CHAPTER III

Luther and the Binding Key

Penance as Blessed Repetition

In March 1525, Nicholas Hausmann (c. 1478-1538), Lutheran reformer in the city of Zwickau, pastor at St. Mary's church, sent Martin Luther a number of masses in the German language for review. This was part of Hausmann's effort, supported by the city council at the time, to bring orderly evangelical reform to a city that had seen a good deal of conflict. Luther replied in a letter dated March 26, in which he proposed one textual revision: the replacement of the preface with its versicles in the inherited Roman mass with "An Exhortation to Communicants." The precedent for this goes back to the year before, to the first evangelical German mass celebrated in Nuremberg (April 1524), in which an exhortation prepared by Andreas Osiander (1498-1552) was read aloud immediately before communion.[1] Luther's exhortation reads as follows:

> Dearest Friends in Christ: You know that our Lord Jesus Christ, out of unspeakable love, instituted at the last this his Supper as a memorial and proclamation of his death suffered for our sins. This commemoration requires a firm faith to make the heart and conscience of everyone who wants to use and partake of this Supper sure and certain that Christ has suffered death for all his sins. But

1. Ronald K. Rittgers, *The Reformation of the Keys* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004) 83-85. For the text of the Nuremberg exhortation, see *EKO* 11/1:48.

> whoever doubts and does not in some manner feel such faith should know that the Supper is of no avail to him, but will rather be to his hurt, and he should stay away from it. And since we cannot see such faith, and it is known only to God, we leave it to the conscience of him who comes and admit him who requests and desires it. But those who cling to open sins, such as greed, hatred, envy, profiteering, unchastity, and the like and are not minded to renounce them, shall herewith be barred and be warned faithfully not to come lest they incur judgment and damnation for their souls as St. Paul says [1 Cor. 11:29]. If however someone has fallen because of weakness and proves by his acts that he earnestly desires to better himself, this grace and communion of the body and blood of Christ shall not be denied to him. In this fashion each must judge himself and look out for himself. For God is not mocked [Gal. 6:7], nor will he give that which is holy unto the dogs or cast pearls before swine [Matt. 7:6].[2]

The exhortation, dramatic and blunt, spoken not in remote Latin but in the vernacular, is evidence of how deeply concerned early Lutheranism was to witness to the holiness of the Lord's Supper over against the unrepentant, the unbelieving, and the casual worshiper. St. Paul's command to examine oneself is given paramount importance within the liturgy itself. The aspect of judgment is placed before the worshiper in such a way that he or she is forced to pay attention. Luther draws upon the traditional catalogue of sins going back to the early church, "greed, hatred, anger," etc., and warns that if these sinful acts are intentional and no effort is made to amend one's behavior, then the sacrament is of no avail. This is the traditional Catholic teaching, whether it is explicitly acknowledged or not, concerning mortal sin. This calls to mind the eschatological consciousness and concern for holiness in behavior so common in the liturgy of the early church that we examined in the last chapter. The exhortation to communicants became a standard feature of Lutheran liturgy in the sixteenth century.[3] Exceptions to its use are rare.

2. *LW* 51:104. On Hausmann, see Helmar Junghans, "Hausmann, Nicholas," in Hans J. Hillerbrand, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996): 2:214-15.

3. Here are examples of two orders of public worship from the sixteenth century that have come down to us in which the exhortation holds a prominent place:

The similarity in intention between Luther's exhortation and the rigorous liturgical warnings of the early church is not explained by the argument that worship practices are being preserved by tradition. One thousand years separated Luther from the early church. In that vast expanse of time the fundamentals of Christian worship regarding repentance in preparation for communion had changed in the West. The common practice in the Roman Church, persistent to the sixth century, was to allow the fallen sinner but one chance to repent in a lifetime, most often in a ritualized public act. Divine grace was limited, holiness a fearful and unbending mandate on all believers. Over the course of the seventh and eighth centuries repentance was reconceived as a repeatable act. The sinner could confess to a priest in private again and again and be assured of the forgiveness of the church. Sins were catalogued, lesser to greater, and gradations of penalties applied. This change came about through Celtic influence. Why this happened among the Irish is unclear. What is known is that in Ireland Christianity came late (mid-fourth century) and developed a vigorous and intellectually inquisitive morphology in relative isolation from inherited Roman tradition. The Irish, it appears, were more forgiving to fallen sinners. Perhaps the reason for this is that St. Patrick, great missionary to the Irish tribes, came to Ireland with a record of scandal in his past. Empathy for the sinner comes from one who knows sin himself; Patrick knew sin. The empathy of the founder shaped Celtic faith and theology. St. Columba or Colmcille, Irish missionary to the continent in the dark age of barbarian conquest, stated that a chief principle of the

Bugenhagen Type	***Brandenburg-Nuremberg Type***
Congregational hymn	*Exhortation to the Supper*
Exhortation to the Supper	*Words of Institution*
Lord's Prayer	*Sanctus, Lord's Prayer, Peace*
Words of Institution	*Distribution*
Distribution	*Post-Communion Collect*
Agnus Dei	*Benedicamus Domino*
Post Communion Collect	*Blessing*
Blessing	

In the so-called "Bugenhagen type" the exhortation "in certain orders or at certain times could be preceded, replaced, or followed by the Preface and Sanctus." Hans-Christoph Schmidt-Lauber, "The Lutheran Tradition in German Lands," in Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, eds., *The Oxford History of Christian Worship* (New York: Oxford, 2006) 403.

gospel is *"Amor non tenet ordinem"* — "Love has nothing to do with order." Discipline must give way to charity.[4] As Celtic influence spread in Western Europe, repeated repentance and forgiveness became part of the rhythm of Christian life.

In this new context, certain aspects of Scripture, especially Jesus' teaching in the Gospels regarding the radical nature of divine forgiveness, emerged with new clarity and relevance.

> Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." (Matthew 18:21-22)

> He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." (Luke 18:9-14)

> Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34)

> All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23)

> For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread. . . . (1 Corinthians 11:23)

> If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. (1 John 1:8)

Scripture affirms that the church is a "mixed body," a *corpus permixtum;* it is wheat and tares, clean and unclean, saint and sinner. This mixture

4. Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995) 176.

can be found in each individual Christian. While the Christian aspires to holiness, he or she cannot claim holiness without falling into sin, like the Pharisee thumping his breast in pride. To be a Christian is to know that one has betrayed Christ and that Christ, though knowing this, still extends an invitation to the Lord's Table.

This awareness of grace did not make penance easy in the Celtic tradition. Sin is a serious affair; penance must be made fitting for the offense. "If any layman commits theft," states *The Penitential of Columban* (c. 600):

> that is, steals his neighbor's ox or horse or sheep or any animal, if he does it once or twice he shall first make restitution to his neighbor for the damage which he has done, and he shall do penance for the three forty-day periods on bread and water. But if he has been accustomed to commit theft often and is not able to make restitution, he shall do penance for a year and the three forty-day periods and shall promise in no circumstances to do it henceforth; and so he shall take communion in the Easter of the following year, that is, after two years having moreover previously given alms to the poor . . . and thus shall he be absolved from the guilt of his evil course.[5]

These are stern penalties. What is new is not only that the one-time thief can secure absolution, but that the chronic thief, the repeat offender, is not barred from the grace of God and a place at the Lord's Table.

As the medieval church developed, penance, as a repeated sacramental act, became routinized in the liturgical calendar and subject to theological rationale. According to canon law, every Christian of the age of reason (seven years) was required to confess sins and receive communion at least once a year, most commonly during Lent. The fundamental question facing the penitent was the same as that of the young rich man who came to Jesus: "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" (Matthew 19:16). For priest, monk, and nun, Jesus' challenge to the young man to go beyond obedience was taken as the rule: "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven" (v. 21). This word had guided great ecclesiastical figures of the church: St. Anthony of Egypt

5. John T. McNeill and Helena M. Gamer, *Medieval Handbooks of Penance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938) 255.

(251-356), St. Augustine, St. Francis of Assisi (c. 1181-1226). For the laity, obedience to the commandments was sufficient, the summary of which Jesus gives as follows: "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (Matthew 22:37-40).

Certainly, neither cleric nor layperson fulfills these demands to perfection. This fact the church now fully realized and was willing to express. "What is the debt we owe to God?" asks St. Anselm (1033-1109). The answer is that "every inclination of the rational creature ought to be subject to the will of God. . . . None who pays it sins, everyone who does not pay it sins."[6] Humanity is incapable of paying the debt. But God requires it and this requirement cannot be rescinded. What is to be done? Anselm answers with his theory of atonement. The solution to the predicament of sinful humanity is Jesus Christ the God-Man. As God Christ carries out the divine will and is perfectly obedient. As human he suffers the penalty that human beings deserve. His atoning death pays the original debt. Human beings, if they believe in Christ, receive pardon.

Reconciled to God through Christ, Christians are still obligated to the divine law to love God and neighbor. Love is the test and fruit of faith. But human beings still sin. How then can they love? This question was hotly debated in medieval scholastic theology as the theology of penance developed. On one side stood Peter Lombard (1100-1160), called "the Master," who authored the most influential theological textbook at the beginning of the Middle Ages, the *Sentences*. He asks: "Is that love by which we are saved a created habit of our soul or is it the very person of the Holy Spirit dwelling within us?"[7] He answers that it is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit allows us to say "Jesus is Lord" (1 Corinthians 12:3). The Holy Spirit does works of love through us. Without the Spirit, we can do nothing. On the other side stood Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), writing a century later, who disagreed with "the Master." Acts of love to be authentic must be voluntary acts of will. While it

6. Anselm, *Why God Became Man* 1.9. Eugene Fairweather, ed. and tr., *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham* (New York: Macmillan, 1970) 119.

7. Peter Lombard, *Sentences* 1.17, a. 2. Quoted in Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform: 1250-1550* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980) 31.

is not to be doubted that God provides an infusion of grace for humanity to respond to the divine will, it is still the case that the human being is obligated to cooperate.[8]

The theology of penance "was notorious for producing differences of opinion."[9] The dominant position was that of Thomas. "Moral cooperation" became the accepted view in the Roman church and undergirded the practice of confession and absolution in the Middle Ages.[10]

On the basis of this theology, confession and absolution were understood as follows. The penitent went through a four-step process with the priest in privacy: confession of the heart *(contritio cordis),* oral confession to the priest *(confessio oris)* which involved the penitent reciting all sins and the circumstances surrounding the sins, and also responding to the examining questions of the confessor, questions that could be formally organized according to, for instance, the Ten Commanddents;[11] satisfaction for sin in the form of good works *(satisfactio operis);*

8. A. M. Fairweather, *Aquinas on Nature and Grace* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954) 344-45 (*Summa Theologia* IIa IIae q. 23 a. 2).

9. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* 4: *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 11.

10. "Following Aquinas, most late medieval theologians thought that God planted divinely created habits of virtue in believers via the sacraments, which helped them realize and develop their natural love for the good, God himself. In this way salvation was always a gift, but it still took place within an individual and required human agency. . . ." Rittgers, *The Reformation of the Keys,* 57.

