

Is Absolution to be Spoken Categorically or Hypothetically?

by C.F.W. Walther (in *Lehre und Wehre* 22 [July, 1876, no. 7]:193-197

In our time, the presumption is that a written work is better, the newer it is; but that presumption is risky if it is applied to a work considered pure doctrine because it is old and comes from the “time of the rule of Orthodoxy.” Luther already wrote in 1542: “They are not all pure who write now” (XIV, 378). And Luther is not talking about the Papists or the Zwinglians, but rather about those who committed to him and wanted to be Evangelical or Lutheran. However, if we go into the seventeenth century, in which the pure teaching of the Word of God was worked through with diligence and ingenuity and methodically represented as in no other age of the Christian Church, we unfortunately see that one also in this so richly blessed time, in this so-called time of Orthodoxy still had to admit with Luther: “They are not all pure who are writing now.” Even in the best (otherwise completely unshakable) doctrinal expositions of this time, there are, nevertheless, deviations from the pure evangelical doctrine, which God has given back to the Church through the Reformation, a time of His grace and marvelous working.

Among other things, not only is the emphasis on the doctrine of justification in Luther’s writings and our church confessions no longer found in those doctrinal expositions,¹ but even indirect deviations from this doctrine *on which the church stands or falls*² occur here and there. Unfortunately, many otherwise faithful theologians did not apply the diligence to the study of Luther’s writings that they should have after studying Scripture, which is undoubtedly one of the main reasons for the complaints that are attached even to the writings of our otherwise undeniably orthodox dogmatists. In 1636, among others, the great theologian Michael Walther, in his classic *Officina Biblica*, bitterly complained about the neglect of the study of Luther’s writings, even by some of the best theologians of his time.

He wrote:

At this time—not to mention the other needs of our dear mother [the Church]—I cannot help but be filled and tormented by the deepest sadness of mind, when I—as I do often—think about it, like so many others, not even excluding those who want to be recognized as confessors of our religion, inside and outside Germany: that the very useful writings of our common father in God, the great hero, Luther, the courageous conqueror of the Antichrist and successful reformer of the papacy, of blessed and immortal memory, have become contemptible and worthless. . . . How few there are in our time who think those writings are worth reading! Here you hear from many whimsical excuses or pretexts if you ask them about it. Many declared that the harshness of the polemic put them off. Moreover, those who are in limited financial circumstances say that they are hindered by the rarity and cost of these works. Most of them are daunted by the vastness of so many Jena, Wittenberg, and Eisleben tomes, which make up a small library by themselves. As a result, not only is the authority of this truly apostolic man in great danger, which one recklessly despises, but so partly is the truth of the heavenly doctrine, which is sleepily put aside, and the gift of the interpretation of the Scriptures, which is despised negligently. So it is to be feared that, out of God’s just judgment and severe punishment for the contempt of his gifts, at the same time as Luther’s writings, the Lutheran religion would fail and disappear faster than one imagines. May Jesus Christ avert this omen!” (*Officina Biblica*, 3rd ed. Wittenberg, 1703, Praef. 2, b. 3a).

¹ Lehrdarstellungen

² *Stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*

So there is no doubt, even in our time, if we do not want to lose what God once gave to the Church through the work of the Reformation, we must, therefore, first of all, according to the Scriptures, and, in addition, according to the pure and fair faith and teaching, study our Scriptures most diligently before the writings of Luther and his faithful collaborators. Secondly, We are by no means exempt from the effort of our own research and the most serious testing although we have extremely rich treasures of divine doctrine in the many wonderful writings of the later godly teachers, especially from the seventeenth century.

How true this is can be shown here by the famous theologian Paul Tarnov and his teaching on the power of absolution. Born in 1562 and died in 1633 as a professor of theology at Rostock, he published many valuable writings, among which his writing: *De sacrosancto ministerio libri tres [Three Book on the Most Holy Ministry]* (Rostock, 1623), occupies an excellent place. We are far from wanting to rise above this great theologian or to diminish his fame as a worthy teacher of our church; nevertheless, we do not regard it as a violation of guilty piety against such a scholar, even if we show him how we can never lose sight of Acts 17:11 (“Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily, *to see* whether these things were so”) when studying the old man. Incidentally, we do not want to give our own, but the criticism of the Jena theologian Christian Chemnitz, who, as is well known, was not only blood-related to the great Martin Chemnitz, but was also spiritually related to a great degree.

