

Author: Paul F. Bosch [pbosch@golden.net]
Series: *Worship Workbench*
Issue: *Essay 139 + June, 2009*



Copyright: © 2009 Paul F. Bosch.

This document may be freely reproduced for non-commercial purposes with credit to the author and mention of the [Lift Up Your Hearts](http://www.worship.ca) web site < www.worship.ca > as the source.

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO CONFESSION?

You have perhaps heard of Martin Luther's dying words. On his deathbed, the Great Reformer is supposed to have said, "We are all beggars. This is true..."

That pious self-denigration — one might say self-loathing — is typical of Luther. If he didn't say it, he could have. And typical too of Lutherans following him. Lutherans are fond of breast-beating.

So it's no surprise to me that a generation ago — if not still today — the favourite hymn of North American Lutherans was "Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me..." Wretches. Beggars. That's us.

I bring this up as a parable. Along with lively disagreement over the propriety of a Creed in every-Sunday Christian worship — see previous [Essay 138](#) — there's a second discussion on the Web these days equally passionately pursued: The place and propriety of an order for Confession & Forgiveness in every-Sunday worship.

Following the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, our new worship resource, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, presents an order for Confession and Forgiveness as optional. Now it's a "may" rubric, not a "shall" rubric. It's use among us these days is permissive, not directive.

Aside: With *LBW*, a new approach to rubrics appeared for the first time among North American Lutherans. The old directive, imperative rubrics — the "shall" rubrics — were replaced with rubrics in simple declarative, indicative form: "The assembly stands and sings...". It's almost a hope, a gentle suggestion. "It would be appropriate if you did this..." That kind of thing. Among some Lutherans of course there's a significant partisan opinion that's opposed to all rubrics, of any

kind. See [Essay 3](#) and others.

The old permissive rubrics — the “may” rubrics — remained: “The assembly may stand and sing...” “You don’t have to do this, folks, if you don’t want to...”

The effect of this change is an order of worship less Teutonic, less off-putting, more visitor-friendly.

And, like the use of a Creed, the use of an order for Confession and Forgiveness was now a “may” rubric. No longer imperative, directive, but instead permissive. In *LBW* and following it, in *ELWorship*.

Aside Number Two: Students of grammar will note as well that *ELWorship* avoids the use of Latinate words and constructions in favour of Anglo Saxon. It’s not “Confession and Absolution”, but “...and Forgiveness”. Again, more visitor-friendly. You could argue it’s a dumbing down. I’m willing to think of it as a concession to immigrant Lutheran congregations with limited grasp of grammatical English. There are more of those than you’d suspect in North America.

Granted, forgiveness is not quite the same as absolution. Forgiveness suggests a condition; absolution suggests an act, a declaration announcing and enacting the condition. So you could say the new wording is not quite accurate. I remember a beloved teacher pointing out how Thomas Cranmer, in his graceful English translations of the traditional Latin Collects, often tried to pair Latinate and Anglo Saxon forms in the same sentence: “Grant us...perfect remission (Latinate) and forgiveness (Anglo Saxon)...”

Well. Why not “shall...”? Why not a directive rubric with the Order for Confession, as it was before the *LBW*? As it was in the old *Service Book and Hymnal*? Or at least one of the new simple declaratives.

I offer four reasons, in the form of questions. I put them as questions here to illustrate my ambivalence about my own answers. Be sure to read through to the end where I cite an important qualifier.

1) Is there questionable psychology at stake? It strikes me as at least arguably unhealthy — sick — that Lutherans so love to beat their breasts. So love to think of themselves as sinners. Default Lutheran anthropology is decidedly dark and unwholesome and self-abasing. Sure, we’re *simul justus et peccator*, simultaneously justified and sinners. Life long. But Lutherans like to think of themselves as much more *peccator* than *justus*.

The instinct was at least understandable in Luther’s time. Plague and brigandry and

warfare and misfortune could be observed first hand simply by looking around. The average life expectancy was something like 35 years. German chorales even in translation perpetuate a picture of poor miserable sinners struggling through a vale of tears. T'was grace "that saved a wretch like me..."

Further: Default Lutheran self-abasement provides a handy excuse for default Lutheran quietism. Not good.

Faithful readers of these postings will recognize lurking here the source of a favourite polemic of mine. For twenty years now, I've been ranting that it's time for Lutherans — for Christians! — to give up on the groveling. One of my favourite themes in writing and in preaching, for two decades now, has been to encourage my hearers to claim their regal inheritance.

I never tire of pointing out that the Greek for resurrection is *anastasia*. In German it's *aufherstehung*. And they both mean the same: The standing erect again of Christ. It's one of my favourite themes. We share with Christ a resurrection royalty. My God does not want us to grovel.

Aside Number Three: More and more these days I find myself resisting the invitation to kneel for prayer, or even to bow my head. (I'm a good guest in another's church, so I do kneel when I'm expected to. But I grind my teeth.) I'd prefer to stand erect for all prayer, even Confession: head up, eyes open, hands open, palms up and open at my waistline in a kind of private, subdued *orans*. In Christ I am royalty.

So are you. That too is basic Christian anthropology: the *justus* balancing the *peccator*. In testimony of that, here's another Luther quote, this from a time when Luther seems more cheerful than at his deathbed. "We are the Lord's", says Luther, "with and without the apostrophe, with and without the possessive." With the apostrophe, with the possessive: "We belong to the Lord." Without it, a simple plural: "We ourselves are royalty."

With a royal Resurrection responsibility to remake the world anew.

I wish all Christians could claim and internalize that honour.