11. These leading questions asked by the priest could be highly invasive of a person's private life. Steven Ozment quotes and translates examples from *The Mirror of the Sinner* (c. 1470), a popular confessional in the vernacular. Questions concerning sins against the First Commandment: "Have you honored temporal rulers and lords more than God, Mary, and the sacraments? Are your prayers, alms, and religious activities done more to hide your sins and impress others than to please God? Have you loved relatives, friends, or other creatures more than God? Have you had doubts about Scripture, the sacraments, hell, the afterlife, the Last Judgment, or that God is the creator of all things? Have you befriended the excommunicated? Have you practiced or believed in magic?" The Second Commandment: "Have you questioned God's power and goodness when you lost a game? Have you muttered against God because of bad weather, illness, poverty, the death of a child or a friend? Have you murmured against God because the wicked prosper and the righteous perish? Have you committed perjury in a court of law? Have you sworn in the name of God that you would do something you had no intention of doing?" The Third Commandment: "Have you skipped mass on Sundays and holidays without a good excuse? Have you conducted business on Sundays rather than reflecting on your sins, seeking indulgence, counting your blessings, meditating on

absolution by the priest *(ego te absolvo a peccatis tuis in nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen).* In the practice of the church, satisfaction and absolution were reversed so that the penitent need not return to the priest. The good works of "satisfaction" were understood to be enabled by the mercy of God. God infuses the believer with grace. The believer cooperates willingly by "doing the best one can" *(facere quod in se est).* In this way Christian faith is formed by acts of charity *(fides caritate formata)* and shapes the worthy Christian life. This life receives as its merited reward the gift of eternal life. As to the works required in satisfaction, the church provided clear guidance. There were the seven acts of corporal mercy derived from Scripture that are meant for the neighbor's physical well-being[12] and seven acts of spiritual comfort to minister to the neighbor's soul, also derived from Scripture.[13] The number seven was thought of as the sacred number of completeness. There was a good deal of variation as to how much satisfaction was required, depending

death, hell and its penalties, and heaven and its joys? Have you dressed proudly [a question especially for women], sung and danced lustily, committed adultery [a doubly deadly mortal sin on Sundays], girl-watched, or exchanged adulterous glances in church or while walking on Sundays?" Translated and quoted in Steven Ozment, *The Reformation in the Cities* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1975) 24.

12. To feed the hungry: "For I was hungry and you gave me to eat." Mt. 25:35
To give drink to the thirsty: ". . . I was thirsty and you gave me to drink. . . ." Mt. 25:35
To clothe the naked: "I was . . . naked and you clothed me. . . ." Mt. 25:36
To visit the imprisoned: "I was in prison and you came to me." Mt. 25:36
To shelter the homeless: ". . . I was a stranger and you took me in. . . ." Mt. 25:35
To visit the sick: ". . . I was sick and you cared for me. . . ." Mt. 25:36
To bury the dead: "Amen, I say to you, insofar as you did it for one of these least of my brothers, you did it for me." Mt. 25:40

13. To admonish the sinner: ". . . there will be more joy in Heaven at the repentance of one sinner than at ninety-nine of the righteous who had no need of repentance." Lk. 15:7
To instruct the ignorant: "Go into the whole world and proclaim the good news to all creation." Mk. 16:15
To counsel the doubtful: "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. . . . Let not your hearts be troubled. . . ." Jn. 14:27
To comfort the sorrowful: "Come to me, all you grown weary and burdened, and I will refresh you." Mt. 11:28
To bear wrongs patiently: ". . . Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you." Lk. 6:27-28
To forgive all injuries: "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." Mt. 6:12
To pray for the living and the dead: "Father, I desire that they, too, may be with me where I am. . . ." Jn. 17:24

on the circumstances and the seriousness of the offense. Over time, however, there developed a tendency to impose lighter penalties.[14] The rigor of the early church was self-consciously left behind while continuing to be admired as an example of uncompromising discipline. The "primitive church" was a harsh master, said Alain de Lille (ca. 1128-1202): its people more able to endure punishment. Early Christians lived in a heroic age closer to God. Now the church is larger, but weaker in character. Its weaknesses must be accommodated: "For then human nature was stronger than it is now for bearing the burdens of penance; and that is why penance must be moderated."[15]

This moderation meant that fewer demands were placed on the faithful. The penitent sinner could confess his or her sins by "attrition" or imperfect contrition and still receive absolution. In the thirteenth century the notion of *opus operatum* was introduced (first used by Peter of Poitiers [ca. 1130-1215]), asserting that the beneficial effects of the sacraments depended neither on the merits of the minister nor the recipient, but on the objective character of the sacrament which itself produces grace by the virtue inherent in it (*opus operatum* — "the work wrought"). This meant that the sacrament could be worthily received with only a virtual intention: a person received the grace of God just by participating, as long as one did not place an obstacle in the way such as conscious resistance or outright rejection. At the Council of Trent the teaching of *opus operatum* would be elevated to official doctrine. The objective character of the Sacrament of the Altar was enhanced by the doctrine of transubstantiation, ratified at the Fourth Lateran Council (1215). This doctrine taught that bread and wine of the Lord's Supper were "changed in substance," or "transubstantiated" at consecration by the priest, becoming the body and blood of the Lord. Christ's real presence in the Mass is a presence of things divine in and through things material.

Fundamental to medieval theology was the distinction of *fides implicata* — "implicit faith" — and *fides explicata* — "explicit faith." The duty of the laity or the "simpler minded" is implicit faith: obedience to the instructions of the "wiser," who are the clergy, those who have ex-

14. Thomas N. Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977) 16-27.

15. Alain de Lille, *Liber poenitentialis,* in Jacques Paul Migne, ed., *Patrologiae cursus completus, Series latina* (Paris, 1844-1890) 210:293. Translated and quoted in Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation,* 17.

plicit knowledge of the content of revelation and faith. Divine truth is made known by a hierarchy. "Now divine revelation," says Thomas,

> reaches lower creatures through higher creatures, in a certain order. It is given to men through the angels, and to the lower angels through higher angels, as Dionysius explains (*Coel. Hier.,* caps. 4, 7). In the same way, it is through wiser men that the faith must be made explicit for the simpler. Hence just as higher angels have a fuller knowledge of divine things than the lower angels whom they enlighten, so also are wiser men, to whom it pertains to instruct others, required to have a fuller knowledge of what ought to be believed, and to believe it more explicitly.[16]

That hierarchy mirrors the order of heaven means that it is the inevitable and natural order of earthly things.

The medieval theology of penance and the church practices derived from it should not be thought of as miring the church in legalism and works righteousness. If anything, they represented a certain laxity of demand as the church tried to carry out the biblical imperative of self-examination and to do so by creating an inclusive system of discipline for penance that was private and repeated and was geared to reach all members of society at least once a year. According to the Protestant historian of doctrine Reinhold Seeberg (1859-1935), this had "beneficial results" for society in that age: "The sinner was compelled to scrutinize his whole life in search of his sins; he was induced to look for and to recognize and mourn as sins, not only gross outward offenses, but also the inward evil desire itself."[17] This challenge to examine the self was softened insofar as the church made allowance for the weakness of faith on the part of the majority of believers. The ultimate effect of teachings such as *opus operatum,* confession by attrition, and *fides implicata* was to relax the demand for subjective holiness on the part of the individual believer that had determined the liturgical practice and discipline of the early church. In the medieval church, the stringent demands of holiness could be set aside or at least neutralized. Penance became a matter of fixed liturgical custom and guaranteed effect, em-

16. A. M. Fairweather, *Aquinas on Nature and Grace* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954) 250 (*Summa Theologia* IIa IIae, q. 2, a. 6).

17. Reinhold Seeberg, *Textbook of the History of Doctrines,* tr. Charles E. Hay (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1952) 2:42-43.

bracing the masses with the assurance of grace. This placed baptism and the Lord's Supper in a more congenial context of "sacramentality": that is, the general and largely comforting medieval idea that things divine are disclosed in and through things material to represent the intimate presence and protection of God; to use the phrase of Martin Buber, "the having of God in space and time."[18]

Sacramentality emphasized the visibility of the church as a public institution at the center of society; its central paradigm was the Incarnation, the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us (John 1:14), an idea that Catholic authorities would readily exploit over against Protestant rebels at the beginning of the Reformation. According to Catholic teaching, Christian truth is that which is taught "always, everywhere, and by all" *(semper, ubique, omnibus)*.[19] "Our doctrine of the church," claimed Robert Cardinal Bellarmine (1542-1621),

> is distinguished from the others in this, that while all others require inward qualities *(internas virtutes)* in everyone who is to be admitted to the church, we believe that all the virtues, faith, hope, charity and the others, are to be found in the Church. We do not think that any inward disposition *(ullam internam virtutem)* is requisite from anyone in order that he may be said to be part of the true Church whereof the Scriptures speak: all that is necessary is an outward confession of faith and participation in the sacraments *(sed tantum externam professsionem fidei et sacramentorum communionem)*. The Church, in fact, is a company of men *(coetus hominum)* as visible and palpable as the assembly of the Roman people, or the Kingdom of France, or the Republic of Venice.[20]

18. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, tr. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970) 161-62.

19. This is the famous definition of Vincent of Lérins (d. c. 445), an obscure semi-Pelagian theologian of the fourth century whose essay *The Commonitory* (434) was rediscovered in 1528 and used for polemical purposes against the relatively small band of upstart reformers at the time, who represented small numbers and few cities and territories. "We hold," says Vincent, "to that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all men" *(teneamus quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est)*. George E. McCracken, ed., *Early Medieval Theology*, Library of Christian Classics 9 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957) 38.

20. *De ecclesia militate*, chapter 2. Quoted and tr. J. S. Whale, *The Protestant Tradition* (Cambridge: University Press, 1955) 185.

This is the morphology of the church type in full display: Christian faith as conventional Christendom.

In the Middle Ages sacramentality involved a wide range of "ritual structures" and "symbolic gestures" that helped to order daily life and give it meaning.[21] Priests could be employed to consecrate a wide range of secular activities through blessings of salt and water that worked as a kind of exorcism: "to bless houses, cattle, crops, ships, tools, armour, wells and kilns. There were formulae for blessing men who were preparing to set off on a journey, to fight a duel, to engage in battle or move into a new house . . . [for] driving away thunder, for making the marriage bed fruitful."[22]

Liturgy marked the rhythms of the yearly agricultural cycle as God's time and nature commingled. The canonical hours, eight daily prayers that measured the day, and the ringing of church bells along with three (or four) prayers at night were a primary way by which time was kept day in, day out. Seasons also had their liturgical markers. At Candlemas (February 2), which celebrates the Lord as the Light of the world, the medieval peasant farmer would bring his oxen, horses, and plows to the church to be blessed for the breaking of the soil in anticipation of the end of the winter freeze. The spring crop was planted to be harvested in late summer or early fall. On St. John's Day, the summer solstice, farmers harvested the winter crop that had been planted back in October and lay dormant under the winter snow. St. Michael's Day (September 29) marked the end of the harvest season: the crop was taken in and taxes paid (usually in kind) to the lord of the manor. On St. Martin's Day (November 11) the stubble in the fields was burned, the ashes used to fertilize the ground for the year to come. Farm animals that could not be kept over the winter were slaughtered to make sausage and salted meat. In winter people mostly slept and did their best to keep warm and survive for the return of the light and activity at Candlemas. The liturgical calendar brought the visible and invisible, the profane and the holy, together for rural life. The proclamation of the gospel that "God became flesh

21. See Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971) 3-50; Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992) 11ff.; Jacques Le Goff, *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages*, tr. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

22. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 29.

and dwelt among us" (John 1:14) was made part of common life in the everyday.

