were imposed on either pastors or churches;"⁷⁷ the confessions were used as a way to exercise control over the churches by civil authorities. But, obviously, the cause of his rejection as well as all misunderstandings on the confessions is found in this statement: "Probably not a dozen of all our American ministers have ever read all these books."⁷⁸

On this basis an accusing supposition is brought against those who, without reservations, acknowledge the Lutheran confessions; namely, they have accepted unlutheran and unscriptural notions. In contradistinction to a religion of forms, with blind submission to human, non-inspired traditions, and justification by works, he extols the religion of the spirit, and gospel liberty, with God's Word as the infallible rule of faith and practice, and justification by grace, through faith. And he states that from this cardinal doctrine in the plan of salvation follows the difference in other doctrines, especially those which stand in more immediate "logico-moral" connection with it; namely, the word of God, church, ministerial office, sacraments, and finally justification and pastoral care (or principles of the cure of souls).⁷⁹

Unfortunately he also confuses the explanation of the articulus stantis vel cadentis ecclesiae, as one will see in the following

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 156.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 162.

⁷⁹Idem, Elemental Contrast Between the Religion of Forms and of the Spirit (Gettysburg; H. C. Neinstedt, 1852), pp. 4, 17.

exposition, and therefore other teachings are wrongly explained by him.⁸⁰ He points to the different ways the Bible explains Christ's mediatorial work, that is, in literal, abstract, and figurative language, and to the three different offices of Christ, namely, priestly, prophetic, and kingly, to conclude that the effort of some theologians to unify and designate the whole work under one term, that is, justification, "could not fail to envelope the subject in much confusion."⁸¹ The plan of salvation or covenant of grace includes four aspects: (1) the basis of the covenant: Christ's atoning work; (2) the persons under the covenant; (3) the manner in which the atonement changes their relations to God and His law; and (4) that which they are required to perform, or the conditions on which the benefits of the covenant are bestowed on us.

From the last point it is clear that his understanding of justification is never free of the inclusion of human works and participation. In this way, in the same breath, he puts together God's and man's action. He states: It was neither our repentance, nor faith, nor anything else which we can do, but Christ who reconciled us to God, but then adds:

Nor do the merits of Christ merely become the mediate ground of our reconciliation with God, by leading us to repentance, and to such a moral reformation as render us more pleasing to God, as induce him to pardon our transgressions. On the contrary evangelical repentance is based on this display of the divine benevolence, it presupposes this pardon as already provided for us, and consists of sorrow for our ingratitude and rebellion against so good a God.⁸²

⁸⁰Cf. Evangelical Lutheran Catechism (Baltimore: T. Newton Kurtz, 1860), pp. 80-92; Lutheran Manual on Scriptural Principles, pp. 83-88; 106-15; Elements of Popular Theology (New York: Leavitt, Lord, 1834), pp. 131-47.

⁸¹Idem, Elements of Popular Theology, p. 132.

⁸²Ibid., p. 135.

Even when he speaks of the Lutheran view of Christ's atonement he explains that it is offered on conditions made possible by divine grace to all who hear the gospel, and that it is only the payment of a debt on a conditional basis:

. . . nor could the atonement be the literal payment of the debt; else when once discharged by the Savior, the sinner might rightly claim exception from punishment and admission to heaven regardless of his moral qualifications, for a debt once paid cannot again be demanded. Moreover, crime is a personal act, and cannot like a pecuniary debt, be transferred or literally imputed to another.⁸³

His misunderstanding of justification also becomes evident in his definition of "justifying faith" as:

. . . that voluntary act of the illuminated and evangelically penitent sinner, by which he confides in the mercy of God, through Christ for salvation, on the terms offered in the gospel. . . . Therefore we find it commanded as a duty (Mk. 1:15; 1 Jo. 3:23). . . . It includes a knowledge . . . feelings . . . and a volition to accept the offers.⁸⁴

He divides God's action toward men in four different periods of economies with a common feature: the condition of salvation was faithful obedience to the light enjoyed. In the Christian, the conditions are repentance and faith, or simply, faith. Whenever an individual performs these conditions he is seen as being in a state of justification.

That he completely subverts the true Lutheran understanding is clearer still in this sequence of answers:

The constant and immediate duty of every unconverted sinner is to repent and believe. . . . (Has the sinner power to perform this duty?) Not by his own strength; but by the gracious aid of God he can do it, for which it is his immediate duty to pray. . . . Whilst the convicted sinner is endeavoring to repent and believe in Christ by reflecting on his own guilt . . . and is praying for grace to trust in him [God]; the Spirit works in his heart. . . . It is [a

⁸³Ibid., pp. 140, 141.

⁸⁴Idem, Lutheran Manual, p. 113.

voluntary act]; and therefore it is commended as a duty. . . . Is a gift of God . . . in those who sincerely pray for and faithfully seek it.⁸⁵

So faith is a gift of God in the sense that He calls, enlightens, convicts us, and enables us to repent of our sins as necessary previous steps for justifying faith, and in the sense that in every "other stage of our progressive moral improvement, he never fails to superadd the blessings of His Spirit to the faithful use of the means of grace."⁸⁶

And, finally, he came to the point to call an absurdity what is the true, confessional, Lutheran position. According to Schmucker one must consider that "every sincere effort of the unregenerated, to perform any duty, is doubtless pleasing to God."⁸⁷ Because the opposite idea "involves the absurdity, that an unregenerated sinner must first be . . . truly converted, before he can begin to seek the Lord acceptably."⁸⁸ And as this question necessarily raises the other one of man's corruption, absence of free will, and deadness in sin, he asserts:

To suppose the volitions of men . . . impeded by a certain indefinite innate something within, misnamed moral inability, which the sinner cannot overcome, and which the Deity must first remove before right volition can take place, is to suppose all men born in a state in which they must necessarily sin on, until God removes from their hearts this insuperable barrier to holiness. What is this other than a delusive idea enveloped in misapplied terms?⁸⁹

As a concluding note it is necessary to call attention not only to the fact that this scheme puts justification after conversion,

⁸⁵Idem, Evangelical Lutheran Catechism, pp. 82, 83, 86, 87.

⁸⁶Idem, Lutheran Manual, p. 114.

⁸⁷Idem, Elements of Popular Theology, p. 142.

⁸⁸Ibid.

⁸⁹Ibid., p. 143.

repentance and faith, but also what is called an evidence is really a condition of justification. Consider the way the point is made:

If you have sincerely mourned over your sins, if you have felt your inability to save yourself, if . . . if . . . then, reader, may you joyfully indulge the hope that you are justified by faith.⁹⁰

Schmucker calls this a "glorious hope," but one has to ask how can a conditional hope be a real, glorious hope! It was just this kind of hope that almost brought Walther to despair.⁹¹ No wonder he had spoken against it and extolled the real hope that lies only and fully in Christ and in God's grace. How much the author's view is distorted, and how empty is the hope he points to, is further seen by the fact that he recognizes that even external reformation in life is no sure evidence of saving faith, and especially because the assurance of salvation or remaining in the state of justification depends finally on man's willingness to remain on the path of Christian duty.

Before turning to the study of Schmucker's position in relation to confession and absolution it is important to define briefly how he understands the doctrines of the means of grace and of the church. On the means of grace his position is that there are no means of grace in the sense that the Lutheran confessions teach, even though he professes the contrary. This is seen in the fact that he believes that the Holy Spirit comes without means also in a superadded immediate action, as a very special gift. The Word is a superior means, while the sacraments are dependent on it and only external rites or ordinances. Finally, it

⁹⁰Ibid., p. 145.

⁹¹Walther went through this experience while in Germany, during his studies, as he was related to Pietism.

is his understanding that good books, church discipline, pious conversation, parent's admonition, and prayer also are all "means of grace." It becomes, then, natural for Schmucker that man's cooperation through his moral fitness (qualifications) and prayer are necessary for the effectiveness of these means.⁹²

Concerning the doctrine of the church and of the ministry his position mainly fails in the recognition of the true visible church as identified by its "visible signs," namely, the correct exposition of the gospel's teaching and the right administration of the sacraments. His definition again is "man-centered." He does not accept the idea of a church where Christians and hypocrites are united because he understands that the invisible and the visible church are in fact only one institution viewed from two different perspectives. He also, implicitly, takes church and ministry as two coordinate institutions of God. But on this point there is no clear definition of his doctrinal position.⁹³

On the basis of Schmucker's doctrinal positions, as explained above, it can be expected that he could not have a right understanding and a high appreciation for the doctrine of absolution and the practice of individual confession and absolution. That this is correct will be

⁹²Cf. The Religion of Forms and of the Spirit, pp. 25-28; Evangelical Lutheran Catechism, pp. 70-73, 104-16; American Lutheranism Vindicated, pp. 67-96, 121-54; Lutheran Manual, pp. 99-106, 134-55, 169, 170; The Church of the Redeemer . . ., pp. 125-36, 167-70; Elements of Popular Theology, pp. 147-82, 197-258; The American Lutheran Church, pp. 200-202, 240-42.