Christian Chemnitz writes the following:

With the intention of the form of absolution, 4. is to know whether it has to be categorical, or whether it has to be conditional and hypothetical. This is how Tarnov writes (book 2, chapter 23, page 829): “But the form and manner must always be conditional, because absolution alone can and should be communicated to the truly penitent, but God, the Heart-Defender, only knows who are truly penitent, what the minister of the church concludes only with probability from words and actions, the private and special absolution can only be given and understood in a conditional form just as in common and public sermon. To no one except the true believer is the forgiveness of sins to be proclaimed and communicated.”

These words either speak of the wholesome fruit and appropriateness of absolution on the part of the confessor; and so it is true that the forgiveness of sins alone is given to those who are truly penitent by absolution. Or they speak of the form of absolution in view of the God offering it, who, as much as it is, offers the grace and forgiveness of sins to all people. Whichever of the two may be understood, they do not prove that the form of absolution should be conditional, for example in the following way: “If you repent of your sins and believe in Jesus Christ, I will absolve you.” Rather, the form must be categorical, or in such a way that the cause of his speech is stated: “And I absolve you,” etc., or: “Because you repent of your sins, and believe that your Savior has done enough for them; therefore, I absolve you in God’s place and by virtue of my office.”

For the ministers of the church are commanded that according to the outward actions (as can be seen with mouth and gestures), if it is of the right kind, distribute the sacraments and pronounce absolution, but as to what is within, leave it in God’s hands.

As Augustine in chapter 12 of the first book of his *On Baptism, against the Donatists* on the person who mistakenly received baptism, writes: “in the case of him who had approached the sacrament in deceit there is no second baptism, but he is purged by faithful discipline and truthful confession, which he could not be without baptism, so that what was given before becomes then powerful to work his salvation, when the former

deceit is done away by the truthful confession,”³—this is also to be said here. Namely, as no one will say that baptism can only be given to adults to a limited extent, because God, the Heart-Defender, is known only with certainty by only the truly penitent and believing, so it is by no means necessary to give absolution for this reason. But as baptism and the Lord’s Supper are categorically given to everyone according to the outward confession of the mouth and the actions of the hands and no one speaks conditionally to the adult: “If you have true repentance and truly believe, I will baptize you, or, accept it, this is Christ’s Body”: so nobody who confesses true repentance with mouth and gesture is not conditionally but categorically given absolution.

Even if someone, as can sometimes happen, were a hypocrite and pretended to repent, nonetheless the absolution from God still applies and then begins to be effectual when the hindrance [of hypocrisy] is removed through true confession. Because “God’s gifts and calling are without repentance” (Romans 11:29), so it is obvious that Tarnov’s opinion, according to which he teaches that the form and manner of absolution must always be conditional, cannot be approved but must be categorical or at least one that gives only the reason and cause. Otherwise, baptism and the Lord’s Supper would also be conditionally given to adults;

2. This would make the certainty of contrition and the belief of the recipient or confessor somewhat dependent on the promising and offering God. For whether the confessor and apparent penitent are hypocrites, or not, absolution is always valid, firm and certain from God’s side. Because the confessor sits in God’s place, not as an omniscient Heart-Defender, but as a servant who is bound to the external words and gestures and to the judgment of love, and since he is also not ordered to do so conditionally; hence, he has to absolve categorically, not conditionally.

3. Here, too, it is not a question of the effectiveness or fruit of absolution but of the form and nature of absolution, which hypocrites also receive intact. All hear the same word, the same gospel, but the fruit is not the same in all hearers, Luke 8:5-7 [Parable of the Sower]. Tarnov differentiates between the act of absolution itself and that the hypocrite and secretly unrepentant by fraud can be absolved by the confessor (according to the well-known expression: “He stole the absolution”) along with the fruit.

From that: 4. Very easily the penitent could be given reason to doubt the truth of absolution and forgiveness. If either his contrition is not very strong, his faith, somewhat weak betrayed by the words of his confession, he will very easily start to doubt whether his sins were truly forgiven by absolution.

6. If, of course, the confessor knows that the penitent does not confess or believe sincerely, or that he does not want to improve his life, he must rather have him come back with a truly penitent heart at another time than do it conditionally. Because we also call for a diligent fuss, but we reject conditional absolution with most of the others. "(*Brevis instructio futuri ministri ecclesiae [Brief Instruction for Future Ministers of the Church]*, Jenae, 1660, pp. 286-292).

—C.F.W. Walther
(translated by David R. Boisclair)

³ Cf. NPNF¹, 4:419.