This mingling of divine and human in the common things of life could lead to outright superstition, especially among the unlettered laity. A friar's cloak, a church key, even dirt from the churchyard could all be used as amulets to ward off various ills. Above all there was the sanctified bread of the Lord's Supper. The doctrine of transubstantiation had the effect of making the consecration of the elements by the priest the center of the mass, instead of the communing of believers. Consecrated bread and wine became objects of devotion believed to hold magical powers above all other things, working, according to a common phrase of the time in England, "like a charm upon an adder."[23] If a communicant did not swallow the bread (the cup was withheld from the laity) but saved it, it could be used as a talisman to protect against misfortune, employed as a cure for fever or blindness, even crumbled in the garden to keep insects away.[24]

The mingling of the divine and the human could also involve great sums of money as the practice of penance (that most intimate of the sacraments) became entangled in the doctrines of Purgatory and indulgences. This was not a positive development. The first mention of Purgatory dates to the eleventh century, although early fathers as diverse as Tertullian, Origen (185-254), Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–c. 215), and Ambrose (c. 337-397) spoke in various ways about the purifying of the dead.[25] The scriptural basis for the doctrine is found in 2 Maccabees,[26] which speaks of "atonement" being made for the dead

23. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic,* 33.

24. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic,* 34.

25. Angelo di Berardino, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Early Church,* tr. Adrian Walford (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) 2:725.

26. 2 Maccabees 12:39–13:1: 39On the next day, as had now become necessary, Judas and his men went to take up the bodies of the fallen and to bring them back to lie with their kindred in the sepulchres of their ancestors. 40Then under the tunic of each one of the dead they found sacred tokens of the idols of Jamnia, which the law forbids the Jews to wear. And it became clear to all that this was the reason these men had fallen. 41So they all blessed the ways of the Lord, the righteous judge, who reveals the things that are hidden; 42and they turned to supplication, praying that the sin that had been committed might be wholly blotted out. The noble Judas exhorted the people to keep themselves free from sin, for they had seen with their own eyes what had happened as the result of the sin of those who had fallen. 43He also took up a collection, man by man, to the amount of two thousand drachmas of silver, and sent it to Jerusalem to provide for a sin

that "they might be delivered from their sin" — the atonement in the form of a money gift to be given to the Temple. Purgatory is a state intermediate between life and heaven where sinners undergo purifying punishment as satisfaction for sins. For those who confess their sins by attrition, Purgatory is required for full satisfaction. It is significant that the official scriptural basis for the teaching should mention atonement by money gift. That the payment of money can be a means of satisfaction is an idea that goes far back in the church. In the thirteenth century it was tied to a supposed "treasury of merit" built up by the works and witness of saints and martyrs, the key to which belongs to the pope. By paying the church to access this treasury, one could draw on this merit for oneself, a relative, or a friend and so reduce the time required in the purging fire. The church used this teaching to raise money. To draw a connection among money, grace, and merit may have been profitable for the church, but it was also vulgar and prone to abuse. Penance as blessed repetition was a great achievement of the medieval church: it deepened religious life by making the sacraments more clearly vehicles of grace. By giving repeated penance a price tag in monetary indulgence, however, the church courted the danger that "a lamentable superficiality" would take over ecclesiastical discipline.[27] It is exactly this danger that an upstart monk and Bible teacher from Wittenberg would lift up for attention and decry.

The Necessity of Explicit Faith

The way the story of the Reformation is usually told, Luther rebelled against the Roman church because of the oppressive burden of what he thought of as "works righteousness" placed on the shoulders of believers. One needs only to think of the generic Lutheran illustration showing Luther, resolved, hammer in hand, ready to awaken the common people to the abuses of a tyrannical institution, the "Ninety-Five The-

offering. In doing this he acted very well and honorably, taking account of the resurrection. 44For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. 45But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore he made atonement for the dead, so that they might be delivered from their sin.

27. Reinhold Seeberg, *Textbook,* 2:43.

ses," nailed to the church door, looking something like the Declaration of Independence. The Reformation, as the conventional narrative goes, was about freedom. "The rise of Protestantism," asserts Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792-1860) "can be thought of as an act of free self-determination that required the highest spiritual and moral energy."[28] But the exhortation to communicants quoted at the beginning of this chapter does not read like a call to freedom. Instead it makes clear in plainspoken language that the mandate of self-examination is a burden on the individual conscience. Luther demands that Christians coming to the Lord's Table "feel" genuine faith. If fallen in sin, the believer must prove by action the earnest desire to "better himself." Those who cling to sin are "warned faithfully not to come lest they incur judgment and damnation for their souls as St. Paul says [1 Cor. 11:29]. . . . In this fashion each must judge himself and look out for himself. For God is not mocked [Gal. 6:7], nor will he give that which is holy unto the dogs or cast pearls before swine [Matt. 7:6]."[29]

The exhortation demonstrates the seriousness with which the Lutheran tradition at its beginning understood sincere faith as the validation of liturgical worship. This is in continuity with the disciplined severity of the early church and its eschatological consciousness. It is also a mark of the sectarian tradition as it would later develop. The purpose of public worship, according to Luther, is to change people and make them Christians. This is clear from the beginning of Luther's public career. In the "Ninety-Five Theses," Luther's primary attack is on the laxity of Christian discipline in repentance. In the first thesis he asserts: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' [Matt. 4:7], he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." Repentance means "that the sinner has a change of heart and hates his sin." There is no place for attrition or routine custom. Repentance demands contrition in the deepest sense: ". . . hatred of oneself should involve one's whole life, according to the passage, 'He who hates his soul in this life, preserves it for eternal life' [Matt. 10:39]. And again: 'He who does not take his cross and follow me, is not worthy of me' [Matt. 10:38]."[30] Sacramental penance cannot begin to fulfill this demand, first, because it

28. Ferdinand Christian Baur, *Lehrbuch der christlichen Dogmengeschichte* (3rd. ed., 1867, reprint Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1974) 273.

29. *LW* 51:104.

30. *LW* 31:83-84.

is "temporal and cannot be done all the time," and second, because it is "external" and can thus be a "sham."[31] Insofar as it is "legally instituted by popes and the church" and is subject to a false theology, it can serve to lessen the demands that God actually makes on those who would be his followers, thus placing believers under an illusion as to their true condition. Thus "the bounty of indulgences" that the church peddles and "the need for true contrition" are in opposition. A Christian who is "truly contrite" does not want to escape punishment but "seeks and loves to pay penalties":[32] "Christians should be exhorted to be diligent in following Christ, their Head, through penalties, deaths, and hell. . . . And thus be confident of entering into heaven rather through many tribulations, than through the false security of peace."[33]

Martin Brecht argues that the "Ninety-Five Theses" "can be understood as an expression of a strict theology of humility," reflecting a stage in Luther's emerging consciousness that predates his mature theology.[34] There is evidence to back this claim. Two years after the posting of the Theses, Luther appears to move away from adherence to the strict demands of contrition to an emphasis on forgiveness and faith. In a teaching sermon, *The Sacrament of Penance* (1519), he declares: "the forgiveness of guilt, the heavenly indulgence, is granted to no one on account of the worthiness of his contrition over his sins, nor on account of his works of satisfaction, but only on account of his faith in the promise of God, 'Whatever you loose . . . shall be loosed,' etc." This is the work of Christ, not a priest; and it can be conveyed to you by "any Christian," even "a woman or child."[35]

This argument encouraged a number of Luther's followers to abandon auricular confession as a requirement for communion. This happened, for example, during Christmas 1521 under the leadership of Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt (1486-1541), professor of theology at Wittenberg. In addition to abandoning private confession, Karlstadt also celebrated mass in the vernacular, discarded traditional vestments, and distributed communion in both kinds. Less than a month later he married. This all took place while Luther was hidden away at the Wartburg. In all this revolutionary activity, Karlstadt sought nothing

31. *LW* 31:85.

32. *LW* 31:196-97.

33. *LW* 31:251.

34. Martin Brecht, "Luther," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, 2:462.

35. *LW* 35:112.

less than to carry out what he thought were the clear implications of Luther's radical teaching. But Luther was not always ready to embrace the fullest implications of his own teaching, especially if he thought that that teaching could confuse laypeople or if it was taken up by someone Luther thought suspicious. The fact is that Luther lost trust in his old colleague. What concerned Luther was the spirit in which Karlstadt acted. Here, he thought, was a man impatient with all externals of the faith, a man all too willing to move quickly to overturn the delicate frame of the inherited social order on the basis of abstract principle. In acting so boldly, Karlstadt relied on the resources of his personal faith; indeed, he was convinced that he himself was a vehicle of divine truth. "The Spirit of God," he said, "to which all things ought to be subjected, cannot be subject even to Scripture."[36] In Karlstadt, the individual conscience, bolstered by the Spirit, became the sole criterion of faith.

Luther recoiled. He saw Karlstadt as the first in a frightening line of radical reformers, a general in a dangerous new army of religious subjectivists. If this attitude spread to the population as a whole, it would be a disaster. No one can live out of the resources of private conscience alone. In 1525 he wrote: "That which God has made a matter of inward faith and spirit they convert into a human work. But what God has ordained as an outward word and sign and work they convert into an inner spirit."[37] Karlstadt, said Luther, was a child of the devil.

For a time after Karlstadt had done his work, Luther allowed communicants to receive the sacrament without confessing their sins before a priest. But he also warned them that "evil abuses" needed to be ended. "The prospect of laypeople participating in the Eucharist without sufficient preparation frightened Luther and his colleagues."[38] After 1524, examination of faith and conduct was mandated for the people of Wittenberg by civil decree.

Why was formal confession so important? Certainly Luther did not want to discourage believers from receiving the sacrament. He writes in the *Large Catechism* (1529) that "true Christians who cherish and honor the sacrament will of their own accord urge and impel themselves to come."[39] He interprets Christ's words of institution to be an offer to receive the sacrament "frequently, whenever and wherever you will, according to everyone's opportunity and need."[40] He cites the rule of "St. Hilary" (actually St. Augustine, *Epistle* 54) approvingly: "Unless a man has committed such a sin that he has forfeited the name of Christian and has to be expelled from the congregation, he should not exclude himself from the sacrament."[41] He assures Christians "that it is the highest wisdom to realize that this sacrament does not depend upon our worthiness."[42] He even goes so far as to say in a section on confession added to the *Large Catechism* in the revised edition, also from 1529, that mandated confession is "the pope's tyranny" and that "we have been set free from his coercion and from the intolerable burden he imposed upon the Christian church."[43] But Luther also understood human weakness and sin and knew that to honor the sacrament "we must make a distinction among men. Those who are shameless and unruly must be told to stay away, for they are not fit to receive the forgiveness of sins since they do not desire it and do not want to be good."[44] The sad fact is that people may have the gift of freedom in confession but this freedom is abused:

> Unfortunately, men have learned it only too well; they do whatever they please and take advantage of their freedom, acting as if they will never need or desire to go to confession any more. We quickly understand whatever benefits us, and we grasp with uncommon ease whatever in the Gospel is mild and gentle. But such pigs, as I have said, are unworthy to appear in the presence of the Gospel or to have any part in it.[45]

Luther's observation that people "do not want to be good" calls to mind St. Augustine's doctrine of *non posse non peccare* ("not able not to sin") and the dramatic example of the pear tree in the *Confessions* when Augustine confesses to sinning with no other cause than the love of the will to undo.