⁹³Cf. The Religion of Forms and of the Spirit, pp. 32-38; Evangelical Lutheran Catechism, pp. 95-103; Lutheran Manual, pp. 88-98, 118-34, 242-47; The Church of the Redeemer . . ., pp. 137-41, 171-83; Elements of Popular Theology, pp. 147-65, 183-96; The American Lutheran Church, pp. 189-92.

the subject of the following section. Some more detailed explanation of his position will also be given.

The Doctrine of Absolution and the Practice of
Individual Confession and Absolution

It can be shown that Schmucker fails: (1) to distinguish between doctrine and the practice, (2) to understand the biblical passages (sedes doctrinae), and (3) to see the relation between general and individual confession and absolution, and between confession and church discipline. Moreover in all aspects a legalistic view of the issue is evident.

His confusion of doctrine and practice may be seen, first, in that he takes some points of practice, like confirmation and the observance of "the sabbath of the New Testament" as fundamental points of doctrine, while other basic points of doctrine he treats as non-essential.

. . . conditional or unconditional election, limited or general atonement, in pedobaptism or anti-pedobaptism. . . . in a literal or figurative presence of the Savior in the eucharist. . . . We justly infer that God designed liberty and charity in these points. Here then we have the great and sublime principles of gospel unity inculcated, uniformity in fundamentals, and charity or liberty in non-fundamentals.⁹⁴

And, second, he tried to judge these points of doctrine by the rule of love, and not by a rule of faith. Things related to simple order he endeavors to enforce through application of the bylaws of the church body, while disregarding what the Lutheran confessions and the Bible say:

The discord and diversity which have in some regions marred the peace of Zion (General Synod) had no reference to doctrine, and admit no doctrinal remedy. They originated and consisted in particular measures, and especially in violation of our Formula of

⁹⁴Idem, The Peace of Zion (Gettysburg: H. C. Neinstedt, 1853), pp. 32, 33.

Government and discipline which strictly forbids all noise and disorder in the worship of God. The remedy for this is already provided by the General Synod in her Formula . . . to enforce the provisions of the Formula, and all will be well . . . by redoubling their efforts to promote orderly prayer meetings. . .⁹⁵

In this way he comes to the conclusion that when his church discontinued, in Christian liberty or even for the sake of pure doctrine, the practice of individual confession and absolution, it had the right to abandon the doctrine "and of course the doctrine on which it is based, is also rejected,"⁹⁶ namely, absolution.

Evidently he did so because he completely denied the power of the minister to forgive sins. On following his argumentation one cannot fail to remember Walther's argumentation against the errors and miscomprehensions of the Bible and confessions that led the Methodists to an empty absolution.

According to Schmucker, by biblical and confessional teaching, the ministry does not have the power to absolutely forgive sins. Its characteristic is that it is authorized only to proclaim the divine promises of pardon, publicly and privately, to the truly penitent; that is, he has only the power of announcing the conditions on which God has promised to forgive sins. But as he cannot know with certainty the genuineness of one's professed repentance, he has to leave to the conscience of the sinner himself and to the all-seeing God to decide whether he possesses this qualification. On the contrary he may be led into a dangerous, soul destroying error:

⁹⁵Idem, The American Lutheran Church, p. 182.

⁹⁶Ibid., p. 175.

. . . for uninspired men to institute a special rite in the church for the express purpose of announcing pardon to individuals, even when done conditionally, as the reformers maintained it always should be, is inevitably calculated to lead, especially the less intelligent, to believe their sins forgiven, at least in part, because the minister announces the fact, and because they have professed penitence to him. But this is wholly unauthorized in God's Word.⁹⁷

It will be necessary to return to this point later, but it is already clear that he misunderstood the Lutheran teaching. And when he added that "it is not (they - the Reformers - say) the declaration of the officiating priest that we are to believe, but the Word of God who forgives our sins,"⁹⁸ one ought to remember Luther's words on The Keys on the erroneous understanding of those who separate the minister's words from God's words.

Schmucker presents five points on which he basis his affirmations of the unscriptural character of individual confession and absolution. (1) Only God and Jesus Christ can forgive and take away sin (Ex. 34:6, 7). Jesus taught to ask for forgiveness only from God (Luke 11:4), and said nothing about resorting to the priest to obtain forgiveness (Eph. 4:32; Acts 8:22; 1 John 1:9; Matt. 9:6; Mark 11:25; 1 Kings 8:30; 2 Chr. 7:14; Ps. 84:5; Jer. 31:34; Dan. 9:19). (2) Sin, committed against God, is a violation of His law, and no other than He can forgive it. (3) "The offers of pardon in God's Word are all conditional and general, and this alone gives the minister the right to proclaim it, either to a congregation or to an individual."⁹⁹ The application of forgiveness

⁹⁷Idem, American Lutheranism Vindicated, p. 104.

⁹⁸Idem, Elements of Popular Theology, p. 259.

⁹⁹Idem, American Lutheranism Vindicated, p. 105.

is made by the Holy Spirit as He enables the individual to trust in Christ, and His testimony is the believer's peace as an evidence that his sins are forgiven.¹⁰⁰ (4) The imparting of forgiveness by God to individuals depends on their moral fitness, required by Him. "It is based on their having performed the prescribed moral conditions sincerely, of which none but the Omniscient Jehovah can certainly judge."¹⁰¹ Therefore even the declarative announcement of pardon to individuals is unauthorized and dangerous. (5) The doctrine of the supposed sin-forgiving power of the ministry is inconsistent with the doctrine that justification or pardon can be attained only by a living faith in Jesus Christ.¹⁰²

But, indeed, it is on the exegesis of the sedes doctrinae and related passages that Schmucker's shallowness shows itself. In Matt. 9:1-2, it was the omniscient Savior who said to the sick "thy sins be forgiven thee" (9:2), for He knew the heart of man (Luke 7:48). To connect this passage to the teaching of absolution, in his view, is a most injurious act to the interests of spiritual religion:

. . . a gross corruption of Christianity, must be admitted by all, who believe the sentiment which though uttered by the scribes and Pharisees, was acknowledged by the Savior; "Who can forgive sins but God alone?"¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰This is but only another form of what Luther calls "the devil's absolution." See Walther, Kirche und Amt, pp. 36, 37; Luther, Büchlein von der Beichte, Hal. Tom XIX, 1051-54.

¹⁰¹Idem, American Lutheranism Vindicated, p. 105.

¹⁰²Ibid., pp. 104, 105.

¹⁰³Idem, The Religion of Forms and of the Spirit, pp. 45, 46.

Again, he says, the Savior Himself, in His memorable prayer (Luke 11:4) taught us to ask not men, but our Father in heaven alone, for pardon. It is impossible on the principle of God's moral administration that one, who does not possess the power to know the sincere penitence of the sinner's heart and the secret intents of the soul, like God, could forgive sins. Still, according to his view, even in the Old Testament dispensation the priesthood did not pretend to forgive sin, because that power was regarded as a prerogative of God alone (Micah 7:18).¹⁰⁴

As to the passages in Matt. 16:19; 18:18 and John 20:23; and to the expression "keys of the kingdom of heaven," and "to bind," and "to loose," he gives the following interpretation: "It (Matt. 18:18) evidently refers to acts of church discipline, such as 'telling it to the church,' etc., which are expressly mentioned in the previous part of the passage."¹⁰⁵ Or in another place: "The church ought to grant absolution. The Scripture doctrine on this subject is that the open backslider shall be made the subject of discipline by the church."¹⁰⁶

On this same passage he quotes what he supposes to be a different view:

The phrase, "keys of the kingdom of heaven" (together with the "binding" and "loosing" connected with it) occurs only in the passages Matt. 16:19, and 18:18; that expression signifies the special power which Christ bestowed on his apostles, in the new administration of the kingdom of grace amongst his people, to ordain what things are allowed and lawful and what are prohibited and unlawful. The

¹⁰⁴ Here he fails to recognize the fact that all offerings for sin were offered through the mediation of the priest, even though in the New Testament this is a privilege of each Christian.

¹⁰⁵ Idem, Definite Platform, Doctrinal and Disciplinarian, p. 26.

