

THE FORGOTTEN GIFT

# Confession & Absolution

*A Practical Guide for Lay Teachers*

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From *Ordinary Means* — newsletter.larryherzogjr.com

## Introduction: The Gift Nobody Knows They're Missing

Of all the treasures of the Lutheran Reformation, Confession and Absolution may be the most neglected. Many Lutherans—including lifelong Lutherans—are uncomfortable with the very idea. It sounds “too Catholic.” It feels unfamiliar and intrusive. And in the broader evangelical culture, confession is something you do privately in your own prayer life, between you and God, with no need for any human intermediary.

And yet, the Lutheran Confessions treat Confession and Absolution not as a relic of medieval piety but as a precious gift of the Gospel—a means of grace through which God delivers to individual sinners, by name and in person, the very forgiveness that Christ won on the cross. The Augsburg Confession devotes two full articles to it (XI and XII). Luther included it as one of the Six Chief Parts of the Small Catechism. It is not peripheral to Lutheran theology; it is *central* to it.

As a confessional Lutheran lay teacher—whether you teach adults or children—you need to understand what Confession and Absolution is, why Luther preserved it when he could have easily discarded it, and how it functions as a living, personal application of the Gospel. Many of those you teach, especially adults who have spent time in non-Lutheran churches, may have never encountered this doctrine at all. For some, it may be the most surprising and the most liberating thing they learn in your class.

## 1. What Is Confession and Absolution?

### The Catechism's Teaching

Luther's Small Catechism addresses Confession in the Fifth Chief Part, placed between Baptism and the Lord's Supper—a deliberate arrangement that reflects its role as a bridge between the two sacraments. Confession is how the baptized Christian, who has fallen into sin, returns to the grace given in Baptism and is prepared to receive the Lord's Supper with a clear conscience.

Luther defines Confession as having two parts:

*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.*

— **Luther's Small Catechism, Part V**

Notice the structure: two parts, but the weight falls decisively on the second. The first part—confession of sins—is our word, spoken in honesty and humility before God. The second part—absolution—is God's word, spoken through the pastor's mouth to our ears and our heart. Confession is our cry for help; absolution is God's answer.

And notice the astonishing claim Luther makes about absolution: we are to receive it "from the pastor *as from God Himself.*" This is not a figure of speech. When the pastor speaks absolution, he is not offering a personal opinion about your spiritual state. He is not expressing his hope that God will probably forgive you. He is delivering God's own verdict—a verdict already secured by Christ's death and resurrection—directly to you, by name, for your specific sins. The pastor is the instrument; God is the speaker.

### **The Office of the Keys**

The scriptural foundation for Absolution is the Office of the Keys—the authority Christ gave to His church to forgive and retain sins:

*"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."*

— **Matthew 16:19 (ESV)**

*"Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."*

— **John 20:22–23 (ESV)**

These are Christ's own words, and they establish something remarkable: the church has been given the authority—indeed, the mandate—to speak forgiveness to penitent sinners and to withhold forgiveness from the impenitent. This authority does not belong to the pastor as a private individual; it belongs to him by virtue of his call and ordination to serve in the Office of the Ministry. When he speaks absolution, he speaks with the authority Christ gave to His church.

The Small Catechism's explanation of the Office of the Keys makes this explicit:

*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.*

— **Luther's Small Catechism, The Office of the Keys**

This is not a power the church invented for itself. It is a gift Christ gave to His church for the comfort of troubled consciences. And it is a *real* gift with *real* power: "Whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." When the church forgives,

heaven forgives. This is not because the church has power over God, but because the church is speaking God's own Word of forgiveness, authorized by Christ Himself.

## 2. What Confession and Absolution Is Not: Clearing Away Misconceptions

Before we go further, it is important to clear away several misconceptions that are almost certainly present in the minds of many adults in your class—and possibly in your own mind.

### It Is Not the Roman Confessional

When most people hear the word “confession,” they picture a Roman Catholic confessional booth: a dark box, a screen, a priest, and the requirement to enumerate every sin in kind and number on pain of having one's confession invalidated. The Lutheran practice of Confession and Absolution is fundamentally different.