Luther appears to say contradictory things about confession: it

36. Quoted in Whale, *The Protestant Tradition*, 200.
37. *LW* 40:148-49.
38. Rittgers, *The Reformation of the Keys*, 82.
39. *BC*, 451.
40. *BC*, 452.
41. *BC*, 453.
42. *BC*, 453.
43. *BC*, 457.
44. *BC*, 453.
45. *BC*, 457.

must be free, and it must be mandated. How are these claims to be reconciled? Can they be? The *Treatise on Good Works* (1520) may provide a helpful perspective. In this important early essay, Luther writes in detail about distinctions among people, contending that there are "four kinds" of persons. The first is the person of faith who needs "no law." This is the ideal Christian: "Such men do willingly what they know and can, because they alone are distinguished for their firm confidence that God's favor and grace rests upon them in all things."[46] Such people do not need the externals of ritual, ceremony, and formal confession of sins to do the will of God. They go to confession freely. The second type is the schemer, ever willing to abuse the freedom of faith as, in the words of St. Peter, "a cover for sin" (1 Peter 2:16). They only see in the gospel what makes them comfortable. The third type is the "wicked," who love sin and seek its perverted pleasures. "They must be restrained like wild horses and dogs by spiritual and temporal laws, and where this does not help, they must be put to death by the temporal sword."[47] The fourth are the immature, "lusty and childish in their understanding." For such people, prey to human weakness, is the discipline of the liturgy with its blessed repetition, its customs and practices, including auricular confession, which is necessary and beneficial: "they must be coaxed . . . enticed with external, definite, concomitant adornment, with reading, praying, fasting, singing, churches, decorations, organs, and all those things commanded and observed in monasteries and churches, until such time as they too learn to know the teaching of faith."[48]

There is no more eloquent defense of the church type in its best sense than Luther gives in this last sentence. He does not glorify the institutional church as the organ of redemption, thus risking the danger of making the church an idol. Instead, Luther sees the church as an accommodation to a fallen world. If Christians consider the four types of human beings that Luther describes, and do so honestly, they will see themselves in all four. This is what it means to be *simul iustus et peccator* — at the same time saint and sinner. That people are both saints and sinners is why Karlstadt's revolutionary subjectivism was rejected as a grave danger and the mandate for auricular confession reinstituted.

46. *LW* 44:35.
47. *LW* 44:35.
48. *LW* 44:35.

But Luther also defends auricular confession in dramatic, existential terms, calling on Christians to make the decision of faith to engage in spiritual warfare: "I will allow no one to take private confession from me and would not give it in exchange for all the wealth of the world . . . no one knows what [confession] can give unless he has struggled much and frequently with the devil. I would have been strangled by the devil long ago if confession had not sustained me."[49] The path to salvation is through tribulations: "through penalties, deaths, and hell." This is *Anfechtung* or personal affliction: spiritual and physical assault on the Christian that is meant to destroy faith, a theme that characterized Luther's theology throughout his career as reformer. Luther identified personal affliction as the mark of the genuine Christian. A human being lives "between God and the devil,"[50] between judgment and grace. This is the heavenly drama of individual human life. It is the explicit faith *(fides explicata)* that is incumbent on all Christians. Luther never abandoned this idea or watered it down, before or after the encounter with Karlstadt.

To the end of his life, Luther argued that leaders in the church do not serve the people when they "preach much about the grace of Christ, yet they strengthen and comfort only those who remain in their sins, telling them not to fear and be terrified by sins, since they are all removed by Christ." Caring only about preaching the assurance of grace (which is the hallmark of the church type), priests and false pastors "let the people go on in their public sins, without any renewal or reformation of their lives. Thus it becomes quite evident that they truly fail to understand the faith and Christ, and thereby abrogate both when they preach about it."[51] The true path to Christ is through personal affliction. It is the "primal experience" *(Urerlebnis)* of explicit faith. In his exposition of Psalm 90 (1534), his great "Christian thanatopsis"[52] or meditation on death, Luther describes this affliction. To stand before the judgment of God is "the climax of the drama which God enacts with us." The divine intention is that "we play our part," and be "in full awareness of our sins and of death"; indeed "to conclude that there is nothing within us but damnation." In this full contrition

49. *WA* 10/3:62. Quoted and tr. in Rittgers, *The Reformation of the Keys*, 82.
50. Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, tr. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).
51. *LW* 41:147.
52. *LW* 13:xii.

or humiliation of the self, "it will happen that one becomes aware of salvation."[53]

Luther's theology of worship can only be fully understood in this existential context of explicit faith: changing people through contrition that leads them to embrace the faith. This will also become the hallmark of the sect type. In *The German Mass and the Order of Service* (1526), Luther says that the public worship service of the church, open to all people, "should be arranged for the sake of the unlearned lay folk . . . for all people, among whom are many who do not believe and are not yet Christians. Most of them stand around and gape, hoping to see something new, just as if we were holding a service among the Turks or the heathen in a public square or out in a field. . . . [T]he gospel must be publicly preached [to such people] to move them to believe and become Christian."[54] This public worship, he believed, would lead to "truly evangelical" private worship among those "who want to be Christians in earnest." If liturgy has any purpose whatsoever, it is not to leave Old Adam as a lump of coal in the bin, but to move him to believe and become a Christian.

To move such people, Luther entered into the full vitality of Christian speech regarding worship, not only its promises and assurances, but also its judgments, challenges, and imperatives; a vitality that calls to mind the rigors of the early church when "human nature was stronger than it is now," as Alain de Lille had argued in the twelfth century.[55] This rigor is evident in Luther's teaching regarding baptism, the office of the keys, the discipline of confession and absolution, and the Lord's Supper.

Baptism

For Luther, baptism is the beginning of the perilous journey of life. It makes the person a child of God, but also places him or her between God and the devil. So, for example, in *The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism* (1519), Luther speaks in familiar terms of "a blessed dying unto sin and a resurrection in the grace of God, so that the old man . . . is there drowned, and a new man . . . comes forth."[56] But he also says that

53. *LW* 13:116.
54. *LW* 53:63.
55. Quoted and tr. in Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation*, 17.
56. *LW* 35:30.

baptism "establishes a covenant between us and God to that effect that we will fight against sin and slay it, even to our dying breath, while he for his part will be merciful to us, deal graciously with us and – because we are not sinless in this life until purified by death – not judge us with severity."[57] Luther warns against "a false security" that says "If baptism is so gracious and great a thing that God will not count our sins against us. . . . I will live and do my own will."[58] This is an illusion: we cannot "wickedly and wantonly sin [and go on presuming] God's grace."[59]

In his early baptismal orders of 1523 and 1526, Luther places the idea of baptism as covenant in the context of the ancient tradition of spiritual warfare. The battle against Satan begins as soon as we enter the world. In baptism we flee from the Prince of Darkness. Baptism is an exorcism. This is ancient church teaching and is preserved in the Roman rite. In obedience to ancient liturgical tradition, Luther emphasizes exorcism, an emphasis made especially dramatic because it is done in the vernacular. Recognizing that the devil is *princeps mundi* who owns us at our birth, the order begins by calling on the devil to vacate his property: "Depart thou unclean spirit and give room to the Holy Spirit."[60] The minister prays in "the name of the eternal God and of our Savior Jesus Christ" to adjure the devil and cause him to "depart trembling and groaning, conquered together with [his] hatred, so that [he shall] have nothing to do with the servant of God who now seeks that which is heavenly and renounces [the devil] and [his] world." After prayer, the exorcism follows directly: "I adjure thee, thou unclean spirit, by the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost that thou come out of and depart from this servant of God, for he commands thee, thou miserable one, he who walked upon the sea and stretched forth his hand to the sinking Peter."[61]

Baptism is indeed the beginning of a perilous journey. The devil is ever ready to ensnare the believer. Luther considered the lordship of Satan over the world "an article of faith."[62] Satan is the greatest enemy

57. *LW* 35:35.
58. *LW* 35:42-43.
59. *LW* 35:42.
60. *LW* 53:96, 107.
61. *LW*, 53:98, 108.
62. "Aber der Teuffel ist herr jnn der welt, und ich have es selbs nie können gleuben, das der Teuffel solt Herr und Gott der welt sein, bis ichs nu mals zimlich erfahren, das es

that Christians face: "Satan is his name, that is, adversary. He must obstruct and cause misfortune; he cannot do otherwise. Moreover, he is the prince and god of this world, so that he has sufficient power to do so."[63] Satan teaches us to acquiesce to his terrible divinity by attacking our health and well being,[64] disturbing marriage,[65] upsetting the rhythms of daily life, including religious practice,[66] inciting murder,[67] mixing politics and religion,[68] and confusing the interpretation of Scripture.[69] This is *Anfechtung*. As Luther put it in the first stanza of "A Mighty Fortress" (Hedge translation):

> For still our ancient foe
> Doth seek to work us woe;
> His craft and power are great,
> And armed with cruel hate,
> On earth is not his equal.

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auch ein artickel des glaubens sey [is an article of faith]: Princeps mundi [prince of the world], Deus huius seculi." *WA* 50:473, quoted in Heiko Oberman, *The Reformation: Roots and Ramifications* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 67.

63. *LW* 37:17. I am indebted to Mark L. Nelson, *Luther's Conception of the Devil* (St. Paul: Luther Theological Seminary M.Th. thesis, 1979), for gathering quotations from Luther on the devil.

64. "In all grave illnesses the devil is present as the author and cause . . . [and] he is the author of death." *LW* 54:33.

65. "At first everything goes all right, so that, as the saying goes, they are ready to eat each other up for love. The devil comes along to create boredom in you, to rob you of your desire in this direction, and to excite it unduly in another direction." *LW* 21:89.

66. "The devil comes at unsuitable places and times, as in the choir during songs of praise to God, or at night when one ought to sleep, in order to ruin the head. Or elsewhere, when other things are being done in common, so that he hinders these things or sees that they are done with less dedication." *LW* 10:348-49.

67. "[The devil] incites the Cainites against their brother, just as Christ declares in John 8.44 that the devil was a murderer from the beginning." *LW* 1:322.

68. "The devil never stops cooking and brewing these two kingdoms into each other. In the devil's name the secular leaders always want to be Christ's masters and teach Him how He should run His church and His spiritual government. Similarly, the false clerics and schismatic spirits want to be the masters, though not in God's name, and to teach people how to organize the secular government. Thus the devil is very busy on both sides, and he has much to do." *LW* 13:194.

69. "When we wish to deal with Scripture, [Satan] stirs up so much dissension and quarreling over it that we lose our interest in it and become reluctant to trust it." *LW* 37:17. "It is the supreme art of the devil that he can make the law out of the gospel." *LW* 54:106.

Many in the modern church consider these lines a colorful trope. Luther meant them literally.

This is why at baptism the minister intercedes on behalf of the baptized as their journey of life begins. Spiritual warfare is a dangerous enterprise, and many lose their way. Thus the minister prays, "that [the one being baptized] may be sundered from the number of the unbelieving, preserved dry and secure in the holy ark of Christendom, serve thy name at all times, fervent in spirit and joyful in hope, so that with all believers he may be made worthy to attain eternal life according to thy promise; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."[70] In his instructions to the Christian reader at the end of his baptismal order, Luther warns that "it is no joke to take sides against the devil." Baptism means that the child will be burdened with "a mighty and lifelong enemy." The child needs the "heart and strong faith" of fellow Christians along with their earnest intercession through prayer. Corporate faith demonstrated in intercessory prayer is the key to the sacrament, not the traditional customs of a rite. "Signing with the cross . . . anointing the breast and shoulders with oil, signing the crown of the head with chrism, putting on the christening robe, placing a burning candle in the hand . . . are not the sort of devices and practices from which the devil shrinks or flees. He sneers at greater things than these! Here is the place for real earnestness." Luther laments that for most people baptism makes no difference. They lose their way on the perilous journey on earth. This is the fault of the church: "I suspect that people turn out so badly after baptism because our concern for them has been so cold and careless; we, at their baptism, interceded for them without zeal."[71] "Real earnestness" in corporate faith and "zeal" in intercessory prayer are both necessary to the effectiveness of the sacrament.

