Confession and the Power of the Keys

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.
(Psalm 51:10)

Confession seems to be part of our culture. It is not unusual for the day’s news or headlines to include some type of confession from politicians or executives or pop culture celebrities, etc. And then there are the many confessions spread through outlets such as Twitter and Facebook. Tonight we continue our study of the Small Catechism, and we’ll be looking at Confession and Absolution. This is different than the media confessions that surround us, this is confession rooted in our faith in Jesus Christ and our baptism.

Confession

- Two parts:
  - We confess our sin (our action).
  - We receive forgiveness (God’s action).

- Absolution (forgiveness) comes from God, not from the Pastor.
  - We are absolved through the Word from another.
  - Absolution is a speaking and hearing of the Word of God and a return to Baptism.

- Confession is voluntary. It is one form of preparation for receiving the Lord’s Supper, but is not a prerequisite.

Three kinds of confession:

- We confess to God directly.
- We confess to those we have sinned against.
- We confess in Church, before the pastor, under the “Office of the Keys.”

Example: “Lord’s Prayer” (forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us)
We are confessing directly to God and reconciling with our neighbors.

Lutheran theology links confession and absolution to the proclamation of the Gospel and Baptism. The forms for confession we use are baptismally based (we die to sin and are raised to new life with Christ).

- There are three rites for confession and absolution in Evangelical Lutheran Worship:
  - General – We begin worship with a confession similar to this (p. 94).
  - Corporate (p. 238)
  - Individual (p. 243)

- Individual confession is based on the confession in Luther’s Small Catechism
  So what do we confess? Luther had a suggestion for students – see page 31-32 of your Small Catechism – I’m sure this doesn’t apply to any of you ©!

Confession and absolution is also linked to the Word. God comes to us through the Word. Hearing the Gospel and the absolution consoles us and strengthens us.
Office of the Keys

*A little history or background:* The “power of the keys” is a term which in its more extended sense refers to the whole power of the Church, and in its more restricted use, the power of granting (or refusing) absolution. The concept goes back to Christ’s words to Peter in Matthew 16:19, and in the early church it was closely connected with the episcopal office (exercised by clergy under the supervision of the bishop). By the Middle Ages this included assigning penance/punishments, turning priests essentially into judges, and the Church had three classes of members: the faithful, catechumens, and penitents. This entire concept was transformed by the Reformation.

- Absolution (the Office of the Keys) and in the mutual conversation and consolation of the brothers and sisters.

- Keys are an office and authority given to the whole church by Christ – “to bind and loose sins” (Matthew 16:19 and 18:18; John 20:23).

- It is not in our power, but God’s alone, to judge sin.
1) What does it mean to confess our sins? Why is it important to acknowledge when we have done something wrong?

2) Is Confession a sacrament? Why or why not?

3) Name three types of confession and their similarities and differences.

4) What are some connections between Confession and the Sacrament of Holy Baptism?

5) What is the minister’s role in confession?

6) Read Romans 8:31-39. What does this say to you about Confession and Forgiveness?

7) List the reason the following elements from our worship service are considered expressions of Confession and Forgiveness. Can you think of any other examples, aside from the Brief Order of Confession and Forgiveness that begins worship?

   Hymn of Praise (“Glory to God”)
   Creeds
   Prayers
   Sharing of the Peace
   Lord’s Prayer
   Lamb of God
   Communion

8) Name two kinds of confession found in the Lord’s Prayer.

9) Write definitions for the following terms:

   Power of the Keys
   Absolution

10) In what way(s) can you apply what we have learned today about our faith, to your life?
Did you know? (Fun facts to know and tell!)

Authority of the Keys

Power, Position, Authority: Roman Catholic tradition has held that the authority of keys given to Peter was exclusively his, and this power and privilege was passed on to the Church and his successors. Peter is considered the first Pope of the Church.

Protestant tradition has held that the authority of keys given to Peter was representative and that it refers to the wider apostolic message and mission.

Other “Key” Scripture

“Key of David” – In Isaiah 22:15-25 we read how Eliakin (steward to the household of King Hezekiah) was given “the key of the house of David” to wear on his shoulder. This symbolized his exclusive authority to grant access to the king.

And in Revelations 3:7 – Christ has “the key of David” and opens the door of access to God.

About that question . . .

Luther repeated a simple question throughout the Small Catechism: “What is this?” It is said that the inspiration for this question came from Luther’s son, Hans, who was three years old at the time this was written and would run around the house pointing at everything and asking, “was ist das?” (“what is this”). If you have a little brother or sister or have spent any time with a child this age, you are probably familiar with this question.

And from Luther’s Large Catechism

“. . . a truly Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism, once begun and to be ever continued” and that “repentance, therefore, is nothing else than a return and approach to Baptism, to resume and practice what had previously been begun but abandoned.”

Psalm 51

Our verse tonight comes from this Psalm. The heading of this psalm refers us to the story of David and Bathsheba, and provides the background for this psalm (2 Samuel 11-12). It is one of the seven penitential psalms (the others are Psalms 6, 32, 38, 102, 130, 143). One of the ways the church has used this psalm is on Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the season of Lent (a penitential season). Psalm 51, a prayer for forgiveness, begins our worship on this day.

Our Verse: Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

(Psalm 51:10)

What’s Next: We are about to conclude the Advent-Christmas-Epiphany cycle in the Church Year, and we will look at the Lent-Easter cycle and our annual baptismal journey where we are witnesses to Christ’s service, suffering, death, and resurrection . . . See you then!