

Confession

"When I urge you to go to confession, I am simply urging you to be a Christian."
(Large Catechism, Brief Exhortation, 32)

What is confession?

Confession has two parts. First that we confess our sins, and second, that we receive absolution, that is, forgiveness, from the pastor as from God Himself, not doubting, but firmly believing that by it our sins are forgiven before God in heaven.

What sins should we confess?

Before God we should plead guilty of all sins, even those we are not aware of, as we do in the Lord's Prayer; but before the pastor we should confess only those sins which we know and feel in our hearts.

Which are these?

Consider your place in life according to the Ten Commandments: Are you a father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, or worker? Have you been disobedient, unfaithful, or lazy? Have you been hot-tempered, rude, or quarrelsome? Have you hurt someone by your words or deeds? Have you stolen, been negligent, wasted anything, or done any harm?

261. What is the first part of confession?

The first part of confession is that we confess, or acknowledge, our sins.

874 **Ps. 32:3, 5** When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. . . . Then I acknowledged my sin to You and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord" and You forgave the guilt of my sin.

875 **Ps. 51:1-4** Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your unfailing love; according to Your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against You, You only, have I sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, that You are proved right when You speak and justified when You judge.

262. What sins should we confess before God?

Before God we should plead guilty of all sins, even those we are not aware of, as we do in the Lord's Prayer.

876 **Ps. 19:12** Who can discern his errors? Forgive my hidden faults.

877 **Prov. 28:13** He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.

An Explanation of The Small Catechism

878 **1 John 1:8-9** If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

263. What sins should we confess before our neighbor?

Before our neighbor we should confess all sins we have committed against him or her.

879 **James 5:16** Confess your sins to each other.

880 **Matt. 5:23-24** If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

264. What sins are we encouraged to confess privately before our pastor or confessor?

Before the pastor or confessor we confess those sins which we know and feel in our hearts, especially those that trouble us.

881 **2 Sam. 12:13** David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord." Nathan replied, "The Lord has taken away your sin."

882 **James 5:16** Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

Note: No one may be forced to make private confession.

265. What is the second part of confession?

The second part of confession is that we receive absolution, that is, forgiveness of sins.

883 **Is. 1:18** "Come now, let us reason together," says the Lord. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool."

266. How should we regard the absolution (forgiveness) spoken by the pastor?

We should receive the pastor's absolution as from God Himself, not doubting, but firmly believing that by it our sins are forgiven before God in heaven.

"It is not the voice or word of the man who speaks it, but it is the Word of God, who forgives sin, for it is spoken in God's stead and by God's command" (Augsburg Confession XXV 3).

884 **Matt. 18:18** Whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

885 **Luke 10:16** He who listens to you listens to Me

An Explanation of The Small Catechism

886 **John 20:23** If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven.

267. What assurance do I have that my private confession to the pastor will remain confidential?

The pastor is pledged not to tell anyone else of sins told him in private confession, for those sins have been removed.

887 **Ps. 103:12** As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.

888 **Prov.11:13** A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy man keeps a secret.

889 **1 Tim. 3:1-2** Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer [pastor], he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be above reproach.

268. What is the benefit of private confession and absolution?

In private confession and absolution, God Himself through the pastor forgives each individual the sins that are confessed.

"If there is a heart that feels its sin and desires consolation, it has here a sure refuge when it hears in God's Word that through a man God looses and absolves him from his sins" (Large Catechism, Brief Exhortation, 14).

890 **Ps. 32:2** Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him.

891 **2 Sam. 12:13** Nathan replied, "The Lord has taken away your sin."

892 **Matt. 9:2** Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.

A Short Form of Confession

[Luther intended the following form to serve only as an example of private confession for Christians of his time. For a contemporary form of individual confession, see Lutheran Worship, pp. 310-11.1

The penitent says:

Dear confessor, I ask you please to hear my confession and to pronounce forgiveness in order to fulfill God's will.

I, a poor sinner, plead guilty before God of all sins. In particular I confess before you that as a servant, maid, etc., I, sad to say, serve my master unfaithfully, for in this and that I have not done what I was told to do. I have made him angry and caused him to curse. I have been negligent and allowed damage to be done. I have also been offensive in words and deeds. I have quarreled with my peers. I have grumbled

An Explanation of The Small Catechism

about the lady of the house and cursed her. I am sorry for all of this and I ask for grace. I want to do better.

A master or lady of the house may say:

In particular I confess before you that I have not faithfully guided my children, servants, and wife to the glory of God. I have cursed. I have set a bad example by indecent words and deeds. I have hurt my neighbor and spoken evil of him. I have overcharged, sold inferior merchandise, and given less than was paid for.

[Let the penitent confess whatever else he has done against God's commandments and his own position.]

If, however, someone does not find himself burdened with these or greater sins, he should not trouble himself or search for or invent other sins, and thereby make confession a torture. Instead, he should mention one or two that he knows: In particular I confess that I have cursed; I have used improper words; I have neglected this or that, etc. Let that be enough.

But if you know of none at all (which hardly seems possible), then mention none in particular, but receive the forgiveness upon the general confession which you make to God before the confessor.

Then the confessor shall say:

God be merciful to you and strengthen your faith. Amen.

Furthermore:

Do you believe that my forgiveness is God's forgiveness?

Yes, dear confessor.

Then let him say:

Let it be done for you as you believe. And I, by the command of our Lord Jesus Christ, forgive you your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Go in peace.