Luther rejected several features of the Roman practice: the requirement to confess every individual sin (which Luther rightly called an impossible and tormenting burden on consciences), the priestly claim to impose satisfaction or penance as a condition of forgiveness, and the entire sacramental framework of Rome that made the priest a mediating judge between the sinner and God. The Augsburg Confession is explicit:

*Our churches teach that private absolution should be retained in the churches, although listing all sins is not necessary for Confession. For, according to the Psalm, it is impossible: “Who can discern his errors?” (Psalm 19:12).*

— Augsburg Confession, Article XI

The point is clear: confession is retained, but the tyranny of exhaustive enumeration is rejected. You confess what troubles your conscience—the sins that burden you, the sins that accuse you, the sins that keep you up at night—and you receive absolution for all your sins, including those you cannot remember or recognize. The focus is not on the completeness of your confession but on the completeness of Christ's forgiveness.

### It Is Not Optional Personal Prayer

In much of evangelical Protestantism, confession of sin is treated as a private matter between the individual and God—something you do in your quiet time or during a worship service's moment of silent reflection. While private prayer and confession to God are good and appropriate, the Lutheran tradition teaches that there is something distinct and irreplaceable about *hearing absolution spoken to you by another person*.

Why? Because the terrified conscience has a way of arguing with itself. You can tell yourself that God forgives you, but when guilt is heavy, your own voice is the least convincing voice in the room. What the burdened sinner needs is an external word—a

word that comes from outside yourself, spoken with the authority of Christ, directly into your ears. That is what absolution is: the Gospel applied personally, specifically, and concretely to you. It is God's voice spoken through human lips, and it carries the same authority and power as any word of God.

Luther understood this deeply. He himself regularly sought private confession and absolution, not because he was required to but because he treasured the comfort it gave. He wrote that Christians should value absolution above all else, "not for the sake of him who hears the confession, but for the sake of the word of God which accompanies it."

### It Is Not a Third Sacrament (Exactly)

The question of whether Confession and Absolution is a sacrament depends on how you define "sacrament." In the strict Lutheran sense—a rite instituted by Christ that uses a physical element (water, bread, wine) to deliver grace through the Word—Baptism and the Lord's Supper are the two sacraments. Confession and Absolution lacks a physical element in the way Baptism and the Supper have one. However, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession (Article XIII) notes that if you define a sacrament more broadly as a rite with God's command and promise of grace, then Absolution can rightly be called a sacrament. In practice, Lutherans typically speak of two sacraments and Confession and Absolution as a *means of grace*—a specific, God-ordained way in which the Holy Spirit delivers forgiveness to sinners. The terminology matters less than the reality: in Absolution, God forgives sins. That is what matters.

## 3. Two Forms of Confession and Absolution

The Lutheran tradition recognizes and practices two forms of Confession and Absolution, both of which are valuable and both of which you should be prepared to teach.

### Corporate Confession and Absolution

This is the form most Lutherans are familiar with, even if they do not think of it as "Confession and Absolution." It takes place in the Divine Service, typically near the beginning of the liturgy. The congregation confesses their sins together using a common form, and the pastor speaks absolution to the entire congregation:

*"Upon this your confession, I, by virtue of my office, as a called and ordained servant of the Word, announce the grace of God unto all of you, and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."*

— Common form of corporate absolution

When these words are spoken, they are not a wish, a prayer, or an expression of hope. They are a *declaration*. God is forgiving your sins through the mouth of His

called servant. This is why the congregation responds “Amen”—it is the affirmation of faith: “Yes, this is true. I believe it. My sins are forgiven.”

Corporate confession and absolution is a profound gift that happens every Sunday in the Divine Service. Teach those in your class not to let it pass by as mere ritual. Those words of absolution are among the most important words they will hear all week.

## Private Confession and Absolution

Private confession is the form that has largely fallen out of practice in many Lutheran congregations—and it is the form Luther most treasured. In private confession, an individual meets with the pastor, confesses the specific sins that trouble their conscience, and receives absolution spoken directly and personally to them.

