

CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION

You Are Egypt

*Why the Disney Princess critique lands — and why it lands
somewhere other than the Lutheran confession*

Essay · By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*
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A quote makes the rounds every few months. It comes from Erna Kim Hackett, and it goes something like this: American Christians suffer from Disney Princess theology. Reading Scripture, they cast themselves as the princess in every story. They are Esther, never Xerxes or Haman. They are Peter, never Judas. They are the woman anointing Jesus, never the Pharisee at the table. They are the Hebrews walking out of Egypt, never Egypt.

I want to say plainly, before anything else: this is a real observation, and it is a good one. Anyone who has taught an adult Bible class has watched it happen in real time. Open to the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, and the room will immediately and un-animously identify with the tax collector — which is, of course, the single most Pharisai-ical move available in the text. Open to the rich young ruler, and the class will discuss what *he* should have done. Open to Nathan standing in front of David, and everyone in the room is Nathan. Nobody is David. Nobody is ever David.

The critique is sound. Where it goes wrong is in the diagnosis of the cause, and therefore in the prescription of the cure.

The charge, in its sharper form

The version I was handed recently pushes further. It argues that the Lutheran church in particular has no capacity for this kind of self-location, and that the culprit is the general confession. Corporate confession, the argument runs, puts distance between the harm you caused and the person you actually harmed. You never have to look your child or your sibling or your friend in the eye and name what you did. You recite a formula on Sunday — the writer called it a magic spell — and the thing evaporates. No reconciliation with the injured party, no reconciliation with God, and no change in behavior. You imagine yourself as Judah under judgment. In reality, the argument concludes, you are Assyria doing the harm.

This deserves a serious answer rather than a dismissive one, because the first half of it describes something that genuinely happens in Lutheran parishes. I have seen it. Cheap absolution is a real pathology, and pretending otherwise would be its own kind of Disney Princess reading — casting my tradition as the sympathetic character in a story where it sometimes isn't.

But the pathology is a failure of catechesis, not a feature of the doctrine. And that distinction is the whole essay.

What the confession actually claims

Begin with the words themselves. In the Divine Service, before anything else happens — before the readings, before the sermon, before the Sacrament — the congregation says out loud that it is a poor, miserable sinner, that it has justly deserved God's temporal and eternal punishment, and that it has sinned in thought, word, and deed, by what it has done and by what it has left undone.

Sit with the strangeness of that. It is a room full of people, most of them respectable, most of them employed, most of them decent neighbors, standing up on a Sunday morning and formally declaring under oath that they are the guilty party. Not the wronged party. Not the sympathetic one. Not Esther. The defendant.

This is precisely the liturgical refusal of Disney Princess theology. It is not an incidental feature of Lutheran worship; it is the doorway. You cannot enter the service without first identifying yourself with the wrong character. And the confession is not narrow. *By what I have done and by what I have left undone* is expressly designed to sweep up the harms you have not noticed, the ones you benefit from without authoring, the sins of omission that a self-flattering reading of your own life would never surface.

Luther's Heidelberg theses put the same thing in sharper form. The theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil; the theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is. Disney Princess theology is theology of glory applied to narrative. It reads the text looking for the flattering seat. The theology of the cross reads the text and finds itself among the accused, because that is where the law always deposits the reader.

Then there is *simul iustus et peccator* — at once righteous and a sinner. There is no formulation in Christendom less compatible with imagining yourself the princess. Lutheran anthropology does not permit a stable innocent self. It insists that the sinner you keep locating in the text is sitting in your chair, and that this remains true on your best day, after your best sermon, in the middle of your most generous act.

If a tradition holding these three things has produced congregations who cannot see themselves as Egypt, the failure is not in the confession. The failure is that the confession has been recited rather than believed.

The general confession was never a substitute for the neighbor

The specific charge — that corporate confession replaces reconciliation with the person you harmed — is simply not what Lutherans have taught, and the documents are not hard to check.