When baptism is not attended to in the church by prayer and faith, Satan rears his ugly head. Over time, his effect is destructive: "though [Satan] could not quench the power of baptism in little children, nevertheless [he succeeds] in quenching it in all adults so that now there are scarcely any who call to mind their own baptism, and still fewer who glory in it. . . ."[72] What is the glory of baptism? Baptism is and remains throughout a person's life the means "for remitting sins and getting to

70. *LW* 53:97.
71. *LW* 53:102.
72. *LW* 36:57-58.

heaven." There should be no confusion about the relation of baptism and penance. Baptism is the basis of penance because it is the source of forgiveness. Rejecting St. Jerome's famous metaphor that penance is "the plank" for the "shipwrecked,"[73] Luther asserts that for the faithful there is no shipwreck. Baptism is the "ship" that does not sink or founder; it is "the first plank" which the believer may safely ride through all storms of life.[74] "The ship remains one, seaworthy and invincible; it will never be broken up into separate 'planks.' In it are carried all those who are brought to the harbor of salvation, for it is the truth of God giving us its promise in the sacraments."[75] Penance does not succeed baptism in order to counter the curse of post-baptismal sins, as if baptism were powerless to forgive such sins. Rather, penance serves baptism by driving the repentant sinner to the promise of God, which is given to the believer unwaveringly, despite the fact that he or she falls into sin again and again through life:

> Now, the *first* thing to be considered about baptism is the divine promise, which says: "He who believes and is baptized will be saved" [Mark 16:16]. This promise must be set far above all the glitter of works, vows, religious orders, and whatever else man has introduced, for on it all our salvation depends.[76]

Baptism is, however, subject to faith. It is only effective when "we exercise our faith in it." Absent faith, "baptism will profit us nothing."[77] As Luther memorably puts the matter in his church postil or expository sermon for Ascension Day 1523 on Mark 16:16 ("The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned"):

> A man can believe even though he be not baptized; for baptism is nothing more than an outward sign that is to remind us of the divine promise. If we can have it, it is well; let us receive it, for no one should despise it. If, however, we can not receive it, or it is denied us, we will not be condemned if we only believe the Gospel. For

73. *NPNF* 6:266 (*Epistle* 130.9).
74. *LW* 36:58.
75. *LW* 36:61.
76. *LW* 36:58-59.
77. *LW* 36:59.

> where the Gospel is, there is also baptism and all that a Christian needs. Condemnation follows no sin except the sin of unbelief. Therefore, the Lord says "He that disbelieveth shall be condemned"; he says not: He that is not baptized. He is silent concerning baptism; for baptism is worth nothing without faith, but is like seals affixed to a letter in which nothing is written. He that has the signs that we call sacraments and has no faith has only seals upon a letter of blank paper.[78]

Through faith, which is the assurance of the gospel, we can rightly say "once we have been baptized, we are saved."[79] Without faith, we are in peril. Returning to the metaphor of baptism as a ship, Luther warns: "Of course, it often happens that many rashly leap overboard into the sea and perish; these are those who abandon faith in the promise and plunge into sin." Nevertheless: "the ship remains intact and holds its course unimpaired."[80]

The Office of the Keys

The office of the keys is vitally important to the purpose of worship as a means of challenging worshipers through repentance and renewal. The binding and loosing of sins keeps Christians in a living relationship with the Lord, protecting them from the illusion of a false security that takes God for granted. In *On the Councils and the Church* (1538), one of his most important essays from his later life, Luther puts it this way:

> Christ bequeathed [the keys] as a public sign and a holy possession, whereby the Holy Spirit again sanctifies the fallen sinner redeemed by Christ's death, and whereby the Christians confess that they are a holy people in this world under Christ. And those who refuse to be converted or sanctified again shall be cast out from this holy people, that is, bound and excluded by means of the keys, as happened to the unrepentant Antinomians.[81]

78. John Nicholas Lenker, ed., *Luther's Works* (Minneapolis: Lutherans in all Lands, 1903-1910) 3:204.
79. *LW* 36:59.
80. *LW* 36:61.
81. *LW* 41:153.

To have the two keys of binding and loosing sins together is, as Luther famously argues in *The Keys* (1530), a sure means that Christ uses to get the sinner's attention so that he can free the sinner:

> . . . the purpose of Christ's binding is to free the sinner from his sins. With his "binding" Christ attempts nothing else but to free and rid the sinner's conscience of sins. It is for this reason that he "binds" and punishes the sinner so that he might let go of his sin, repent of it, and avoid it. One may call such "binding" a saving.[82]

Binding sin is the means to break the iron grip of pride, and it prepares the sinner for the grace of God. Receiving grace by the loosing of sins requires no merit on the part of the believer. Luther asserts that it is wrong to "want to become holy by our own righteousness, beyond and outside of divine grace."[83] But the keys "demand faith in our hearts, and without faith you cannot use them with profit."[84] Faith begins with the binding key. Faith allows us to heed the threat of divine judgment and "thereby come to fear God." Faith comes to rest in the loosing key. Faith allows us to believe the "consolation" of divine mercy and accept the promise of eternal life and "so learn to love God and receive a joyful, confident, and peaceful heart." The keys place us before the existential situation of faith, the primal emotions of fear and consolation, emotions that are never satisfied by the performing of works. Even repentance itself is subservient to these primal emotions. As the consolation of the loosing key grips our hearts we become ready for the life of faith and its responsibilities. Thus: "He who has faith in the [loosing] key, has satisfied it by means of such faith, before and without performing any works. The key demands no other works. Afterward such faith will indeed perform works."[85]

When Luther talks about "Christians," it must be remembered that a proviso stands over all of his theology: namely, his firm belief that the "Christian" is a *rara avis* — a "rare bird." In Luther's view, there is no such thing as "Christendom" traditionally defined. Luther attacks the very idea of a "Christian" society or a "Christian" government. He makes this attack on sacramental grounds:

82. *LW* 40:328.
83. *LW* 40:330.
84. *LW* 40:330.
85. *LW* 40:375-76.

> . . . the world and the masses are and always will be un-Christian, even if they are all baptized and Christian in name. Christians are few and far between (as the saying is). Therefore it is out of the question that there should be a common Christian government over the whole world or indeed over a single country or any considerable body of people, for the wicked always outnumber the good.[86]

The world is unconverted; the mass of the baptized are unconverted. Most people love darkness and hate the light. The Roman polemic that Christian truth is taught "always, everywhere, and by all" is false. Christian truth is not subject to the law of majority but the law of minority. This is the reason, as Philip Melanchthon (1497-1560) puts it, that "there is an infinite number of ungodly within the church who oppress it."[87] The true church is "scattered throughout the world"; "wolves and ungodly teachers" are "rampant" within it; it is beset by "weak people" who build "perishing structures of stubble, that is, unprofitable opinions."[88] "Human doctrine, ceremonies, tonsures, long robes, miters, and all the pomp of popery only lead far away from it into hell."[89]

Among the most pernicious of Catholic teachings is the doctrine of *opus operatum*. Melanchthon asks rhetorically: "Why will faith be necessary if sacraments justify *ex opere operato*, without a good attitude in the one using them?"[90] The fact is that outward participation in the sacrament is not enough to receive its benefits. The sacrament requires faith. Faith is "the proper attitude in the recipient."[91] If people are to be Christian, they must become Christian. They must be evangelized: "the gospel must be publicly preached [to such people] to move them to believe and become Christian."[92] This includes even the "earnest Christians" for whom Luther proposes a private service; what he calls

> . . . a truly evangelical order [that] should not be held in a public place for all sorts of people. But those who want to be Christians in earnest and who profess the gospel with hand and mouth should sign their

86. *LW* 45:91.
87. *BC* 169.
88. *BC* 171-72.
89. *LW* 41:211.
90. *BC* 172.
91. *BC* 115.
92. *LW* 53:63.

names and meet alone in a house somewhere to pray, to read, to baptize, *to receive the sacrament, and to do other Christian works. According to this order, those who do not lead Christian lives could be known, reproved, corrected, cast out, or excommunicated, according to the rule of Christ, Matthew 18[:15-17].* Here one could also solicit benevolent gifts to be willingly given. . . . Here would be no need of much and elaborate singing. Here one could set up a neat and brief order for baptism and the sacrament and center everything on Word, prayer, and love.[93]

Notice the passage in italics. Even among the "dearest Christians," the "earnest Christians," there is the exercise of the binding key.

Luther does not blink from the conditional expression of divine grace when he believes Christ leads him so to speak. In *Sermons on the Gospel of John* (1537), Luther comments on Christ's words in John 15:10: "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love":

> . . . it behooves everyone to search his heart and examine himself. Let no one bank on thoughts like these: "I am baptized and am called a Christian. I hear God's Word and go to the Sacrament." For here Christ Himself separates the false Christians from those who are genuine, as if He were saying: "If you are true believers in Me and are in possession of My treasure, it will surely become evident that you are My disciples. If not, do not imagine that I will acknowledge and accept you as My disciples. You will never cheat and deceive any but yourselves — to your eternal shame and harm. Christ and the Gospel will surely not be cheated and defrauded."
>
> Christ found this admonition necessary, and it must constantly be repeated in Christendom, because we see that there are always many Christians of this sort among us. Christ is determined not to have or to acknowledge any false Christians. In Matt. 7.23 He passes a terrible sentence on them, when He says that on the Day of Judgment He will address them with the words: "I never knew you; depart from Me you evildoers." Such false Christians would fare far better if they were heathen and non-Christians. Then they would at least not do harm to Christianity with their offensive example and would not disgrace and blaspheme the holy name of Christ and of His Word.[94]

93. *LW* 53:63-64, italics added.
94. *LW* 24:250.

This is Luther exercising the office of the keys in preaching, placing believers before the privilege and duty of explicit faith. The word of God calls a person out of custom, lethargy, obedience to a hierarchy, and outward participation in sacramental life *(opus operatum)* into the fullness of an individual relation to Jesus as Lord and Master.

Why does Luther say these things — things which make many a church-type Christian from a later age cringe? Trusting that the Holy Spirit calls and sanctifies, Luther felt free to speak plain language in the church, language not only of comfort, but also of admonition and command, language that is contingent and conditional in that it demands a response on the part of the hearer — above all fear of the judgment of God and faith in the divine promise of salvation. To be Christian is to know the forgiveness of sins, the glory of Christ's mercy. Christ alone makes the Old Adam alive. But, as Luther says, in *Bondage of the Will* (1525): "[God] does it by killing."[95] In the drama of human life *coram Deo,* God breaks us down, brings us to fear, which is "the beginning of wisdom" (Proverbs 9:10), which then leads us to the promise of salvation.

Private Confession

Luther's original understanding of private confession, as seen in his *Short Order of Confession before the Priest for the Common Man* (1529) and in his instructions on *How One Should Teach Common Folk to Shrive Themselves* (1531), offers a worthy ideal for the church. Luther conceives confession primarily as an intimate act within the fellowship of believers in which Christians, burdened by their sins and repentant, make oral confession to a fellow Christian, usually a minister, and receive this assurance: "As thou believest, so be it done unto thee [Matt. 8:13]. And I by the command of Jesus Christ our Lord, forgive thee all thy sin. . . ."[96] Absolution is from God, not the church: "the forgiveness of guilt is not within the province of any human office or authority, be it pope, bishop, priest, or any other."[97] But this word of forgiveness is to be spoken within the fellowship of believers from one Christian to another so that it is made concrete and personal: "For any Christian can say to

95. *LW* 33:62.
96. *LW* 53:121.
97. *LW* 35:12.

you, 'God forgives you your sins, in the name,' etc., and if you can accept that word with a confident faith, as though God were saying it to you, then in that same faith you are surely absolved."[98]

In medieval Europe, the office of the keys was placed exclusively in the hands of the clergy. It was a chief means by which clerics exercised political power. The papacy had used the binding key in its ultimate form of excommunication to claim the jurisdiction of *sacerdotium* over *regnum* — church over state. Political reformers such as Marsilius of Padua (ca. 1245-ca. 1342) and John Wycliffe (ca. 1324-1384) rejected the claim that the church can exercise coercive power in the secular realm and further declared that the clergy derive their privileges from the congregation of the faithful, the priesthood of all believers. This was a revolutionary idea at the time. Luther takes it up, especially in his early writings, as he declares the right of lay people to absolve the sins of fellow Christians.