The Small Catechism provides a simple form for how this works:

*Before the pastor we should confess only those sins which we know and feel in our hearts. When asked, “What sins should a person confess?” answer: “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.”*

— Luther’s Small Catechism, Part V (paraphrased)

Private confession is not about producing an exhaustive inventory of every sin you have ever committed. It is about bringing to the pastor the sins that are actually bothering you—the ones that haunt your conscience, the ones you cannot seem to shake, the ones that make you wonder whether God could really forgive someone like you. And then the pastor, acting in Christ’s stead and by His command, speaks the word you need to hear: “I forgive you all your sins.”

There are several reasons why private confession is uniquely valuable:

- **It is personal.** In corporate absolution, you hear “your sins are forgiven” along with everyone else. In private absolution, you hear “*your* sins are forgiven” spoken directly to you, for the specific sins you named. There is a power in hearing that personal word that corporate absolution, as precious as it is, cannot fully replicate.
- **It confronts the lie of isolation.** Sin thrives in secrecy. When you speak your sin out loud to another person and hear forgiveness spoken back, the power of that secret is broken. You discover that your sin, however ugly, is not bigger than Christ’s forgiveness.
- **It provides concrete assurance.** For the person tormented by guilt, private absolution is the most direct and concrete form of the Gospel available. It leaves no room for the doubt that says, “Yes, but does God really forgive *my* sin?” The pastor answers that doubt: “Yes. He does. I just told you so, in His name.”
- **It is pastoral care at its most concentrated.** Private confession is an opportunity not only for absolution but for pastoral counsel, encouragement,

and the application of God's Word to the specific circumstances of a person's life. It is one of the most powerful tools of pastoral care the church has—and one of the most underused.

## 4. The Augsburg Confession on Confession

The Augsburg Confession addresses Confession and Absolution in two articles, both of which are worth knowing:

### Article XI: Confession

*Our churches teach that private absolution should be retained in the churches, although listing all sins is not necessary for Confession.*

— Augsburg Confession, Article XI

Article XI is brief but decisive. It affirms private absolution while rejecting the Roman requirement of exhaustive enumeration. The Reformers did not throw out confession; they purified it. They kept the Gospel—the absolution—and removed the burden—the impossible demand to list every sin.

### Article XII: Repentance

Article XII provides the broader theological framework for confession by addressing repentance itself:

*Our churches teach that those who have fallen after Baptism can receive forgiveness of sins whenever they are brought to repentance, and that the Church should impart absolution to those who return to repentance. Now, strictly speaking, repentance consists of two parts. One part is contrition, that is, terrors striking the conscience through the knowledge of sin. The other part is faith, which is born of the Gospel, or of absolution, and believes that for Christ's sake, sins are forgiven. It comforts the conscience and delivers it from terror.*

— Augsburg Confession, Article XII (summary)

Notice the two parts of repentance as the Confession defines them: contrition (sorrow over sin produced by the Law) and faith (trust in Christ's forgiveness produced by the Gospel). This is the Law/Gospel distinction taken up in the companion guide, *Distinguishing Law and Gospel*, applied directly to the pastoral act of confession and absolution. The Law does its work of crushing self-righteousness and exposing sin. Then the Gospel does its work of forgiving, comforting, and restoring. Confession without absolution is Law without Gospel—it leaves the sinner in despair. Absolution without genuine contrition is cheap grace—it treats sin as trivial. Both parts are necessary, and both are present in faithful confession and absolution.

Article XII also makes an important point: those who have fallen after Baptism can receive forgiveness whenever they are brought to repentance. There is no limit on how many times God forgives the repentant sinner. There is no sin so grave that it

exceeds the reach of Christ's blood. The door of absolution is always open to the penitent.

## 5. Confession in the Life of the Christian: Connecting the Means of Grace

One of the most important things you can teach is how Confession and Absolution relates to Baptism and the Lord's Supper. These three means of grace are not isolated events; they form an interconnected whole that sustains the Christian from the font to the grave.