The Small Catechism's section on confession is explicit that we confess before God the sins we know and those we do not know, but that before the pastor we confess the sins we know and feel in our hearts. It then walks through examples by station in life: are you a father, a mother, a son, a daughter, an employer, an employee. Have you been unfaithful, lazy, hot-tempered, rude, quarrelsome. Have you hurt someone by word or deed. Have you stolen, neglected, wasted, done harm. The Table of Duties exists for the same purpose — to make you locate yourself in a specific chair, with specific obligations, having specifically failed the specific people around you.

Private confession and absolution were never abolished among Lutherans. The Augsburg Confession retains it, and Luther defended it fiercely — not as a work required for grace, but as a gift he refused to surrender, because the general confession does not let you hear the words *your* sins are forgiven addressed to *you* about the thing you actually did.

And the horizontal claim, the one the critic thinks Lutherans have never encountered: leave your gift at the altar, go, be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer it. If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. These are not obscure texts. They sit at the center of every catechism unit on the fifth and eighth commandments. Luther's explanation of the eighth commandment — that we defend our neighbor, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way — is not a theory about God's opinion of us. It is an instruction about the person in front of you.

So the argument fails on the facts. But there is a deeper problem with it.

The proposed cure is the disease

The remedy on offer is that the church should preach asking forgiveness directly from those who have been wronged, and that doing so will change behavior and refill the pews.

Notice what has happened. The critique begins by attacking a theology for letting people cast themselves as the hero. It ends by proposing a program in which the person who repents correctly becomes — the hero. Confess rightly, reconcile visibly, and you will be the one who figured it out, unlike those people in the group arguing about irrelevant doc-

trine. The princess has not been removed from the story. She has been re-cast as the enlightened one.

This is the oldest failure mode in Christian moral reform, and Lutherans have a name for it. When the law is preached as a program of self-improvement rather than as an accusation, it does not humble; it stratifies. It produces a class of people who have done the work and a class who haven't. The Pharisee in the parable was not a man who neglected repentance. He was a man who had a superior repentance practice and knew it.

The confessional answer is harder and less flattering than the proposed one. It is not that you should feel worse about being Egypt. It is that you *are* Egypt, that no amount of correct reconciling will stop you from being Egypt, and that this is exactly why the absolution is spoken to you from outside — by a called man, in the stead and by the command of Christ, on the authority of a word you did not generate and cannot revoke. The general confession does not exist to spare you the conversation with your sister. It exists because after you have that conversation, and she forgives you, and you do it again anyway, you will still need to be told that Christ died for you.

Remove that, and what remains is a moral seriousness with nowhere to put its failure. Which brings us to the last claim.

The pews

The argument closes by predicting that this reform would fill the pews rather than alienate generations.

This is testable, and it has been tested. Bodies that reoriented their preaching around social reconciliation, moral seriousness, and the naming of historic harms did not fill. They emptied — faster, in most cases, than the confessional bodies they left behind. This is not a scoring point against anyone's sincerity, and it is not an argument that the ethical concerns were false. It is a simple observation that people do not sustain a weekly commute to be told, however accurately, what they owe. They sustain it to be given something.

The pews are emptying everywhere, including in confessional parishes, and any Lutheran who pretends otherwise is doing exactly the flattering reading this whole essay is about. But the diagnosis that catechesis has thinned out, that people can recite the confession without having been taught what it means, that private absolution has quietly disappeared from parishes that formally retain it — that diagnosis is right. It just doesn't lead where the critic wants it to lead. It leads back toward the confession, not away from it.

The right kind of unflattering

So here is what I would say to someone who finds the Disney Princess critique compelling, as I do.

You have identified something true. Most people read Scripture looking for themselves in the good seat, and powerful people do it with the most at stake and the least awareness. The reading habit is real and it is corrosive.

But the tradition you aimed at is the one that already refuses it — not by asking you to feel appropriately implicated, and not by generating a better class of repentant, but by telling you flatly, every single week, before you are permitted to hear anything else, that you are the guilty party. You are Xerxes. You are Judas. You are the Pharisee at the table. You are Egypt.

And then, having told you the worst thing about yourself, it tells you the only thing that would matter if the worst thing were true.

That is the sequence. It is not weak Bible work. It is the only order in which the news is good.

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