¹⁰⁶ Idem, Lutheran Manual, p. 160.

necessary, yes, indispensable infallibility, without which this power could not be exercised, was conferred on them by the immediate influence, indwelling, and inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

The truth of this position is evident, because the word "loose" () in Scripture, . . . signifies to abolish a law or to declare that to be allowed which had been prohibited. On the other hand, the word "bind" signifies to render something obligatory; so that what had before been free, and left to the choice of each individual is either made obligatory or prohibited (cf. John 5:18; 7:23; Matt. 5:17; 19:23, 24; Lk. 11:46-52).¹⁰⁷

It bears repeating that Schmucker pretends it to be a different explanation, however, the only point in which he disagrees with Baumgarten is that this author ascribes church discipline as a duty, not to this but to other passages. Their agreement becomes evident by Schmucker's explanation of John 20:23:

The passage (John 20:23) , . . has no connexion (sic) with the two texts above cited (Matt. 16:19; 18:18), and was uttered by the Savior after his resurrection. This declaration evidently refers to a miraculous power to forgive sins bestowed on the apostles alone (v. 24), as it requires inspiration for its proper exercise, and was conferred only after he had breathed upon them the miraculous gifts of the Holy Ghost (v. 22), and had told them, "As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you," a declaration applicable only to the apostles in its full sense.¹⁰⁸

Finally in two other places he goes a step further (but not far enough) and states:

It [Matt. 18:18] refers to church discipline, and signifies "whatever acts of discipline ye enact in regard to such an individual, I will ratify in heaven." But this has no bearing on private confession and absolution. The other passage [John 20:23] . . . either refers to a miraculous power bestowed on the apostles . . . or it confers on the ministry, in all ages, the power to announce in general the conditions on which God will pardon sinners. But it contains no authority to uninspired ministers to apply these promises

¹⁰⁷Ibid., p. 161. Quotes Baumgarten, Glaubenslehre, vol 3, pp. 256ff.

¹⁰⁸Ibid.

to individuals, the conditions of whose heart they cannot know as is done in private absolution.¹⁰⁹

It is now necessary to summarize all these statements to see the fallacy of his argument. First, he avoids any reference to Matt. 16:19 because this passage would establish the link between the three passages (Matt. 18:18 and John 20:23), as Baumgarten clearly points out by the expressions "to bind" and "to loose," common to both passages, and by the reference to the power bestowed on the disciples to forgive sins, as he needs to concede on the basis of the texts of John 20:23 and Matt. 18:18. Therefore, his repeated statement on the absence of a connection between the three texts has no valid foundation. Second, and here he even goes into a contradiction, he cannot ascribe to the church the church discipline (Matt. 18:18) and to the disciples the power of forgiving sins (John 20:23) because both were directed primarily to the disciples and, as was pointed out, both speak to the issue of forgiveness of sin. So, if it was an extraordinary gift to the disciples, also the power of discipline should be denied to the church. Moreover, the exercise of church discipline necessarily involves the power to forgive the repentant sinner who asks for it from the brother or from the church. Otherwise one should suppose that any action of church discipline always will end necessarily in excommunication. Thirdly, even if one can restrict the texts of Matt. 16:19 and John 20:23 to a general announcement, one cannot explain Matt. 18:15-18 in any other way than as an individual, particular, and "private" confession and absolution of the repentant sinner. Fourthly, he has no explanation, except for his division of the texts,

¹⁰⁹Idem, American Lutheranism Vindicated, pp. 100, 101; cf. Definitive Platform, Doctrinal and Disciplinarian, pp. 26, 27.

for the fact that the same power is ascribed to Peter, and to the church, and to the disciples.

The argument, based on these sedes doctrinae, therefore, answers his objections that one will not find in the Bible a command and an example of confession of sins to a minister, because the command is clear and there are a good number of examples, pointed out by Walther, both in the Old and in the New Testaments. Moreover, what is valid for a multitude should be valid for each person individually. It answers also the objection that only the Father and Christ can forgive sins and that ministers can only declare it and that only in a conditional way, because the texts prove that the minister is acting under God's command, in Christ's stead, and on behalf of the church which has the power of the Holy Spirit in the same way as the disciples, as Luther explained; therefore, he can impart forgiveness unconditionally.

Finally, as Schmucker repeatedly misunderstood the confessions and tries to prove "how dangerous the entire doctrine of absolution and sin-forgiving power of the ministry is to the spirituality of the church and to the doctrine of justification by grace alone,"¹¹⁰ it is necessary to call attention to some other aspects of his theology. First, nothing is more contrary to the Bible's central doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith and to the spirituality of the church than a mere conditional declaration of forgiveness that makes the assurance dependent on man's participation with "feelings" and "volition," his repentance and "his" faith which is Schmucker's position. Second, he

¹¹⁰ Idem, Definitive Platform, Doctrinal and Disciplinary, p. 26.

seems to be loaded with prejudice against individual confession and absolution because of the abuses of the Roman Catholic Church and because of his desire to get rid of all that seems to be "Romish," judging the commendation of confession and absolution as a concession of the Reformers to the other party. Thirdly, he fails to see how evangelical and pastoral are the Lutheran confessions, and there are few places where it is more evident than when they strongly commend absolution. Fourthly, to use the rejection of other churches in such a question as a reason for condemning is a dangerous step because then it is no longer the Bible that establishes doctrine and practice but one's conscience, letting it be ruled by others. Fifthly, to state that "at the same time, whilst we will not admit into our Synod any one who believes in . . . Private Confession,"^{lll} is a total rejection of the evangelical direction that the church judges doctrine by the rule of faith, but practices and ceremonies by the rule of love, as the confessions state: no divisions because of ceremonial differences. And finally, to insist on the practice of church discipline as if it were a sure sign of the true church, moreover without a faithful use of absolution, is no less than a sure sign of formalism and a legalistic orientation.

The study of Schmucker's theological positions and view of individual confession and absolution has proved the statement that it is a radical departure from Lutheran doctrine. One wonders how long a church body could stand by this doctrinal position and still use the name Lutheran. It seems that here one has reached the "bottom of the

^{lll}Ibid., p. 5.

well," and the only direction to go is a return to where one has left. This historical background of this return and its major causes have been already presented; one has now to see the shape taken by the turn of the century as portrayed in the theological positions of G. H. Gerberding.

George Henry Gerberding

G. H. Gerberding arrived on the scene one generation later, with the same background as Schmucker. He was also a professor of Practical Theology. In his writings will be found the same line of theological reasoning as followed by Schmucker, but in them can be seen a very sound and profound influence by Walther's theology. An anthropocentric view of salvation, especially in the teaching of regeneration or conversion, and, thereby causing a misunderstanding of the confessions, is still present. But the positions are not as radical against the truthfulness of the confessions, and his interpretation of the sedes doctrinae is nearly orthodox. It could be said that Gerberding reflects a change in the position of the Lutheran Church in America. Unfortunately, he, like Schmucker, falls short in the central doctrine of justification through faith, by grace.

Basic Doctrinal Positions

One of Gerberding's characteristic approaches is to analyze the problems of the church from economical, sociological, psychological, and educational understandings of the situation. His position is that the sinful nature of man is the constant, and the environmental conditions are the variables. Gerberding thinks one ought to know the dangers he faces, otherwise he cannot effectually guard himself against them. One

must search for the causes.¹¹² He is proud of the use of these "techniques" for the better understanding of people, problems, and environmental conditions. In his analysis he finds the causes of the problems in the rural parish, which in his day was the predominant type of Lutheran Church, in the area of education,¹¹³ especially in the school and in the congregation.¹¹⁴ In this regard he emphasizes the necessity of preparing the minister to have a real understanding of the individual and his environment, and the problems with which he has to cope. But he gives also this warning: "All this by no means is a substitute for the spiritual side of his private and public ministry but as an aid to it."¹¹⁵

Another main cause that he identifies is related to the manner in which ministers view their office. Besides a lack of dedication and earnestness he points to the fact that there is "too little earnest heart to heart talk of inner life, the soul's personal relation with God, little Seelsorge."¹¹⁶ Large parishes are also a cause of this situation of declining membership and spirituality in the church. Other causes include long vacancies or the absence of the pastor living in the city, away from the people. He also warns against the content of educational material and sermons; in these nothing is more prejudicial than a liberal theology that claims freedom from all Christian tradition and scoffs at creeds and confessions of faith.

¹¹²G. H. Gerberding, The Lutheran Church in the Country (Rock Island: Augustana Book Concern, 1925), p. 71.