- **Baptism establishes the relationship.** In Baptism, God claims the sinner as His own, washes away sin, and creates faith. This is the starting point of the Christian life.
- **Confession and Absolution restores the relationship.** When the baptized Christian falls into sin—as all do daily—Confession and Absolution is the return to Baptism. It is the daily drowning of the old Adam and the rising of the new man that the Fourth Part of the Catechism's teaching on Baptism describes. When you confess your sins and hear absolution, you are living out your Baptism.
- **The Lord's Supper sustains the relationship.** Having been restored through absolution, the forgiven sinner comes to the Lord's Table to receive Christ's body and blood for the ongoing strengthening of faith. This is why historic Lutheran practice includes confession and absolution as preparation for receiving the Sacrament.

This interconnection is not accidental. It reflects God's comprehensive provision for His people. He does not leave us with a one-time act of salvation and then abandon us to figure out the rest on our own. He gives us Baptism to begin, absolution to restore, and the Supper to sustain. The Christian life is lived in this rhythm of grace: falling and being lifted, sinning and being forgiven, dying and rising—all within the embrace of the means of grace.

## 6. Common Errors to Watch For

### “Confession Is a Catholic Thing”

This is probably the most common reaction you will encounter, especially among adults. The assumption is that Luther abolished confession as part of the Reformation. The opposite is true: Luther treasured confession and absolution. What he abolished was the Roman abuse of confession—the requirement to enumerate every sin, the imposition of penance as satisfaction, and the priestly claim to be a mediating judge. Luther kept the heart of confession—the Gospel promise of absolution—and freed it from the works-righteousness that had encrusted it.

*In your teaching:* Acknowledge the discomfort honestly. Then point out that the discomfort itself is revealing: we have become so shaped by evangelical

Protestant culture that a practice Luther himself treasured—one with direct scriptural foundation (John 20:22-23; James 5:16)—feels foreign. The problem is not with the practice but with our unfamiliarity.

### **“I Confess My Sins Directly to God; I Don’t Need a Pastor”**

It is absolutely true that you can and should confess your sins directly to God in prayer. Lutherans affirm this without reservation. But the question is not whether you can confess to God directly; the question is whether you are availing yourself of all the means God has provided for delivering His forgiveness to you. God can forgive you without absolution, just as He can sustain your faith without the Lord’s Supper. But He has given you these gifts because He knows you need them—especially when your conscience is troubled and your own voice telling yourself “God forgives me” is not enough.

*In your teaching:* Frame this not as an either/or but as a both/and. Private prayer and confession to God are good. But when guilt is heavy and the conscience is burdened, the external word of absolution—spoken by the pastor in Christ’s name—provides a certainty and concreteness that private prayer alone cannot. God gave you ears so that you could hear His forgiveness spoken to you.

### **“The Pastor Doesn’t Have the Power to Forgive Sins”**

Strictly speaking, this is correct: the pastor does not forgive sins by his own power or authority. God forgives sins. But God has chosen to deliver that forgiveness through human instruments, specifically through the Office of the Ministry. When the pastor speaks absolution, he is not forgiving sins on his own behalf; he is speaking God’s forgiveness *in the stead and by the command* of Christ. The authority is Christ’s; the mouth is the pastor’s. This is no different in principle from preaching: when the pastor preaches the Gospel, it is God’s Word—not the pastor’s personal opinion—that creates faith. The same is true in absolution.

*In your teaching:* Use the analogy of an ambassador. An ambassador speaks with the authority of the government that sent him. When he makes a declaration, it carries the full weight of that government’s authority—not because of who the ambassador is personally, but because of who sent him. In the same way, the pastor speaks with the authority of Christ, who commissioned the Office of the Keys. The messenger’s personal worthiness is irrelevant; the authority of the One who sent him is everything.