A confessor will know additional passages with which to comfort and to strengthen the faith of those who have great burdens of conscience or are sorrowful and distressed.

This is intended only as a general form of confession.

An Explanation of The Small Catechism

The Office of the Keys

What is the Office of the Keys?

The Office of the Keys is that special authority which Christ has given to His church on earth to forgive the sins of repentant sinners, but to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant as long as they do not repent.

Where is this written?

This is what St. John the Evangelist writes in chapter twenty: The Lord Jesus breathed on His disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." [John 20:22-231

What do you believe according to these words?

I believe that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, in particular when they exclude openly unrepentant sinners from the Christian congregation and absolve those who repent of their sins and want to do better, this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself.

269. What special authority has Christ given to His church on earth?

Christ has given to His church the authority to forgive sins or to withhold forgiveness.

893 **Matt. 18:18** 1 tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

894 **John 20:22-23** [Jesus] breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

270. Why is this authority called the Office of the Keys?

This authority works like a key to open heaven by forgiving sins, or to close heaven by not forgiving them.

895 **Matt. 16:19** 1 will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.

271. How is the Office of the Keys related to the proclamation of the Gospel?

The Office of the Keys is a special God-given way of applying the Gospel to the individual.

"God is surpassingly rich in His grace: First, through the spoken word, by which the forgiveness of sin (the peculiar function of the Gospel) is preached to the whole world; second, through Baptism; third, through the holy Sacrament of the Altar; fourth, through the power of keys; and finally, through the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren" (Smalcald Articles III.IV).

896 **Matt. 18:20** Where two or three come together in My name, there am I with them.

An Explanation of The Small Catechism

897 **Matt. 28:18-20** Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

898 **1 Peter 2:9** You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light.

272. Who are to be forgiven (absolved)?

Those who repent and ask for forgiveness are to be forgiven.

899 **Acts 3:19** Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.

273. Who receives the forgiveness given in absolution?

Only repentant believers receive the forgiveness.

900 **Ps. 32:5** I acknowledged my sin to You and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord"-and You forgave the guilt of my sin.

274. Who are repentant believers?

Repentant believers are those who are sorry for their sins (contrition) and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior (faith).

901 **Ps. 51:17** The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.

902 **Acts 16:31** Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.

Note: Secretly unrepentant sinners (hypocrites) reject the forgiveness which the absolution truly offers them.

275. Who are not to be forgiven?

Unrepentant sinners, that is, those who are not sorry for their sins and do not believe in Jesus Christ, are not to be forgiven as long as they do not repent.

903 **Matt. 18:17** If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

An Explanation of The Small Catechism

276. What is the necessary result of repentance?

"Then good works, which are the fruits of repentance, are bound to follow" (Augsburg Confession XII 6).

904 **Matt. 3:8** Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. 905 John 8:11 Go now and leave your life of sin.

Bible narrative: Zacchaeus the tax collector (Luke 19:1-10).

277. How does the church publicly exercise the Office of the Keys?

The Christian congregation by the command of Christ calls pastors to carry out the Office of the Keys publicly in His name and on behalf of the congregation. The pastoral office is a divine institution.

906 **Eph. 4:11** It was He [Christ] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers.

907 **Acts 20:28** Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.

908 **1 Cor. 4:1** Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God (NKJV).

909 **2 Cor. 2:10** What I have forgiven ... I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake.

278. Who should be considered for the office of pastor?

Congregations are to call men who are well qualified personally and spiritually to be their pastors.

"Our churches teach that nobody should preach publicly in the church or administer the sacraments unless he is regularly called" (Augsburg Confession XIV).

910 **1 Tim. 3:1-2** If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer [pastor], he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach.

911 **2 Tim. 2:2** The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.

912 **2 Tim. 2:15** Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

913 **1 Cor. 14:33-34** As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says.

Note: See also 1 Tim. 2:11-14.

An Explanation of The Small Catechism

Church Discipline and Excommunication

279. What great care must be taken in dealing with an openly unrepentant sinner?

The Christian congregation must carry out church discipline in love and patience. "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. 'If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector " (Matt. 18:15-17).

914 **Gal. 6:1-2** Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. 915 **Eph. 4:2-3** Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

280. What must the congregation finally do with openly unrepentant sinners?

The Christian congregation must exclude openly unrepentant sinners (excommunication).

916 **1 Cor. 5:13** God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked man from among you."

281. By what authority does the congregation excommunicate openly unrepentant sinners?

Excommunication is authorized by Christ and is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself.

917 **Matt. 18:18** I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven.

282. What is the duty of the called minister of Christ when the congregation has excommunicated a sinner?

The called minister of Christ must carry out the resolution of the congregation, that is, he must exclude the excommunicated person from the rights and privileges of a Christian.

283. What is the purpose of excommunication?

Excommunication is not intended to punish the sinner, but to

A. lead him or her to repentance and faith;

An Explanation of The Small Catechism

918 **Matt. 12:20** A bruised reed He will not break, and a smoldering wick He will not snuff out.

919 **Acts 3:19** Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out.

B. prevent him or her from leading others into sin.

921 **Matt. 18:6** If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

922 **1 Cor. 5:6** Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough?

284. What is the duty of a congregation toward an excommunicated sinner who repents?

The congregation must forgive any excommunicated person who repents and receive him or her back into full fellowship.

923 **2 Cor. 2:7-8** Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him.