But as wonderful as the ideal form of private confession is, with its genuineness, spontaneity, and equality, it is very hard to regularize in liturgy and church order. What ended up being regularized was a practice of private confession that, like the Roman doctrine of penance, became mandated in Lutheran churches as a preparation for Holy Communion; indeed, it became an article of faith: "Confession has not been abolished in our churches, for it is not customary to administer the body of Christ except to those who have previously been examined and absolved."[99] The clergy received exacting instructions as to how to examine individuals regarding their sins and shortcomings. The emphasis was not, as in Roman Catholic penance, on the recounting of specific sins through detailed and invasive questioning by the priest. "No one," asserts the Augsburg Confession, "should be compelled to recount sins in detail, for this is impossible. As the psalmist says [Psalm 19:12], 'Who can discern his errors?'"[100] But this did not mean that confession was to be lax. Parishioners were expected to recount serious sins that burdened the conscience. Pastors were expected to examine an individual's understanding of both the content of faith and the meaning and consequence of sin. This was in effect an assessment of a layperson's responsibility for explicit faith.

98. *LW* 35:12.
99. *BC* 61.
100. *BC* 62.

This regularized clerical examination of laypeople in private confession came to be called the *Verhör* or "interrogation," as in a court of law. As we have already seen, it was instituted by Luther himself in Wittenberg in 1524 to counter Karlstadt and "to insure the devout reception of the sacrament."[101] From Wittenberg the practice grew: "Fifty Lutheran church ordinances between 1525 and 1591 decreed individual confession with the *Verhör* as a precondition to admission to the Lord's Supper: no Lutheran polities failed to adopt it, and many forbade general absolution of the congregation."[102]

The instructions for the *Verhör* itself could be elaborate and detailed. A good example is the church order for Courland (Latvia) from 1570. This calls for "each Christian to be assiduously instructed in proper confession."[103] The penitent is called "to examine himself" at least four times a year and to go before the "priest" who stands "in the stead of God." He or she is to engage in heartfelt confession. It is expected that such confession will involve the disclosing of specific sins. If any are particularly grievous or involve important matters, the priest is to refer the individual to "deputy inspectors" or "superintendents" for disposition.[104] The confessional process of examination in preparation for communion involves twelve steps from turning to God in contrition and confession, through trusting divine forgiveness in Christ, to seeking harmony and fellowship with other believers in the church.[105] The

101. Thomas Tentler, "Confession," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, 1:403.
102. Tentler, "Confession."
103. *EKO* 5:84.
104. *EKO* 5:86.
105. The steps are as follows: (1) turning to God with one's heart; recognizing one's sins and confessing them; (2) hearing that God is true and righteous and forgives sins; (3) knowing that absolution, the loosing of sins on earth and in heaven as proclaimed in Matthew 16 and John 20, is "the goal and benefit of confession"; (4) realizing that the promise of the gospel is spoken "particularly and privately" to the penitent and (5) that what is given to the individual penitent is "justification through faith" as St. Paul teaches in Romans 4; (6) taking comfort in the fact that divine forgiveness consoles the conscience and relieves the penitent of "anger, personal affliction [*affecting*], and secret sorrows"; (7) knowing that Jesus promises that whoever acknowledges him before men will be acknowledged by him before his heavenly Father (Matthew 10); (8) rejoicing that God will send many blessings and mercy to the penitent; (9) knowing that the forgiven penitent is under obligation to the church and that "that which is sacred is not given to dogs nor pearls cast before swine" (Matthew 7); (10) in this regard, having fear in the knowledge that any baptized and believing Christian who evades God's offer of grace in forgiveness will be subject to God's wrath and fearful judgment on the Last Day;

"inexperienced and unknowing" who undergo examination — that is, those who lack "understanding" in whole or part — are to be admonished for their ignorance and then examined in the catechism as to the nature of true confession. They must be able to define sin and recognize the law, know how to confess properly and how to repent, and pledge themselves to new obedience and Christian life.[106]

The church order demands that all Christians who come to the Table must be able to answer five questions:

1. What is the sacrament of the altar? Answer: It is the true body and blood of Christ.
2. What are the words of institution? Answer: "On the night in which he was betrayed. . . ."
3. What moves one to receive the sacrament? Answer: The command of God "to take and eat," the gracious promise of Christ that it is done "for the forgiveness of sins," and the need of the sinner to be unburdened of sins.
4. What makes the sacrament efficacious? Answer: Not merely the eating and drinking, but "the firm faith that Christ died for my sins."
5. What are the benefits of the sacrament? Answer: The forgiveness of sins, the strengthening of faith, reconciliation with God, and union with Christ.[107]

Finally the Courland church order takes up the problem of the "Easter Christian" who "seldom or never comes to confession and sacrament." Such a person should be upbraided, punished, and, if need be, banned from the church.[108]

After such examination the private absolution was applied. In Courland, this meant a brief, unconditional declaration of forgiveness and assurance:

(11) knowing that God in Christ is the penitent's example, directing one's way in divine righteousness (Psalm 32, etc.); and finally, (12) the forgiven sinner seeking harmony in the church and the increase of brotherly love. *EKO* 5:84-85.

106. *EKO* 5:85. In some territories, the *Verhör* called for occasionally *(zu zeiten)* testing a person's knowledge of the catechism by recitation; if they failed, they were to be admonished to go home and learn the parts they missed. See *EKO* 6/1:560.

107. *EKO* 5:85-86.

108. *EKO* 5:86.

> The almighty, truthful, merciful God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who through the will of his Son has forgiven thy [second person familiar] sins, wants further to have mercy on you and continue what has been begun to the praise of his holy name and your salvation. Amen.[109]

It is common, but by no means a set rule, for the *Verhör* to be accompanied by an unconditional declaration of absolution for sins. A particularly elaborate, even extravagant example of such an unconditional absolution may be found in the church order from Lüneburg, 1564. Its instructions for the *Verhör* are much less detailed and rigorous than those from Courland. They amount to two brief paragraphs stating that receiving the sacrament must be preceded by confession of sins to the priest and that priests are expected to examine "simple folk" *(einfeltige leut)* in recitation of the catechism, admonishing them to learn any passages they miss. The absolution reads as follows:

> The Almighty God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ wills to be gracious and merciful to you [second person singular familiar] and will forgive you all your sins for this sake, that his dear Son Jesus Christ has suffered and has died for this; and in the name of the same, our Lord Jesus Christ, at his command and in the power of his word when he says, John 20.23 "To whomever you remit sin, to him they are remitted," I declare you free from all your sins; I declare you free, quit, and rid of all your sins that they should be forgiven you always as richly and perfectly as Jesus Christ has effected the same through his suffering and dying and has commanded the same to be preached through the gospel in all the world, and this trustworthy promise which I now make to you in the name of the Lord Christ that you will peacefully accept, joyfully fix your conscience on this, and firmly believe your sins are certainly forgiven you.[110]

This is indeed a sublime word of forgiveness, an unqualified expression of the loosing key that has as its purpose to release the sinner and offer the assurance of salvation. But the instructions make it clear

109. *EKO* 5:87.

110. *EKO* 6/1:560.

that any absolution must be earned by fulfilling the requirements of the *Verhör*.[111]

A second, optional form of absolution attached to the Lüneburg order makes the essential connection between contrition and absolution clear:

> Since you [familiar plural] confess that you are afflicted with sin and with your sins have angered God and desire comfort against the devil's assault [*Anfechtung*], and since I am ordained to comfort poor sinners, male and female, a servant of God, after Christ has spoken to me [Joh. 20,23]: "which sins you forgive, they are forgiven"; also [Mt. 18,18]: "what you loose on earth is loosed in heaven," on such a promise of God and speaking according to his command, I declare you in God's stead free from all of your sins in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.
>
> Go in peace and sin no more.[112]

Public Confession

Martin Luther never prepared a public order for confession and absolution. But he did get involved in bitter controversy over a rite of public confession and absolution in the imperial city of Nuremberg that pitted the city council against the polarizing figure of Andreas Osiander (1498-1552).

The circumstances were as follows. The majority of the citizenry of Nuremberg had stopped practicing sacramental penance by 1524.[113] In May of that year private penance had been replaced by an order for public confession and absolution in a mass in the German language at which Wolfgang Volprecht (d. 1528), prior of the Augustinian order in Nuremberg, presided. As part of that mass, the confession of sins read as follows:

> I, a poor, miserable, and sinful human being, acknowledge to God my heavenly Father, to the Lord Jesus Christ my Savior, to you my

111. "*. . . darumb sol keener sum sacrament des altars gehen, er hab sich den bey dem priester angeben und sich vor einem sunder bekand in die privatam absolutionemn erlanget.*" *EKO* 6/1:560.

112. *EKO* 6/1:560.

113. Rittgers, *The Reformation of the Keys*, 80; see also 84-85.

> brothers and sisters, and to the whole Christian community, that I, unfortunately, have sinned frequently and seriously against God my Lord, by disbelief and lack of trust, [and by] not loving him above all things and my neighbor as myself. This is readily apparent to me and causes me great sorrow in the depths of myself. O Lord God, almighty Father, I, a poor sinner, remind you of your most gracious pledge and promise, where you promise forgiveness of sin through the blood of your Son Jesus Christ, who died for us and poured out his blood for our forgiveness. The same Jesus Christ, my Lord, also spoke through his holy mouth that where two or three are gathered in his name he will be in their midst [Matthew 18:20], and, that what they ask from you in his name will be granted them [Matt. 18:19]. Therefore, we ask for forgiveness of our sins in his name.

After this the pastor proclaimed the divine response to confession, which included not only the declaration of forgiveness but also divine imperatives to the penitent: "The Lord God says to us, 'according to your [second person familiar] faith it will happen to you! Go forth in peace! Sin no more! Thy sin is forgiven, removed, and left behind." There then follows a brief formula of absolution: "My dear brothers and sisters, God has mercy on us, pardoned our sin, and will give us eternal life. Amen."[114]

This public order was well crafted for its purpose. Its text is concentrated in expression. The confession emphasizes, in good evangelical fashion, sins against faith – disbelief and lack of trust and dependence upon Christ. The absolution is subtly conditional. Forgiveness is declared to be by God's own word and dependent upon the faith one holds along with the conviction to amend one's life. The absolution itself is not from priest to parishioner, but from God to "us."[115] To insure proper reception of the sacrament, the mass also included an exhortation to communicants, which was in fact prepared by Osiander, pastor at St. Lorenz Church, that reminded worshipers of St. Paul's demand to examine oneself (1 Corinthians 11:28). Holy Communion, declared the exhortation, requires a hungry soul that confesses sin, fears God's wrath and death, and thirsts for righteousness. To such a soul, the exhortation declares: "As we however examine ourselves, we find

114. *EKO* 11:39. Quoted and tr. in Rittgers, *The Reformation of the Keys*, 84.