¹¹³Ibid., pp. 75-78.

¹¹⁴Ibid., p. 79-88.

¹¹⁵Ibid., p. 81.

¹¹⁶Ibid., p. 100.

He tries to establish the main lines of his doctrinal position, first, in opposition to those who object to the integrity and inspiration of the Holy Scripture, as God-given Word, clear and true, and the reality of revelation, miracles, divine providence, prayer, and supernatural subjects; those who deny sin as corrupted nature, and, therefore, the necessity and possibility of a divine-human Redeemer and of vicarious atonement ascribing to Christ the function of a good teacher and a beautiful example; those who look to the ministry with critical eyes, charging it with exploiting and deceiving people; and those who believe that social science will supplant the Bible; and human organizations, the church. Second, he tries to stand between two tendencies which he identifies among Lutherans. One is the foolish and superficial imagining that supposes that to be seriously concerned for confessional orthodoxy means to be endangered spiritually;

We know full well that no church can have a sound and healthy life without sound and scriptural doctrine. We know that true spiritual life must flow out of and be the fruit of true teaching.¹¹⁷

The other tendency is of a narrow, cold, intellectual, view that is afraid to emphasize awakening conversion, experience, piety, and inner spiritual life because of the abuses. It is the view of those who see danger in the emphasis on the subjective side as if it would be detrimental to objective doctrine. Against this tendency he warns that "there is a danger in our doctrine loving church, of being content with the doctrine and neglecting the fruits;" and that "the first problem is

¹¹⁷Idem, Problems and Possibilities (Columbia: Lutheran Board of Publication, 1914), p. 45.

not to lay over and over again the foundations of the doctrine"¹¹⁸ but the development of a deeper spiritual life. And so he proposes to seek a combination of care for sound doctrine and an earnest insistence and appreciation for a deep and growing experience. According to Gerberding these "two sides of true Lutheranism are emphasized and urged in the Privateseelsorge ."¹¹⁹

Gerberding states that it is "in her Dogmatic Theology" that "the Church's Fundamentals are to be found,"¹²⁰ and that the Lutheran Church has a clear and deep theology and understanding of biblical teaching on the person and work of Jesus Christ, on the sovereign grace of God, on how the divine grace is brought to men, and on the doctrine of the means of grace, in a way that the sovereignty of God is harmonized with man's responsibility. He recognizes the Word as a spirit-bearing vehicle of the renewing and sanctifying grace; Baptism as a means of regeneration, bringing people into a covenant of grace; the Lord's Supper as the real presence of the glorified Christ; and the central doctrine of justification, whose comprehension, acceptance, and appreciation is a fountain of joy. All these teachings are precious to the Church, but he stresses even more the necessity of a reviving, a conversion, a rising of the soul from the sleep that dominates so many members of the church and whose end is spiritual death.

¹¹⁸Ibid., pp. 45, 46.

¹¹⁹Idem, Lutheran Church in the Country, p. 110.

¹²⁰Idem, Lutheran Fundamentals (Rock Island: Augustana Book Concern, 1925), p. 26.

Repeatedly Gerberding excuses himself with the fact that he is not a man of Systematics, which would not be a problem if his expositions were clear and consistent. The most consistent trait, which follows the traditional line of exposition of his church, is that he begins his argumentation on justification with the question of conversion, which he defines as:

. . . a turning or facing about -- a returning or a changing of direction. . . . It means a turning from sin to righteousness, from Satan to God. The transgressor who had been walking in the way of disobedience and enmity against God, and towards eternal death, is turned about into the way of righteousness. . . . This is a change of direction, but it is also something more. It is a change of state -- from a state of sin to a state of grace. It is still more, it is a change of nature -- from a sinner into a saint. It is finally a change of relation -- from outcast and stranger into a child and heir. Thus there is a outward and an inward turning, a complete change. (Acts 26:18).¹²¹

Conversion happens in one's heart when he prays in the words of the psalmist (85:4; cf. Jer. 31:8; Lam. 5:21). Especially in the case of children Gerberding speaks in terms of regeneration as the action by which the Holy Spirit recreates the child, giving him a new birth from above, a birth of the Spirit. By this first work of the Holy Spirit the beginnings of a new life are implanted.

Conversion, or regeneration, has two constituent elements: penitence and faith. Penitence, or contrition, is the acknowledgement of sin, the sense of sinfulness, the hatred of sin, the longing for forgiveness and deliverance from sin, and a breaking away from sin. It is the recognition of his own damnable state and the justice of God's wrath and condemnation. This is the first and the negative element of

¹²¹Idem, The Way of Salvation (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1887), pp. 139, 140.

the new life. The other, the positive element, is faith; it looks upward. After the individual has found no deliverance in himself, God brings the gospel into his life whereby the Holy Spirit begets faith, he then sees in Christ the One who has taken all his sin upon Himself and suffered all that he deserved to suffer. He casts himself upon the Savior, and finds in Him a free, a full salvation, and peace. In short, "he who has thus experienced contrition for sin . . . and surrendered himself to Christ has new life."¹²² True penitence always grows into faith, and true faith always presupposes penitence; where one is the other is also together there, and where both are, there is conversion. He says:

Penitence, therefore, is not something that goes before conversion, and faith something that follows after, and conversion an indefinable something sandwiched in between . . . but penitence and faith are the constituent elements that make up conversion.¹²³

Gerberding says also that he avoids the use of the term repentance for the sake of clarity, because this term embraces not only penitence but also faith. And he makes a distinction between regeneration, which happens in infants, and conversion, which requires consciousness and happens in adults. That he speaks of conversion as a state,¹²⁴ and his distinctions between penance and faith, and between conversion and

¹²² Idem, Lutheran Fundamentals, p. 188; cf. p. 201; The Way of Salvation, pp. 140-42.

¹²³ Idem, The Way of Salvation, p. 142.

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 152: "Can each one then tell whether he is at present in a converted state or not? . . . look in his heart and see how his sins affect him. . . . Does he earnestly long and strive to be rid of them? Does he daily turn to Jesus Christ for forgiveness and strength? . . . he has the elements and evidences of conversion and the new life."

regeneration, in the terms he proposes, are evidence that he includes the work of man in the work of salvation. His distinction of penance is not clear and correct because many of the aspects he ascribes to it are already features of faith.

His anthropocentric view of salvation becomes evident in that the most important question is: "What part does the human will have in conversion?"¹²⁵ Nevertheless, he presents two answers to this question that are at least confused if not contradictory. In his book Lutheran Fundamentals he makes this comment on the question:

. . . some Lutheran theologians come dangerously near to teaching the same kind of destructive doctrine when they emphatically and persistently insist . . . that man can do nothing at all toward his salvation. Unexplained . . . such a statement is dangerous. . . .
 . . . The question as to man's agency in his own conversion ought never to be studied without ever keeping in mind that Grace comes through Means . . . the Holy Spirit comes through Law and through Gospel. Through Law He wakes contrition. Through Gospel He enkindles faith.¹²⁶

But in another work, The Way of Salvation, he states something different:

Thus is the whole man in darkness, blindness, ignorance, slavery to Satan, and at enmity with God. He is in a state of spiritual death. The will is equally affected by this total depravity. If the natural man cannot even see, discern or know the things of the Spirit, how much less can he will to do them.¹²⁷

He even points to a quotation from Luther in the Formula of Concord: "In spiritual and divine things which pertain to the salvation of the soul man is . . . like a lifeless statue, which uses . . . neither senses nor heart (Matt. 3:9),"¹²⁸ to come to the conclusion that before conversion,

¹²⁵Idem, Lutheran Fundamentals, p. 207.

¹²⁶Ibid., p. 209.

¹²⁷Idem, The Way of Salvation, p. 156.

¹²⁸Ibid.

man is utterly impotent to will or to do anything towards his renewal:
 "At first, the will is doubtless entirely passive."¹²⁹

In the tension between these two positions he leans slightly toward the former. Gerberding answers the question very minutely, explaining that the first thoughts and movements of human will are preparatory steps produced by the Spirit through the Word. He calls these first approaches of divine influence and advanced signals of grace prevenient grace, because it goes before all other in the return of the soul to God. He comes up with the statement: "This preparatory Grace comes to the sinner unsought (Zech. 4:6; 1 Cor. 12:3). It is entirely the work of the Holy Spirit upon the sinner."¹³⁰

But then he says that the will begins to take part in the process. The individual must assume an attitude, because to resist or to remain non-resistant to the holy influences requires a positive act of the will that man puts forth by his own strength. If he, with the assistance of prevenient grace, permits it to do its works, the process goes on, his will being renewed by this infusion from God's will. At this point prevenient grace becomes operating grace, and as the man increases his efforts and "works out his own salvation" it becomes cooperative grace. Gerberding goes even further pointing out that in this process the church's environment, one's past experiences, each person's different psychological constitution, and especially the fact that one goes to hear the Word and permits grace to work on him, is evidence that

¹²⁹Ibid., p. 157.