### **“If I Confess to the Pastor, He’ll Think Less of Me”**

This is a deeply human fear, and it is worth addressing with honesty and compassion. The pastor is bound by the seal of confession—he is not free to share what is confessed to him. More importantly, a faithful pastor has heard far worse than whatever you think will shock him. He is a sinner himself, and he knows it. His job in that moment is not to judge you but to deliver Christ’s forgiveness to you. The confessional is not a courtroom; it is a hospital room, and the pastor is there to apply the medicine of the Gospel.

***In your teaching:*** Be sensitive to this concern, especially in adult classes where people have reputations and relationships at stake. Emphasize the confidentiality of private confession and the pastoral office's purpose: the pastor exists to deliver forgiveness, not to compile a record of your failures. If it helps, point out that Luther—who could have simply abolished private confession—chose to keep it precisely because he found it so comforting. He would not have done that if the experience were one of judgment.

## 7. Practical Guidance for Teaching

- **Teach the Fifth Chief Part of the Catechism.** Many Lutherans know the Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper—but skip right past Confession. Don't skip it. It is there for a reason.
- **Emphasize absolution, not just confession.** The treasure of this practice is not the act of confessing (that is often painful) but the word of absolution (that is always liberating). If your teaching makes confession sound like a burden, you have missed the point. The point is the Gospel spoken to you personally.
- **Connect confession and absolution to Baptism and the Lord's Supper.** Show how they work together: Baptism begins the Christian life, absolution restores it when we fall, and the Lord's Supper sustains it. This framework helps people see confession not as a standalone awkwardness but as part of God's comprehensive care for His people.
- **Help people pay attention to corporate absolution in the Divine Service.** Many people recite the confession and absolution every Sunday without realizing what is happening. Help those you teach understand that when the pastor says "I forgive you all your sins," he is delivering the Gospel to them. It is not a warm-up act for the sermon; it is the real thing.
- **Encourage—but never coerce—the use of private confession.** Luther was insistent on this point: private confession should be voluntary, never compulsory. It is a gift to be received, not a duty to be imposed. If someone in your class is interested, encourage them to speak with the pastor. But never pressure anyone. The moment confession becomes compulsory, it ceases to be Gospel and becomes Law.
- **Address the "too Catholic" concern head-on.** Don't pretend the concern doesn't exist. Acknowledge it, explain the differences between the Lutheran and Roman practices, and show from the Catechism and the Augsburg Confession that this is genuinely and distinctively Lutheran—not a Roman import.
- **Consult your pastor.** If questions arise about the specifics of private confession in your congregation—how to arrange it, what to expect, what the pastor's practice is—direct people to the pastor. He will be glad to hear the question.

## Conclusion

Confession and Absolution is the forgotten gift of the Lutheran Reformation. It is the Gospel at its most personal—God’s forgiveness spoken directly to you, by name, for your sins. It is not a relic of medieval superstition, not a Roman import, and not an optional extra for the especially pious. It is a means of grace—a way God Himself has chosen to deliver His forgiveness to burdened sinners.

As a confessional Lutheran lay teacher, you have the opportunity to reintroduce this gift to people who may never have known they had it. For adults who have carried guilt for years, the discovery that God has provided a way to hear “Your sins are forgiven” spoken directly to them can be genuinely life-changing. For all who sit in your class, the regular reminder that corporate absolution in the Divine Service is the real thing—God actually forgiving their sins through the pastor’s word—can transform how they experience worship.

Teach this gift. Treasure this gift. And when your own conscience is heavy, make use of this gift yourself. That is what it is there for.

*“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them.”*

— John 20:23 (ESV)

## For Further Reading

- *Luther’s Small Catechism, Part V: Confession and The Office of the Keys* — The foundational texts.
- *Augsburg Confession, Articles XI and XII* — The confessional statements on confession and repentance.
- *Luther’s Large Catechism, A Brief Exhortation to Confession* — Luther’s extended pastoral argument for valuing confession.
- Rittgers, Ronald K., *The Reformation of the Keys: Confession, Conscience, and Authority in Sixteenth-Century Germany* (Harvard University Press, 2004). Scholarly treatment of the Reformation’s transformation of confession.
- Kleinig, John W., *Grace Upon Grace: Spirituality for Today* (Concordia Publishing House, 2008). Chapter on confession within the broader sacramental life.