115. *EKO* 11:39.

nothing in us but sin and death; we cannot in any way help ourselves out of them. Therefore has our dear Lord Jesus Christ had mercy on us and for the sake of us become flesh, fulfilled the law for us, and suffered. . . ." To receive his blessing requires "firm faith."[116]

The following year Wenzeslaus Linck (1483-1547) of New Hospital Church prepared a public confession to follow Osiander's exhortation in the service that became widely popular in the churches of the city:

> And because we have all sinned and need God's grace, humble your hearts before God the Lord, confess your sins and transgressions with heartfelt love and desire for his divine grace and help, with firm belief and trust in his gracious promise, and forgive from your hearts your neighbors so that your heavenly Father will also forgive you your sins and transgressions. If you do this, I will then release you from all of your sins on behalf of the holy Christian Church and by the command and promise of our Lord Jesus Christ when he said, "He whose sins you forgive, to him they are forgiven," in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.[117]

In this confession, the Christian is challenged with imperatives: to confess "with heartfelt love and desire," to believe firmly in the divine promise of forgiveness, and to forgive the neighbor so that God forgives "you your sins and transgressions." The absolution is then promised on a conditional basis: "If you do this," says the text, the minister representing "the holy Christian Church," by the command of Christ will forgive sins.

Despite his involvement in the preparation of the new Protestant liturgy, Osiander was uneasy with the liturgical practice of public confession followed by conditional absolution. He argued that to give a public absolution to a "mixed assembly" made up of unbelievers, impenitent, adulterers, drunkards, and the like, people who neither deserve nor want to confess sins and receive absolution, is without warrant in Scripture and follows no practice condoned by the ancient church. His concern for discipline was not in any way unusual. The early reformers were, without exception, opposed to indiscriminate mass communion. But he was also concerned about the nature of absolution. If the absolution is given conditionally in the form, "if you have faith, I absolve you," it is

116. *EKO* 11:48. See Rittgers, *The Reformation of the Keys*, 85.

117. Quoted and tr. in Rittgers, *The Reformation of the Keys*, 92.

"no real absolution" said Osiander.[118] Thus he demanded the resumption of private confession and absolution "to the exclusion of general, public confession and absolution . . . advocated by the majority of Nuremberg clergy."[119] The theological question at stake in this controversy was this: Can there be such a thing as a general or public absolution, especially when the argument is clearly made that any conditions placed upon an absolution means that it is no true absolution?

The clergy in the city did not agree with Osiander, nor did the city council. The council's interest in defending a public order for confession was at least partly political. They knew from their long experience governing an imperial city and protecting its independence that the Roman clergy often exploited the office of the keys in the sacrament of private penance to exercise influence and authority over the fate of individual lives in a way that rivaled the power of secular rulers. Public confession and absolution in official liturgical wording made the office of the keys a matter of church order regulated by government. If this regulated liturgical wording states that God alone forgives and clergy along with laity are recipients of grace, as is the case in the liturgical text for absolution in the German mass used by Volprecht, then the interests of secular government are all the more protected from clerical abuse. In this regard, Osiander was not unmindful of the political implications of his protest.

In 1533, after several years of debate, the city council asked Luther and Melanchthon for advice on the matter. In a letter sent April 18, 1533, Luther and Melanchthon argued that both forms of confession and absolution, private and public, should be retained. "The preaching of the holy gospel itself is principally and actually an absolution." Through preaching "forgiveness of sins is proclaimed . . . in public to many persons, or publicly or privately to one person alone. Therefore absolution may be used in public and in general, and in special cases also in private. . . ."[120] They then go on to describe absolution itself:

> . . . for each absolution, whether administered publicly or privately, has to be understood as demanding faith and as being an aid to those that believe in it, just as the gospel itself also proclaims for-

118. H. E. Jacobs, "Confession of Sins," *The Lutheran Cyclopedia* (New York: Scribner's, 1899) 128-29.

119. *LW* 50:75.

120. *LW* 50:76.

> giveness to all men in the whole world and exempts no one from this universal context. Nevertheless the gospel certainly demands our faith and does not aid those who do not believe it; and yet the universal context of the gospel has to remain [valid].[121]

One can presume that this letter was written with special care since two people had to agree on its wording and since it was a public utterance meant for a public controversy. In Wittenberg, both Luther and Melanchthon gave preference to the practice of private confession and absolution. But this preference did not prevent them from affirming the validity of public confession in Nuremberg and also, in effect, defending the practice of conditional absolution. A liturgical absolution, they argue, must conform to two characteristics: (1) it demands faith, and (2) it is an aid or comfort to those who believe in it. To make the demand of faith is to subject absolution to a condition.

Osiander refused to accept this judgment, although he did not wish to argue against Luther directly. In September 1533 he presented an expert report on the matter of absolution, *Opinion Concerning the Use of Absolution (Gutachten über den Gebrauch der Absolution)*, in which he reasserted that a public order for confession and absolution was illegitimate and that a proper absolution can never be conditional.[122] He complained directly about the conditional absolution formulated by Wenzeslaus Linck:

> It requires humility, sorrow, heartfelt desire for God's grace and help, [and] a firm faith and trust in his promises. These are the highest and most difficult works and virtues one can wish or require from a human being. . . . Who can believe that he has been absolved [according to this teaching]? Truly, no one, unless he believes and knows beforehand that he possesses all the above-mentioned virtues.[123]

Authentic absolution, declared Osiander, is conveyed by the pastor's word, speaking in God's stead, unconditionally. It requires no faith or

121. *LW* 50:77.

122. Gerhard Müller and Gottfried Seebaß, *Andreas Osiander D. Ä. Gesamtausgabe* 5 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1983) 413-90. See Rittgers, *Reformation of the Keys,* 150-58.

123. *Gesamtausgabe* 5:465. Quoted and tr. Rittgers, *Reformation of the Keys,* 153.

moral obedience on the part of the recipient. "In the absolution with the laying on of hands is not a sign of loosing but is the loosing [of sins] itself," just as Christ himself is present in the bread and wine and just as the act of baptism is itself a dying to sin and a rebirth.[124] Throughout this argument, Osiander refers for authority to Luther's essay *The Keys* (1530).[125] According to Osiander, Luther teaches that the loosing of sins and the promise of eternal life is the judgment of Christ alone.[126] Everything has to do with Christ, nothing with us. This unconditional absolution is what the pastor conveys. It must be done directly, privately, one-on-one, not indiscriminately in a public service where the graciousness of God is lost on those attending who are uncaring.

In his *Gutachten,* Osiander ignores what Luther and Melanchthon said in their letter to the city council concerning the demand of faith. That faith is essential is also Luther's argument in *The Keys,* an argument that Osiander distorts. To be sure, as we have already argued above, Luther asserts in *The Keys* that to have sins forgiven does not require moral obedience: it is wrong to "want to become holy by our own righteousness, beyond and outside of divine grace."[127] On this Osiander and Luther agree. Luther goes even further by declaring that the loosing key does not depend on repentance,[128] an assertion that contradicts the demand of his own exhortation to communicants and the instruction in the various conditional absolutions that we have considered in this chapter. It is not atypical for Luther to engage in overstatement, and this seems to be an example of it. But let the statement stand. Here again Osiander and Luther seem to be in agreement. But, according to Luther, the keys "demand faith in our hearts, and without faith you cannot use them with profit."[129] Faith begins with the binding key and comes to rest in the loosing key. Thus: "He who has faith in the key, has satisfied it by means of such faith, before and without performing any works."[130] Here Luther and Osiander do not agree. That Osiander ignored Luther on the demand of faith makes his position appear eccentric and willful. It is as if, ironically, he is yearning

124. *Gesamtausgabe* 5:489.

125. *Gesamtausgabe* 5:450ff. *passim.*

126. *Gesamtausgabe* 5:451.

127. *LW* 40:330.

128. *LW* 40:375.

129. *LW* 40:375.

130. *LW* 40:375-76.

for the laxity of Roman practice. His argument evokes in a curious way the Roman doctrine of *opus operatum* – the teaching that one receives the grace of God by mere participation – a position that would come to haunt the Lutheranism of a later age as it conformed more and more to the morphology of the church type.

It is no wonder that Osiander found himself outside the consensus of church leaders in Nuremberg. Rittgers describes Osiander's stance as "extreme absolutionism," a theological position which to his detractors recalled the "remnants of the sacerdotal religion they had rejected."[131]

The Lord's Supper

For Luther the validity of the Lord's Supper depends on the word of Christ alone. The so-called canon of the mass, "also called Eucharistic prayer, mass canon, Prayer of Thanksgiving, Great Thanksgiving,"[132] in other words, the central rule according to which the Lord's Supper is to be received, is unnecessary and misleading, even dangerous to the faith. The Words of Institution are all that is needed. To add to them the elements of the mass "is like imbedding the holy words in a heathen temple."[133] As Luther puts it in *An Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg* (1523), complaining about that portion of the mass called the "offertory" and what follows after it,

> From here on almost everything smacks and savors of sacrifice. And the words of life and salvation [the Words of Institution] are imbedded in the midst of it all, just as the ark of the Lord once stood in the idol's temple next to Dagon. . . . Let us therefore repudiate everything that smacks of sacrifice, together with the entire canon and retain only that which is pure and holy, and order our mass.[134]

When Luther says to "repudiate everything that smacks of sacrifice," he means it. It was for him a matter of firm theological principle, enunciated forcefully in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), and adhered to throughout his life:

131. Rittgers, *Reformation of the Keys*, 158.

132. Oliver K. Olson, *Reclaiming the Lutheran Liturgical Heritage* (Minneapolis: Reclaim Resources, 2007) 88.

133. Olson, *Reclaiming*, 33.

134. *LW* 53:26. See Olson, *Reclaiming*, 33.

> . . . we must be particularly careful to put aside whatever has been added to [the sacrament's] original simple institution by the zeal and devotion of men: such things as vestments, ornaments, chants, prayers, organs, candles, and the whole pageantry of outward things. We must turn our eyes and hearts simply to the institution of Christ and this alone. . . . For in that word, and in that word alone, reside the power, the nature, and the whole substance of the mass.[135]

The idea that "the mass is a good work and sacrifice" is "the most wicked abuse of all" with regard to the Sacrament of the Altar.[136] It makes the sacrament captive to the ecclesiastical hierarchy, which seeks to control the grace of Christ for the sake of power. The sacrament is Christ and belongs to Christ.

> Let this stand, therefore, as our first and infallible proposition – the mass or Sacrament of the Altar is Christ's testament, which he left behind him at his death to be distributed among his believers. . . . Let this truth stand, I say, as the immovable foundation on which we shall base all we have to say. For, as you will see, we are going to overthrow all the godless opinions of men which have been imported into this most precious sacrament.[137]

"Mass and prayer, sacrament and work, testament and sacrifice" must never be "confused." The former is from God, the latter the false human effort to be in command of the means of grace: "The former descends, the latter ascends."[138] Prayer does have its legitimate place in sacramental administration. As we have seen, the congregation's zealousness in prayer makes baptism effective in the life of the believer as he or she begins the journey of life.[139] And in the mature life of the individual believer, "baptism is worth nothing without faith, but is like seals affixed to a letter in which nothing is written."[140] This faith is

135. *LW* 36:36.

136. *LW* 36:35.

137. *LW* 36:37.

138. *LW* 36:56.

139. *LW* 53:97, 102.

140. Lenker, *Luther's Works* 3:204.

nurtured by the confession of sins in preparation for receiving the Lord's Supper. But in the liturgy of the Lord's Supper, the context in which this reception takes place, there is no necessary human action, no ritual of enactment, no ascending to divine being that takes place. God comes to us, even "on the night in which he was betrayed."