¹³⁰Ibid., p. 158.

the individual "thus does something toward his own conversion,"¹³¹ at least by not resisting. His conclusion is:

And thus our Lutheran doctrine of Grace through the means of Grace clears away all difficulties and avoids all contradictions. It gives God all the glory and throws on man all the responsibility.¹³²

With an analysis of his concept of justification it is easy to understand why he believes he is still on the same ground as Luther and in the same experience of justification by faith, when in fact he really is far away. In the effort for a logical and plausible explanation of the work of Christ for us and His work in us, he became misdirected.

Otherwise he could not have said:

. . . no man ever was saved without the Atonement. And yet the Atonement alone never did and never could save man. Man was still unsaved, still sinful, still guilty and condemned. He needed to take, to appropriate to himself the purchased salvation. Man had to be made fit for salvation. . . . Man's sinful nature needed to be changed, to be made over, before he could be made a partaker of the salvation purchased for him.¹³³

When Gerberding looks to Luther's "tower experience," he does this from his anthropocentric point of view. In his opinion Luther discovered that the righteousness acceptable to God was wrought out by Christ and coming to believe this, out of his broken and contrite heart he did reach up a trembling hand and grasped Christ and so was justified on account of Christ.

It is really amazing how clearly and truly he can explain justification:

¹³¹Idem, Lutheran Fundamentals, p. 209; cf. The Way of Salvation, p. 160.

¹³²Idem, The Way of Salvation, p. 161.

¹³³Idem, Lutheran Fundamentals, p. 152.

It is that act of God in which He forgives the penitent and believing sinner all his sins . . . declares him righteous. . . . All this he does solely on account of the merit and satisfaction of Christ, apprehended and appropriated by faith. Justification is not a change in man's nature, but a change in his standing before God. . . . Justification takes place . . . outside of man and for man. It is a judicial act of God. The originating cause of justification is the love of God . . . worked out that wonderful scheme of redemption whereby He could be just and yet justify the ungodly.¹³⁴

And then he goes on to explain that justifying faith comes out of a penitent heart that reaches up, lays hold of Christ, and makes His righteousness its own. But "it is not the faith that works or merits justification," rather "it is Christ who justifies."¹³⁵ He cannot help but lay stress on the aspect of faith as something related, as is penitence with emotions and feelings.

It is beyond understanding that he can give such a clear and faithful teaching, and then drop out and fall short by this final statement on justification:

We have placed justification next to regeneration; they belong together. In thought we may keep them apart. It is important that we ever bear in mind the distinction between the two. . . . But, in time they go together. When one is regenerated, then at that moment he is also justified. Penitence and faith are the content of regeneration. How could one have these and not be justified.¹³⁶

Concerning the means of grace, Gerberding still considers the Word as the principal means, identifying with it the power of the keys. But contrary to Schmucker he teaches that the Word not only tells about sin and salvation, but also:

. . . delivers from sin and confers salvation . . . points out the way of life . . . carries us into and along that way . . . instructs concerning . . . the Holy Spirit . . . conveys that Spirit to the

¹³⁴ Ibid., pp. 192, 193.

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 194.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 198.

very mind and heart . . . through it the Holy Spirit works repentance and faith.¹³⁷

He also teaches that God's plan always was to work through human instruments, bringing His saving grace to man through men. He identifies the saving operations of the Holy Spirit with the Word of God, therefore he considers the means all sufficient and their use imperative for growth in the Christians' spiritual life.

Concerning the doctrine of the Christian church one finds in Gerberding a simple but clear, biblical and confessional understanding in all the meanings of the word. Also, following Luther, he recognizes the right of the laymen in the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers to teach the Word to others, to exercise the power of the keys, to administer the sacraments in emergencies, to offer spiritual sacrifices (Rom. 12:1; 1 Pet. 2:5), to pray for others, and to pass judgment on doctrines in the light of Holy Scripture. He also recognizes the office of the ministry wherein pastors teach and act officially as representatives of the church.¹³⁸

In the study of Gerberding's theological position it has been shown that a humanistic anthropocentric view of the way of salvation necessarily causes the misapplication of orthodox Lutheran theology as so clearly defined according to God's Word. The result is that there is neither a clear understanding of the doctrine of absolution nor a good appreciation for individual confession and absolution, even though Gerberding's position represents an advance in relation to that of Schmucker.

¹³⁷Idem, The Way of Salvation, pp. 131, 132.

¹³⁸Idem, Problems and Possibilities, pp. 77, 78.

The Doctrine of Absolution and the Practice of
Individual Confession and Absolution

The differences between the theological positions of Schmucker and Gerberding have been delineated. These differences are also clearly reflected in the attention that each gives to confession and absolution. How much their positions differ can be seen in the way each explains and relates the basic biblical texts on this issue. Had Gerberding taken the correct position on the doctrine of justification and not fallen short, he would not have taken a wrong step in denying the power to impart forgiveness through absolution after he had so correctly expounded this doctrine.

Gerberding understands that in Matt. 18:18 Jesus, with the same words, gives the same power, as He had given to Peter (16:19), to all the disciples as representatives of the Christian congregation, and that the passage in John 20:23 corroborates this interpretation. He recognizes also that by these words Christ has given to His Bride, the Church, the keys of His kingdom and authorized her to dispense its treasures, through her ministers, to all men (cf. Luke 10:16; 2 Cor. 5:20; 2:10). His conclusion is:

If now we take these passages together we must admit that in their plain literal sense, they do teach that Christ, the Head of the Church, has in the same sense committed to His Church the power to remit and to retain sins, and that this power is exercised in the church through its ministry.¹³⁹

He even goes so far as to state that this power is not given to the ministers by their own inherent virtue, nor by power that arises from their person, because in this sense only God has this power, but

¹³⁹Idem, The Way of Salvation, p. 125.

they exercise it in God's name by the power the Lord Himself gave to them through the mediation of the church. But then he stopped short of reaching the right understanding, even recognizing the absolution, as the proclamation of the gospel, "when spoken by the minister, is just as effective as when it fell from the lips of Christ or His inspired apostles," he concludes:

. . . he does nothing else than declare Christ's absolution. It is the Word of God, that still remits and retains, that binds and looses. . . . The pastor can only declare . . . but the Word itself does effectually work forgiveness to him that rightly receives it.¹⁴⁰

His error is the same as the one pointed out by Luther (on The Keys), he dissociates the keys as if one were ours, the other the Lord's.

In view of the meaning and benefits of the Lord's Supper, which he seems to acknowledge, and also because of his emphasis on the pastoral responsibility and care for the participants, Gerberding strongly commends the use of a service of public confession and absolution.¹⁴¹ One needs to observe, however, that in this service the absolution is only declared, and after this a short but emphatic admonition is pronounced against the impenitent or hypocrite, thus revealing his legalistic spirit.

Concerning individual confession he correctly interprets the spirit of the Lutheran confessions in their commendation of it. He asserts that "surely there is nothing unscriptural or unevangelical

¹⁴⁰Ibid., p. 126.

¹⁴¹Idem, The Lutheran Pastor (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1902), pp. 329-35.

in this old pastoral custom."¹⁴² Where the custom is properly conducted he also recognizes its advantages, for the pastor and the congregation in the care of each individual. It certainly would provide the opportunity for the development of a relationship between pastor and members which would help in the process of growing in grace, in growing in spiritual knowledge, and in walking in the way of sanctification, if the pastor:

. . . could have a private and confidential interview with each communicant every few months on the particular needs, trials, temptations, sins, and sorrows of that soul. If everyone would thus confidingly and fully open up his heart and his private thoughts to his pastor, what a help to the pastor in administering the specially needed with instruction, reproof, warning, encouragement, and consolation.¹⁴³

But by posing many "ifs," he expresses his concern that individual confession and absolution may become a repetition of certain forms and a source of danger for the church's spirituality. Although he considers the practice an open question he would not see its abandonment as a loss:

Better have no private confession and absolution than such sacrilegious mockery. It is perilous to the soul of the confessor and leaves a fearful accountability on the pastor.¹⁴⁴

At this point in almost all of his books¹⁴⁵ he proposes as a "good substitute," for individual confession and absolution "the real pastoral visits," emphasizing the advantage of the pastor seeking out

¹⁴² Idem, Lutheran Fundamentals, p. 234.