## QUICK-REFERENCE SUMMARY

### *Confession & Absolution*

*For Sunday School Teachers — Keep This at Your Desk*

#### CONFESSION & ABSOLUTION IN ONE SENTENCE

*In Confession and Absolution, you confess your sins and receive God's own forgiveness spoken to you personally through the pastor, in the stead and by the command of Christ Himself.*

#### THE TWO PARTS

Part	Whose Word?	What Happens?	Law / Gospel
<b>1. Confession</b>	Our word	We confess our sins in honesty and humility.	Law reveals sin; we acknowledge it.
<b>2. Absolution</b>	God's word	The pastor speaks forgiveness in Christ's name and stead.	Gospel delivers forgiveness; we receive it.

#### TWO FORMS

	Corporate	Private
<b>When?</b>	Every Sunday in the Divine Service	By appointment with the pastor
<b>Who confesses?</b>	The entire congregation together	An individual, one-on-one with the pastor
<b>What is confessed?</b>	A general confession of sin	The specific sins troubling the conscience
<b>Absolution?</b>	Spoken to the whole congregation	Spoken directly and personally to you

#### HOW THE MEANS OF GRACE FIT TOGETHER

Means of Grace	Its Role	What God Does
<b>Baptism</b>	Begins the Christian life	God claims you as His own.
<b>Confession &amp; Absolution</b>	Restores the Christian life	God forgives and lifts you when you fall.
<b>The Lord's Supper</b>	Sustains the Christian life	God nourishes and strengthens your faith.

## THE QUICK TEST

✓ TEACH THIS	✗ NOT THIS
Absolution is God's word of forgiveness spoken through the pastor.	The pastor is just offering his personal opinion or a prayer.
The pastor speaks in the stead and by the command of Christ.	Only God can forgive sins; the pastor has no role in it.
Confession is a precious gift and comfort for burdened consciences.	Confession is a Catholic practice that Lutherans don't do.
You confess the sins that trouble you; absolution covers all sins.	You must list every single sin or the confession doesn't count.
Private confession is voluntary, never compulsory.	You are required to go to private confession.
Corporate absolution in worship is the real thing — God forgiving you.	The confession in the liturgy is just a ritual warm-up.
Absolution is the Gospel applied personally and concretely to you.	Confession to God in private prayer is all you ever need.

***The treasure is not the confession. The treasure is the absolution.***

## More from Larry Herzog Jr.

If this guide was helpful, here's where to find more like it.

### The Newsletter

*Ordinary Means* — a weekly confessional Lutheran newsletter for lay teachers, weary evangelicals, and serious laypeople. Free to subscribe at [newsletter.larryherzogjr.com](http://newsletter.larryherzogjr.com).

### Books for the Reader Who Wants to Go Deeper

- ***The Hollow Altar: A Confessional Lutheran Invitation to Weary Evangelicals*** — for the reader who has loved Christ inside evangelicalism but kept running into things their tradition couldn't quite explain.
- ***Judeo-Christian Values?: A Confessional Lutheran Reckoning with Dispensationalism, Christian Zionism, and the Gospel They Replaced*** — a timely volume on where modern evangelical eschatology actually came from.
- ***Ad Fontes: Textual Criticism for Lutheran Laity*** — why we can trust the text of Scripture in the first place.
- ***What Horse?: Common Misconceptions About What the Bible Actually Says*** — for the reader who has heard things “the Bible says” their whole life and started to wonder.

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### About the Author

Larry Herzog Jr. is a confessional Lutheran layman in Valley City, North Dakota — but he got there the long way. He came to Christ as a college-age atheist through an online debate on the reliability of Scripture, then spent over two decades working through North American Baptist, Evangelical Free, Nazarene (where he served as an associate pastor), a Calvinist Baptist church, and Reformed Baptist seminary before finally landing in confessional Lutheranism (AFLC). He teaches adult Sunday school and leads Bible studies at Grace Free Lutheran Church. His weekday job is cybersecurity.