An Arduous Liturgical Tradition

In the practice of worship both Catholics and reformers took seriously the fundamental duty to call Christians to self-examination. They accepted the teaching that repentance could be repeated. They realized that this teaching represented a moderation of the severity of the early church, in which forgiveness for serious sins could be given only once in a lifetime. The Roman Church sought to lessen the burden of penance for sinners in the secure environment of sacramentality, teaching that divine grace is an intimate and assured presence in the blessed repetition of ritual action and participation — forgiveness guaranteed by formula. Whatever moralism and legalism attended the interrogation of the penitent by the priest in private confession, the fact is that the church in the Middle Ages relaxed the demand for subjective holiness on the part of the laity. This is the effect of the teachings of *opus operatum,* confession by attrition, and *fides implicata.* Penance became a matter of fixed liturgical custom. Cardinal Bellarmine was right to describe the morphology of the Roman church as not requiring "inward qualities." The believer can rest assured that the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love inhere within the visible, institutional church itself. Thus: "all that is necessary is an outward confession of faith and participation in the sacraments."[141] Repentance as a blessed repetition in liturgical worship led Catholicism to embrace a church-type morphology, Christian faith as Christendom.

The reformers sought to call Christians to self-examination in a much different way. They eschewed sacramentality with its rituals and formulas as the superficial trappings of "human traditions" and false religion. There is no Christendom: "the world and the masses are and always will be un-Christian."[142] "Human doctrine, ceremonies, tonsures,

141. *De ecclesia militate* 2. Quoted and tr. Whale, *The Protestant Tradition,* 185.
142. *LW* 45:91.

long robes, miters, and all the pomp of popery only lead far away from it into hell. . . ."[143] When Luther speaks of hell, he means it. The world belongs to the devil, who engages Christians in spiritual warfare, seeking to make them his own through assault on body and soul *(Anfechtung).* The reformers sought to ground the church in inward qualities, the very thing that Cardinal Bellarmine decries. Outward participation in the sacrament is not enough to receive its benefits. There must be faith. Faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is "the drama which God enacts with us."[144] Faith must be nurtured and tended so that people are not left as "heathen in a public square or out in a field" but actually "become Christian."[145] In this regard, private confession is a mandate, a formal exhortation to communicants is a common feature of the worship service, and absolution, especially when delivered in a public order for confession and absolution, is usually given in a conditional form. Private confession is not a sacrament mediated by a priest. It is not a moralistic or legalistic exercise in recounting the particulars of one's sins. But it is an examination of oneself, standing before God's judgment and undergoing "Christ's binding."[146] To fulfill the responsibility of *fides explicata,* the confessing sinner must know the fundamental content of faith: what sin is, what the sacrament of the altar is, what makes it efficacious, what its benefits are, etc. In all this the church sought to speak plain language: language of admonition, command, and comfort, language that demands a response on the part of the hearer — above all, fear of the judgment of God and faith in the divine promise of salvation, a promise that comes to the struggling Christian again and again in blessed repetition. "God will not let the sinner go," proclaims the church; "receive Him in simple faith." This style of worship bespeaks a church that, at least in the early decades of its formation, demonstrated a tendency toward a sect-type morphology, a morphology that shaped itself less moralistically or legalistically than existentially.

In 1746, Henry Melchior Muhlenberg (1711-1787), a pastor serving in America, reported to his superiors back in Halle in Saxony-Anhalt on his method of administering Holy Communion. His letter, dated October 30, 1746, was but one of many he would write throughout his life,

143. *LW* 41:211.
144. *LW* 13:116.
145. *LW* 53:63.
146. *LW* 40:328.

the so-called *Hallesche Nachtrichten,* in which he described the conditions and spiritual state of Lutheran churches in the new land. Muhlenberg had been sent to the colonies just four years before to provide leadership among Lutherans who had settled in Pennsylvania and surrounding colonies and were desperate for a spiritual guide and steady hand. Muhlenberg was the right man for the job. He would spend the rest of his life in America, organizing the Pennsylvania Ministerium in 1748 and helping to educate two generations of pastors. The sacrament, writes Muhlenberg, is given twice yearly in each congregation.[147] Those wishing communion are expected to speak with the pastor the week preceding. "One talks with them about the inner feelings of the heart and looks for growth and also gives the necessary admonitions, encouragement and consolation as the situation requires."[148] Through this private encounter, Muhlenberg as pastor learned about the congregation: "one gains an understanding of inner and outer conditions and one also gets an insight into relationships in the estate of marriage, between neighbors, parents, children and friends." On Saturday evening a preparatory service of confession was held, the sermon being directed to repentance and the concerns and tribulations of parishioners: "Without reference to specific persons one arranges the preached word according to the concerns and circumstances one has noted in the particular conversation." After the sermon the parishioners "form a half moon around the altar." Those guilty of "public offense" are singled out. They are once more examined by the pastor in front of the gathered congregation and urged to "true repentance" and "improvement of life." Thus private confession as interrogation or *Verhör* and public confession are joined together. The congregation is urged to reconciliation with the offenders. Muhlenberg reports that most often parishioners readily forgive their brothers and sisters of public sins. "Then when everything has been settled members of the group bow their knees before God, and the pastor, kneeling in their midst, prays the confession." Catechetical questions about faith and the meaning of the sacrament are directed to the entire gathering. These are followed by a conditional absolution: forgiveness is declared

147. "Letter 58" (October 30, 1746), *The Correspondence of Heinrich Melchior Mühlenberg 1: 1740-1747,* ed. and tr. John W. Kleiner and Helmut T. Lehmann (Camden, ME: Picton Press, 1993) 293-307.

148. *Correspondence of Heinrich Melchior Mühlenberg* 1:296.

to the penitent and the warning is given "that the sins of the impenitent shall be retained until they do an about-face." After this the pastor is still not done. "Those who perhaps still have something against one another go to the parsonage with the pastor, are reconciled with one another and forgive each other their faults." On Sunday the sermon focuses on Holy Communion. The elements are consecrated and distributed. "Afterwards the school teacher has to read the history of the Passion from the four Evangelists so that one may proclaim the Lord's death and consider the price he paid to redeem us."[149]

In late spring, 1867, Herman Amberg Preus (1825-1894) reported to his home church in Norway on the conditions and spiritual state of Norwegian Lutheran churches in America. He did so in person, traveling back to Norway for a visit after sixteen years of service as pastor, fourteen of them in the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, later known as the Norwegian Synod or Old Synod, which had been established in 1853. Preus gave a series of lectures, "Seven Lectures on the Religious Situation among Norwegians in America," in part to entice ministers to serve in the far-off and rugged land of Midwest America, but also to describe and, if need be, defend the new church.[150] The Church of Norway was wary of its offspring, and with good reason. The religious leaders of the Norwegian immigrants disapproved of the latitude of the territorial church in Norway. They saw America "as an opportunity to restore what they thought of as proper Lutheran practice." Thus they embraced older Lutheran rites instead of nineteenth-century revisions, congregational freedom, which befitted the American religious environment, and stricter penitential practice. The most important reform involved membership: "Where baptism alone had been sufficient for membership in the Church of Norway, the pioneer pastors provided for a rigorous examination of the faith and life of applicants for membership in their congregations and required the congregations or congregational councils to vote on the admission of prospective members."[151]

In Lecture II, on "Congregational Polity," Preus summarized communion discipline. "Private confession," he said, "is to be considered the goal toward which we must strive," though he admitted that it was not

149. *Correspondence of Heinrich Melchior Mühlenberg* 1:296.

150. Herman Amberg Preus, *Vivacious Daughter: Seven Lectures on the Religious Situation in America,* ed. and tr. with intro. Todd W. Nichol (Northfield: The Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1990) 10.

151. Preus, *Vivacious Daughter,* 15-16.

practiced everywhere and was frequently hard to do given the isolation of many churches and rural conditions. Nevertheless, he asserted: "In spite of the difficulties with respect to time and place standing in the way of private confession, in spite of the great trouble and time it costs the pastor, in spite of the ignorance and misunderstanding and ill will the common people show toward this ordinance, it has made its way into many of the congregations."[152] Examination of communicants is necessary to fulfill Christ's admonition, "Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine" (Matthew 7:6).[153] Christ expects the congregation and pastor "to take care and stand guard so that the plainly unfit and unrepentant do not go to the altar and profane what is holy while bringing judgment upon themselves."[154] At the preparatory or "confessional service," held usually on Saturday, people gather in "as many as ten to twelve at once" or "in special cases [as] individuals," and the pastor gives instruction on "the conditions for a worthy reception," "the truths of faith," and "the knowledge of Christianity."[155] The service begins with "prayers and hymns, after which followed catechization. The five parts of Luther's Small Catechism are gone through along with "the section on absolution."[156]

> When the catechization is over, each individual comes to the pastor in the sacristy or in a room set apart. Confession takes place either as the penitent himself makes confession or as he answers certain questions directed to him by the pastor. The pastor pronounces absolution [in unconditional form along with the laying on of hands] when the confession is finished, if there is no evidence of impenitence. While private confessions are in progress, the rest of the congregation sings hymns or someone reads to them from the Bible or a book of communion devotions.[157]

On Sunday, those who have been prepared receive the Lord's Supper preceded by "a communal address." Preus was well aware that this communion discipline could easily be subject to abuse "by an arrogant, domineering pastor or in an unevangelical manner." But, he declared, "we believe that the blessings attending upon a proper evangelical administration of private confession are so great that we ought not to preclude or abolish its usage."[158]

152. Preus, *Vivacious Daughter,* 69.

153. Preus, *Vivacious Daughter,* 68.

154. Preus, *Vivacious Daughter,* 68.

155. Preus, *Vivacious Daughter,* 69.

156. Preus, *Vivacious Daughter,* 70. The five chief parts of the Catechism are: the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, Holy Baptism, and the Sacrament of the Altar.

157. Preus, *Vivacious Daughter,* 70.

Muhlenberg wrote his letter exactly two centuries after Luther's death; Preus delivered his lectures one hundred and twenty-one years after that. Both men represent the austere Lutheran liturgical tradition in faithful transmission. Muhlenberg is recognized as the patriarch of American Lutheranism. His influence and inspiration extended through the Pennsylvania Ministerium to the Joint Synod of Ohio, the General Synod, the General Council, the United Lutheran Church in America, and the Lutheran Church in America. Herman Amberg Preus is the patriarch of a distinguished church family that created deep ties among the Norwegian Synod, the Missouri Synod, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, and the American Lutheran Church. To be sure, the rituals and customs that Muhlenberg and Preus describe are particular to their times and places. Lutheran worship has always had variations. But everything that Muhlenberg did from the week preceding communion through Saturday and Sunday and Preus did on Saturday and Sunday is grounded in practices established in the Reformation. The penitential disciplines of Muhlenberg and Preus thus conform to the morphology of Lutheran identity, emphasizing, above all, its sect-type elements, centered in the vigorous exercise of the binding key that recalls the eschatological consciousness and moral rigor of the early church. These disciplines were especially well-suited to the rugged religious environment of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America where the evangelicalism of sectarian denominations held sway. Above all, Muhlenberg and Preus, in their administration of Holy Communion, sought to obey the divine imperative that undergirds Christian devotion to the Sacrament of the Altar: examination of oneself. These pioneers in the American wilderness give eloquent and poignant witness, from their time and place to ours, to the fundamental purpose of worship: *to call Christians to repentance, to warn them to be under no illusion as to who they are and how far they fall short when they stand before God and holy things, to teach them to worship God in humility, to feed them the Bread of Life, and to make them ready to give testimony to Christ in word and deed.*

158. Preus, *Vivacious Daughter,* 70.