¹⁴³ Idem, The Lutheran Pastor, pp. 331-32.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 333.

¹⁴⁵ Cf. The Lutheran Church in the Country, pp. 167, 168; The Lutheran Pastor, pp. 333, 371-78; Problems and Possibilities, pp. 51, 52; Lutheran Fundamentals, p. 235.

the reluctant member. One ought to agree that Gerberding expressed a true pastoral responsibility that looks for solutions and seeks to provide new ways to replace those he felt should be abandoned. But pastoral visits are not a substitute for individual confession and absolution; they are really a way to develop this old and wise custom of the church. Certainly the same problems threaten both confession and absolution and the practice of pastoral visits, and are not easy to overcome, but the results will make the effort worthwhile. Certainly the pastor, who wants to know each one of his flock, will seek out those who do not come to him for admonition, guidance, and consolation, and will reassure each individual penitent sinner of God's grace and forgiveness.

CHAPTER III

CONCLUSION

One of the goals of this study has been to highlight the close connection between pastoral care and individual confession and absolution. Through the historical study it was shown how absolution was theologically understood and practically applied for the purpose of pastoral care by a confessional Lutheran theologian, C. F. W. Walther, in contrast with S. S. Schmucker and G. H. Gerberding. Another goal has been to emphasize the vital importance of restoring the biblically based and time-tested resource of individual confession and absolution as an effective means of pastoral care. Furthermore, it was shown that the insights, methods, and techniques of the behavioral sciences must not be neglected but judiciously integrated and applied along with the given Christian resources. In both the objectives the main emphasis lies on the biblical and confessional position of the Lutheran church.

Walter Koehler presents fifteen points to demonstrate how individual confession and absolution enriches the ministry of pastoral care.¹ His statements may be succinctly summarized in this way:

1. Individual confession and absolution emphasizes people's problems as being primarily spiritual, calling for spiritual solutions centered in justification. Individual confession and absolution avoids

¹Walter Koehler, Counseling and Confession (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982), pp. 73-75.

needless digressions into peripheral areas and brings about a practical application of justification to restore a person to a right relationship with God.

2. Individual confession and absolution expressly applies the very heart of the gospel (the key element of pastoral care) to people's troubled hearts.
3. Individual confession and absolution surpasses the results of psychotherapeutic resources (catharsis, insight, and self-awareness) in removing sin and guilt by the effective means of God's forgiveness.
4. It expresses the meaning of baptism for one's daily life for in confession sin and sinner ("old Adam") are put to death and through absolution a new creature comes alive in Christ.
5. The serious dealing with sin in confession breaks any circle of self-deception as one admits responsibility for a specific sin.
6. In absolution the reality of a living (personal) God is acknowledged. God, who is the ultimate measure of all things, grants forgiveness through the person of the minister.
7. God's Word in individual confession and absolution accomplishes His purpose by applying to each one's life the proclamation of law and gospel.
8. Individual confession and absolution highlights the function of faith and enhances it, bringing healing and strength by the promise of forgiveness and by the Christian's personal hope in Christ.
9. The isolation built up by concealing sin is broken by confession and forgiveness, bringing the person back into the communion of the church represented by the pastor.

10. Individual confession and absolution is a direct and effective therapeutic resource in Seelsorge that brings cure to the total personality.
11. Individual confession and absolution is central and unique in providing a pastoral and theological perspective to pastoral care as it is threatened by its close connection with contemporary psychology and psychotherapy.
12. The biblical theology embodied in individual confession and absolution reiterates pastoral care's (practical theology) theological basis and interrelation with other theological disciplines (particularly systematic theology). This interrelation is placed in jeopardy because of the influence of psychology.
13. Having their focus on the ministry of reconciliation pastoral care and individual confession and absolution are kept in congruence with the church's purpose (bringing restoration and salvation) and within an eschatological dimension.
14. The practice of individual confession and absolution within pastoral care has great possibilities for renewal of the congregation's spiritual life (new and sustained life in Christ).
15. The foci of pastoral care and individual confession and absolution converge in that the frequent participation in this practice prevents repressed anxiety, brings problems into the open, and lets God's love and grace work continually.

The conclusions of the present study coincide with some of Koehler's main statements, however, the approach and the mode of establishing the chief interrelations between individual confession and

absolution and pastoral care are different. The conclusion is under the following subtitles: (1) the integration of theology and psychology in pastoral care, (2) the tensions between theology and psychology in the area of anthropology, (3) the meaning of pastoral care, and (4) the doctrine of absolution and the practice of individual confession and absolution.

The Integration of Theology and Psychology in Pastoral Care

The historical development of pastoral care and counseling runs parallel to that of psychotherapy. They will continue to affect each other since both deal with humanity's basic problems and utilize many of the same techniques. The integration of the insights of the behavioral sciences with the Christian means of pastoral care, as it occurs in practice, is imperative and beneficial. This integration is achieved within the person of the pastor under clear theological principles embodied in the "God-given practical aptitude" of the pastor, by which he unites both areas in a judicious theological process of assimilation. Pastoral care receives challenges and incentives from the insights of psychotherapy on human nature (unity and wholeness) and problems (personality disorders, conflicts and broken relationships), on sensitivity and acquaintance to human needs, as well as from its techniques used to identify needs and to communicate availability. Pastoral care's most important contribution to this integrated approach is in the area of theology and faith: the importance of the spiritual needs in the total dimension of a person. The integration of theology and psychology avoids the "dangers of having a theology which is largely removed from life," as

well as "a psychology which attempts to speak authoritatively to all of man's needs."² The discriminating use of the insights, methods, and techniques from psychology and psychotherapy under clear biblical and confessional principles affirms the primacy of the church's theological heritage in pastoral care. Such integration does not fail either to honestly appraise the real differences between the fields of theology and psychology, or the fact that while working in the same area the two disciplines have different approaches and goals. Some of the ministerial functions and objectives (visiting the sick, guiding youth, preaching, teaching and evangelism), in fact, come closer to those of psychotherapy: alleviating emotional distress and anxiety, resolving conflicts, helping people to fulfill their potential as human beings in societal and professional life. However, psychotherapy's goal is to make people feel good and to change conflicting behavior (horizontal plane); its tools are the therapist's skills and the individual's capacity of self-correction. Pastoral care, on the other hand, establishes as the pastor's specific role and basic goal his being instrumental in bringing man into right relationship with God through the gospel. By proclaiming law and gospel he seeks fundamentally to create, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, a new person, who enjoys the new and sustained life in Jesus Christ, forgiveness of sins and a reconciled relationship with God and his fellowmen, and abundant life and salvation (vertical plane). The pastor's tools are basically God's means of grace through which the Holy Spirit is working. All of these aspects are organically integrated in pastoral care.

²Peters, "Counseling and Evangelical Theology:" 7, quoted in Koehler, Counseling and Confession, p. 28.

Other areas of divergence which have been positively acknowledged are: (1) the scope of concern, which is narrower in psychotherapy, but in pastoral care embodies the emotional and the spiritual (the total) dimension(s) of personality. Pastoral care is effective also with situations where psychotherapy is not. (2) The life perspective in psychotherapy refers to here and now, while in pastoral care there is a sense of purpose which takes into consideration God's action through his people in history and in its consummation in eternity. It is, therefore, a sign of a sound integration of the areas of theology and psychology when Word and sacrament, individual confession and absolution and other Christian resources (pastoral conversation, prayer, Christian fellowship, liturgical formulae and benedictions) have precedence over scientific methods and techniques, in dealing with man's basic problem, sin. This precedence is also a fundamental step in preserving pastoral care's uniqueness.

Failure in achieving this integration is one of the causes of the reciprocal suspicion among the areas of theology. On one hand, the psychological methods of pastoral care and counseling are superficially adapted to Christian faith and lack theological direction because the theological issues involved are not dealt with comprehensively, raising suspicion over the practical area. On the other hand, as exegetical, historical, and systematic theology do not address human needs in relevant terms and lack practical application because they fail to provide consistent theological direction to the practical area, suspicion is raised against them also. The failure of this integration further results in pastoral care's incapacity to accomplish its task of guidance in pastoral counseling; psychotherapy consequently increasingly continues

to fill the gap. This situation is the reason why pastoral care is being thrust into programming that brings confusion as to its nature, purpose, and functions, when facing men's problems in life and the challenges of research in the area of psychotherapy. The study of the theology and practice of absolution by the different areas of theology presents itself as a rich source towards their integration and mutual enrichment, evincing their interdependence.