2) Is there questionable sociology at stake? Perfunctory every-Sunday Confession can have the effect of trivializing sin. North Americans are particularly vulnerable to this charge. Among Americans and Canadians, sin too often simply equals sex. Ask North Americans to name some sins, and they'll invariably think of abortion, adultery, sex before marriage, masturbation, that kind of thing. And supremely among some today: homosexuality, The Ultimate Sin.

North Americans today rarely think of sin as sociological or systemic. Your consumerist greed despoiling the planet. Your acquiescence to unjustifiable war. Your government disproportionately imprisoning and executing minorities. Your vote to lower your own taxes at the cost of cutting social programs that support the poor.

Does an every-Sunday perfunctory Confession perpetuate the perception among us that sin means Janet Jackson's "wardrobe malfunction" at the Super Bowl? And if the Confession is not perfunctory but heart-felt, is it then simply sick? (See 1 above.) Further: Do we ever get to consider or to measure the systemic sins in society? I simply raise the possibility.

It's worth remembering that there are Ten Commandments, not just one. And Seven Deadly Sins, and they're in priority: Pride, envy, anger, and greed are first. Lust is last.

And there are pastors who resist an every-Sunday Confession on the grounds that it runs the risk of perpetuating what Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace". It's too easy, in many cases, for parishioners simply to hear those words of Absolution and forget any responsibility "for amendment of life". Perhaps Roman Catholics have it right in their reluctance to abandon Private Confession in favour of a general, Corporate Confession as part of every-Sunday Mass. Corporate Confession is too un-demanding. See A) below.

3) Is there a questionable understanding of mission at stake? For congregations of faithful, every-Sunday worshippers to expect strangers and visitors to be able to participate, first thing, in our own corporate breast-beating is to require too much.

We are, after all, "in mission for others." To begin worship with an Order for Confession is to presume that all people present are privy to our specific world-view. Like the insistence on an every-Sunday "loyalty-oath" Creed (See [Essay 138](#)), an every-Sunday Confession is inhospitable to strangers and visitors to liturgical worship.

An every-Sunday Confession may be beloved of those who think of themselves as already "belonging to the Christian club". But it's part of our "chaplaincy" mentality. It frustrates our efforts at enlarging our "chaplaincy" assumptions into a "missional" mentality.

Every-Sunday Confession, like an every-Sunday Creed, is an in-house exercise. It may make sense to the initiated. But to outsiders and to those we're presumably trying to reach, it's distinctly off-putting.

Sure, we're a family of faith with our own distinctive traditions and values and ways of worship. But we're also "in mission". We don't want to set up unnecessary road blocks to visitors and seekers.

4) Is there even questionable theology at stake in an every-Sunday Confession? Is there the possibility that we're sending the wrong signal with Confession as the first thing we do when we gather? Are we telegraphing the message that you've got to clean up your own act before God will entertain your prayers? Not good theology.

Maybe Anglicans put Confession in the right place: just after the Intercessions, just before the Peace, just before Communion. Perhaps that's where a rite of Confession belongs, if we want to be true to Jesus' words in Matthew 5:23-24. Or is it problematic even here? As if Confession is always and necessarily the "gate" to Communion?

Now for my disclaimer. I'm not at all certain I can be so negative about every-Sunday Confession. For many, a real sense of real sin is a real burden. And for these, the shame of sin is not sick. It's simply realism.

And I predict we'll see, in days to come, more deeply troubled people as a result of the barbarities of recent wars, not excluding non-combatants: barbarities observed and barbarities committed. Hence the following principles.

A) Provide regular opportunity in your parish schedule for Individual Confession and Forgiveness. Don't allow this precious gift from our earliest Lutheran traditions to go unused. Advent and Lent are good seasons to schedule specific times in your weekly calendar for clergy to be available for this important Summary of the Gospel. And make a point of reminding your people that "private confession" is not part of a Romish plot to impose clerical power, but a gift to the whole church: The Third Sacrament. Any Christian can forgive. And Christian clergy are specifically called to do it. So do it.

B) Provide a brief order for Confession and Forgiveness as part of corporate worship on each of the Sundays in Advent and Lent. I'd even be willing to kneel, in Advent and Lent. (Bow my head? No. Kneel? Yes.)

C) Schedule Confession and Forgiveness occasionally in green seasons: Every now and then throughout the long Summer season after Pentecost; on some of the Sundays after Epiphany. As often as once a month? Maybe. As with the use of Creeds, these are pastoral decisions. But I'd advise standing, not kneeling, on the green Sundays. To keep Advent and Lent differentiated.

D) On Easter and its season? Or Christmas? My advice: Never on white Days or seasons. These are days of sovereign celebration. Breast-beating is out of place on these Sundays. Granted, it may take some time and education to get your parish piety to this point.

E) Remember: The whole Christian Eucharist is one extended act of Confession and Absolution. Not surprisingly, that "...given....for you" in the Communion was a favourite assurance for Luther.

F) Remember also that in many cases – Most cases? – the point of Confession is ultimately Reconciliation: reconciliation with self, with the neighbour, with the whole creation, and with God. Once again we can learn from our brothers and sister in Roman Catholicism, who since Vatican 2 have often replaced an individual booth for Private Confession in their church buildings with what they're calling a Reconciliation Room. That's a signal that sin means not so much individual peccadillos as a rupture in relationships. It's relationships we're trying to mend, most often, with Confession and Forgiveness. Matthew 5:23-24 again.

I close with Something Completely Different, a distinct change of mood. You've heard of Oscar Wilde's deathbed words? "Either this wallpaper goes, or I do..."

+ + +