The Tension Between Theology and Psychology in the Area of Anthropology

The basic point of tension is in the divergences of theology and psychology in anthropology (the concept of man's nature). It is also necessary to be attentive to the tension which has developed between liberal and conservative theological views. Liberal theology comes very close to the humanistic presuppositions of the behavioral sciences and, therefore, receives rather uncritically the new trends in psychology and psychotherapy. For liberal theology the insights of these sciences not only best represent the values of Christian faith but are authoritative along with the Scriptures and indispensable for the full understanding of faith. The humanistic presuppositions (anthropocentric view of man's nature) emphasize human wisdom and potential (innate capacity to choose to do good) and action (capacity of self-correcting) to achieve wholeness and fulfillment here and now. If a person is given insight and self-awareness he is enabled to live in a wholesome and meaningful relationship with himself and others. Liberal theology emphasizes man's capacity to solve his problems (God's grace cooperates with man) and is at fault in minimizing, if not contradicting, the very basic biblical tenets of

man's sinful state, the centrality of the gospel (the clear application of law and gospel), the indispensability of the means of grace, and the full meaning of justification and regeneration. Its humanistic views do not leave "much room for a theology which seriously considers sin, personal salvation and biblical absolutes."³ Conservative theology in contra-distinction starts from a theocentric (God as the primary focus) point of view of man's nature, as a sinner completely lost, powerless and hostile to God but beloved of Him. It is on this basis that conservative theology deals with issues such as sin, human abilities, freedom of will, conscience, guilt and forgiveness. The problem of human depravity is only adequately addressed in the gospel of forgiveness pastorally applied in the dynamics of law and gospel completely relating the sinner to his gracious God and assuring that sinner that he is redeemed and now whole. The authority of the scriptures and an unyielding conviction in matters of the Christian faith are the basis for a theologically centered pastoral care. It has been demonstrated that a confessional theological position is fundamental for a mature practice of pastoral care and for the practice of pastoral care and for the practice of individual confession and absolution.

Liberal theology operates conversely. In relation to pastoral care it causes the depreciation of Christian theological heritage, the departure from its ministerial roots, the loss of its uniqueness, and the surfacing of doubts on the authority of Christian faith and practice. In relation to individual confession and absolution it brings about the abandonment, the denial of the power to impart forgiveness and

³Koehler, Counseling and Confession, p. 19.

consequently the denial of basic Christian doctrine. The definition of pastoral care itself demonstrates that it must be solidly anchored on Christian theology, particularly on those doctrines with which it is in direct relationship (the Christian church, the priesthood of all believers, the holy ministry and the "call"), in order to maintain its identity and uniqueness. Only in this way definite guidelines are provided for the ministry of pastoral care (to apply law and gospel) and for the pastor's definition of his role and goals. On this positive basis the pastor not only finds his identity but also the impetus to inquire into the meaning of this identity for him personally. In the same way the theology and practice of individual confession and absolution reflects the basic Christian doctrines inherent in it, chiefly the guiding principles of the Lutheran Reformation, namely, that God's promises in Christ grant free forgiveness to those who believe in the promises (solus Christus, sola Scriptura, sola gratia and sola fide). In fact both pastoral care and confession and absolution respond to biblical theology by dealing theologically and functionally in the appropriate way (at the ultimate level) with the problem of sin, guilt and alienation from God and other men. This is not achieved when pastoral care draws too heavily from psychotherapy. Pastoral care is a channel for delivering God's healing grace since it applies, under God's explicit mandate, the Word (law and gospel) and the sacraments, including also other Christian resources through which the gospel is presented to guide men not only to acknowledge his sinfulness but also to receive God's forgiveness through faith. Recognizing that this is in its essence and purpose the Lutheran

concept of individual confession and absolution,⁴ one establishes its intimate connection with pastoral care. It is precisely the importance of individual confession and absolution as a pastoral application of justification by grace through faith and its decreasing use that raise the question on how effectively and truthfully Lutherans are dealing with sin and grace, law and gospel. One must fully consider whether this disuse is an indication of superficial understanding of the Lutheran doctrinal treasure and of the meaning of the ministry of reconciliation, or a sign of weak confidence and crisis in authentic pastoral ministry, or ultimately both together. In all ways it appears to be the neglect of an important aspect of the ministry.⁵

The Meaning of Pastoral Care

The third point focuses on some specific and direct causes of the "blurring and overgeneralization of the entire ministry,"⁶ the clouding of "a meaningful determination of what constitutes both the public ministry and the effecting of authentic pastoral care."⁷ Pastoral care is distinguished from the other helping professions in that it is in congruence with the church's main ministry being centered in proclaiming the gospel with the purpose of improving the individual's relationship

⁴Knut M. Enger, "Private Confession in American Lutheranism," Doctoral diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1962, p. 1.

⁵Koehler, Counseling and Confession, pp. 54, 76-77. See also Enger, "Private Confession," pp. 2-3.

⁶William A. Clebsch and Charles R. Jaekle, Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964), p. 68.

⁷Koehler, Counseling and Confession, p. 10.

with God. Pastoral care, that is pastoral calls, visits to the sick, the shut-in, the dying, the bereaved, the distressed and the delinquent, is also distinguished from other ministerial work (teaching, preaching, worshiping and evangelism) in that the pastoral attitude of the minister communicates his willingness to help people deal with emotionally and spiritually loaded situations. Once again the main causes of confusion have been identified in the doctrinal misconceptions on the nature of the Christian church and of the office of the ministry, which become evident in the different meanings given to the term "pastoral" as well as in the wrong understanding of the function of pastoral theology. The term "pastoral" must be understood in its proper and strictest sense that defines pastoral care as an exclusive function of the minister (pastor). The theological input of pastoral care is maintained according to its definition and the correct understanding of pastoral theology (not a "theory" but a God-given practical ability), by the fact that the person who carries on this ministry is a pastor-theologian. This means that he is enabled for the ministry in general (practical theology) and pastoral care in particular by God through a given and cultivated practical aptitude embodying faith and the disposition to put it into practice, through special gifts for the ministry (charismata) and through the study of theology, arts and sciences and finally qualified to the pastorate by a divine call from a congregation (rite vocatus).

The fact that pastoral care is developed within the church structure and the framework of the church's mission as a ministry of law and gospel with the goal of bringing comfort, strength and assurance of forgiveness (reconciliation) in specific situations, mostly to individuals,

together with the biblical truth that it is an exclusive function of the pastor, who speaks instead of God and by His command on behalf of the whole congregation, all make evident the close connection between pastoral care and the practice of individual confession and absolution. Thus, pastoral care when properly understood and especially when employing the means of individual confession and absolution helps to clarify the function of the ministry and the pastor to identify himself with it. Since both cooperate precisely to emphasize the main thrusts of the pastoral ministry, the integrated practice of pastoral care and individual confession and absolution also enriches the whole of the pastor's ministerial functions, which are clearly distinguished but definitely interrelated.

From the above explanation it is clear that pastoral care and individual confession and absolution are theologically connected, since both are applications of law and gospel to the individual's life needed to bring about God's reconciliation with Him, as well as practically connected, since the latter is one of the best instruments by which the first is accomplished. "All individual confession and absolution has within it elements of pastoral care."⁸ The acknowledgment of the connection between pastoral care and individual confession and absolution has a long tradition within the Lutheran Church as was evidenced in the historical overview, particularly in those periods of history and among

⁸Ibid., p. 57. See also p. 76: "The above factors outline the tremendous contribution that individual confession and absolution has for the pastoral counselor, underscoring the claim that individual confession and absolution is one of the best resources in pastoral care."

those theologians who maintained strong confessional theology as the basis of their pastoral concern for people and Christian living.

The Doctrine of Absolution and the Practice of
Individual Confession and Absolution

To highlight the basic findings of this study on the Lutheran doctrine of absolution we must say, first, that it is based on the acknowledgment of the theological principles of the Christian faith and of Christian liberty. These two aspects are essential to establish the practice of individual confession and absolution free of legalism, which either abuses or rejects the doctrine of absolution, and to carry out this practice in pastoral care in an evangelical way. The importance of absolution is that it emphasizes the gospel by proclaiming and granting complete and unconditional forgiveness (sola gratia) which is the basis of true liberty in Christ. Thus absolution in the Lutheran view stands in contradistinction to penance, imposed as a meritorious work, and to the denial of the practice of individual absolution (which includes the denial of the gospel) as if this denial were a right of Christian liberty. Absolution expresses remission, acquittal, forgiveness, pardon and newness of life, in short, justification. C. F. W. Walther, for example, provides a summary of the doctrinal basis of the practice of individual confession and absolution;⁹ it starts with God's plan for men's salvation accomplished in Christ's redeeming work and concludes with the church's function of proclaiming the gospel, particularly as this is done in granting forgiveness through the office of

⁹See chapter II, footnote 38; C. F. W. Walther, The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel, trans. W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1929), pp. 169-70.

the ministry and each Christian by exercising the power given by Christ. He identifies the gospel with absolution¹⁰ and connects individual confession and absolution directly with the means of grace (Word and sacrament) by their mutual relation to the article of saving grace. On the basis of the sedes doctrinae (Matt. 16:19; 18:18; John 20:23) Walther presents the biblical basis of the doctrine and practice of absolution. With confession and absolution under the office of the keys, he connects it to the power in which Christ's and our acts are united in one and the same action of forgiving or retaining sin. The Lutheran theological view of absolution also stresses the function of faith. The means of grace are the tools through which God bestows his grace and abundant forgiveness, works faith and increases his work in our lives. This makes the constant use of the means, in all forms in which they are presented, vital for sinners. As the means of grace once generated faith, by which redemption is received, now they bring strength to faith and deepen the desire for forgiveness (repentance as contrition and faith), which is granted in the gospel and embraced by faith. Finally, faith, strengthened by the means, moves into action, into the practice of love.

Second, by the doctrine and practice of individual confession and absolution, "as a direct pastoral application of justification by grace through faith,"¹¹ has a specific connection with the doctrine of the church and that of the office of the ministry, particularly with pastoral care. Both, the doctrine and practice of absolution, highlight

¹⁰See chapter II, footnote 31; Walther, Law and Gospel, p. 174.

¹¹Koehler, Counseling and Confession, p. 67.

the office of the pastor as a divinely established ministry within the church. It is a powerful and efficacious ministry because God himself is active through the Word. Within the ministry of the Word individual confession and absolution has proved to be one of the clearest and most instructive ways to apply law and gospel in an individual's life.¹² Through the call the pastor becomes a servant of the keys: he acts instead of and by God's command, and on behalf of the congregation. Thus, in granting absolution he is applying Jesus' authority to forgive sins. He personally can and ought to be confident of this in order not to drive people either to false confidence or to doubt and mistrust. On the contrary, if one is unrepentant or self-confident he is to convict him of sin; but when one is troubled by sin he must bring him peace and healing by the assurance of forgiveness that overcomes the dreadfulness of sin. Law and gospel are here applied to very concrete and personal situations. Sin cannot be denied but must be put to death in confession; on the other hand grace and forgiveness are given in their fullest measure (note the parallel with the sacraments) to each one individually.

Lutheran theology highly values individual confession and absolution because of the doctrine and because of the efficacy, within pastoral care, as a means to provide consolation, forgiveness, strength, advice and training, all stemming from the assurance of God's presence and action in and through the church. It is a means to develop awe

¹²Richard R. Caemmerer, The Pastor at Work (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1960), p. 289: "Through individual confession and absolution a burdened soul is freed and delivered, as is possible through no other process, situation, or relationship. It is an awesome yet wonderful gift which the Lord has given, of which more should be made in the ministry and the cure of souls."

and confidence toward God, deep sensitiveness toward a brother's problem, Christian fellowship and personal humbleness, all vital expressions of unity in the church.¹³ The existence of local congregations and of the ministerial office are at the base of the practice of individual confession and absolution as an effective means for a ministry of reconciliation, sustaining, guiding and healing. Lutheran theologians, following Luther, recommended the practice of individual confession and absolution as profitable along with the examination (exploratio) of the Christian faith preparing for participation in the Lord's Supper. This practice arose for doctrinal reasons and pastoral concern; it was conducted evangelically for correction, instruction and guidance of the young and the simpleminded people who lack understanding. But they recognized the merits of individual confession and absolution to deal individually with persons in trouble, temptation, failure and doubt as happen to human beings many times in this life.

On the one hand, pietistic teaching puts emphasis on contrition and amendment of life, the Roman Church stresses penance, confession and satisfaction, and psychotherapy works anthropocentrically with the concepts of guilt and catharsis. On the other hand, Lutheran theology emphasizes absolution, but does not neglect the aspects of repentance and newness of life. Confession is always done in God's presence; it is not a merely psychological or emotional phenomenon but one of spiritual

¹³Koehler, Counseling and Confession, pp. 46, 71. "The power and strength which God gives to the whole body, the church, is available to each individual. Individual confession is one of the avenues which leads to the sharing of burdens in soul care." "The practice of individual confession and absolution involves both a ministry functioning on the local level through the office of a pastor, and the exercise of a ministry of reconciliation for every one."

dimension. Confession involves the individual's acknowledgment of his transgression of God's law and the expression of faith, which desires forgiveness and the willingness to commit his life to God's will. Both confession of sin and amendment of life result from God's grace as the expression of a believing heart filled with gratitude that sin and guilt have been removed and with the decision to walk by the Spirit in newness of life. There is no doubt that in dealing with guilt one has to consider the existence of subjective "guilt feelings" and the "psychological" need of confession and assurance to provide relief from anxiety which terrifies the conscience. There are also subjective experiences that explain why a person may manifest uncertainty about God's forgiveness. But by emphasizing absolution as a bestowal of forgiveness obtained by Christ the question of guilt is raised from the area of human feelings or human psychological dynamics to a theological dimension where faith as a gift from God is the means by which a person appropriates forgiveness. The power is centered in the gospel; this prevents the person from placing his confidence in his suffering, repentance, confession, tears and struggle, merits and disposition to improve his life, or on the person of the pastor. Forgiveness is, then, something objective that really happens through the gospel. The reality of forgiveness finds expression in newness of life. Thus, the results of individual confession and absolution as a means of pastoral care, being similar to those of the techniques of psychotherapy, surpass whatever could be achieved by that science alone.

Finally, it is necessary to include a comment on the ways for revitalization of the practice of individual confession and absolution.

The pastor of today is becoming more aware of psychology's insight that people have a compelling need to "confess." He also experiences that people come to him to discuss their problems, to seek his advice, guidance or simply to express the burden within their hearts. These situations of pastoral care and counseling do not replace individual confession and absolution but are natural ways to instruct people in a meaningful context on the deeper reason for their anxiety and the meaning and importance of individual confession and absolution. But the steps towards improvement of this practice should not depend only on occasional situations. The pastor must learn how to show availability and to involve the whole congregation in his ministry of pastoral care which includes individual confession and absolution. His pastoral activities should have the goals of establishing meaningful, personal relationships with people and providing instruction on the issue. He himself must present to the members emotional maturity and use the means of individual confession and absolution in arrangement with a nearby pastor.¹⁴ There are two main avenues to increase the practice in the congregation. One is an increased exposure to and awareness of the doctrine and practice of individual confession and absolution for the pastors in their seminary training. The other is increased information

¹⁴Ibid., p. 72. Koehler gives a list of points on the pastor's personality and attitude: (1) to project an image of being empathic (understanding, sensitive, and respectful); (2) to be able to maintain strict confidentiality; (3) to possess soberness and humility regarding his position, achievements and failures; (4) to exercise compassion and firmness; (5) to understand the ways of God and the ways of people. "While all pastors may not have the necessary aptitude for hearing confession, this number would be small, since the requirements for hearing confession closely parallel those that are necessary for effective pastoral ministry."

and instruction at the congregational level through the educational program and the ways of communication (sermons, Bible class, confirmation instruction, orientation to leadership, group and board meetings, visits and calls, parish newsletters and flyers). The promotion of the practice as a normal experience of Christian living should be included in the overall concept of ministry of the congregation. "The possibilities of individual confession and absolution as one avenue of authentic pastoral ministry in the area of pastoral care and counseling are both exciting and worthy of full pursuit."¹⁵ After all, the biblical directive that prevails in this matter is that one must follow the rule of faith and the rule of love, as explained by Walther,¹⁶ in order that individual confession and absolution does not become an element of hindrance but remains always a tool of growth for each individual and the whole church.

Undoubtedly those who absue or deny individual confession and absolution consequently deny the perfection of Christ's salvation, contradict the clear words of the Savior, and rob Christians its most high and necessary comfort. The theology and practice of individual confession and absolution as advocated in the confessional Lutheran church, however, has always emphasized the evangelical nature of the holy office of the ministry and the office of the keys through a continuing defense and proclamation of the gospel in all its fullness.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 54.

¹⁶See chapter II, pp. 118-23.

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