

A Brief Study on the Practice of Corporate Absolution

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Corporate Absolution or the Declaration of Grace

Wikipedia:

In Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism, the Penitential Rite, also known as Confession and Absolution, is a form of general confession that takes place at the start of each Divine Service or Mass.

Sometimes known as "general confession", the Lutheran Penitential Rite is done at the start of each Mass. The pastor and congregation say the Confiteor and the pastor says the Declaration of Grace. The Declaration of Grace is not an absolution. In Lutheran practice, the sacramental rite of confession is its own separate service, and private confession is expected before partaking of the Eucharist.

Pastor: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."

People: "But if we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Pastor: "Let us then confess our sins to God our Father."

People: "Most merciful God, we confess that we are by nature sinful and unclean. We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved You with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbours as ourselves. We justly deserve Your present and eternal punishment. For the sake of Your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us. Forgive us, renew us, and lead us, so that we may delight in Your will and walk in Your ways to the glory of your Holy Name. Amen."

Pastor: "In the mercy of almighty God, Jesus Christ was given to die for us, and for His sake God forgives us all our sins. To those who believe in Jesus Christ He gives the power to become the children of God and bestows on them the Holy Spirit. May the Lord, who has begun this good work in us, bring it to completion in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In Lutheranism, the Declaration of Grace is the words that are said in the Divine Service by the pastor, following the congregation reciting the Confiteor. It is not regarded as absolution, rather it is regarded as an "assurance of forgiveness".

Version 1

In the mercy of almighty God, Jesus Christ was given to die for us, and for His sake God forgives us all our sins. To those who believe in Jesus Christ He gives the power to become the children of God and bestows on them the Holy Spirit. May the Lord, who has begun this good work in us, bring it to completion in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Version 2

Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, has had mercy upon us, and has given His Only Son to die for us, and for His sake forgives us all our sins. To them that believe on His Name, He gives power to become the sons of God, and bestows upon them His Holy Spirit. He that believes, and is baptized, shall be saved. Grant this, O Lord, unto us all.

Martin Luther

In 1533 Luther's companions Osiander and Brenz formulated a new Church Order for the churches and Ansbach and Nuereberg. In this order they did away with the *Offene Schuld* or General Confession.

They did so on the grounds that it devalued the Rite of Private Confession-Absolution.¹ Some people complained and the matter was brought to the City Council. The City Council debated the question but could not agree. The matter was then referred to Luther. Luther responded in a letter dated October 8th 1533, signed by himself and his colleagues Melancthon, Bugenhagen, Jonas and Cruciger. In this letter they conclude that the *Offene Schuld* could be used in order to remind hearers that each of them should believe the Gospel as the proclamation of the forgiveness of their sins. On the other hand, Luther and the others stressed the importance of Private Confession-Absolution.²

It would seem from this statement that Luther and his colleagues approved of Corporate Confession-Absolution. However, the *Offende Schuld* is not the same thing as the Corporate Confession-Absolution found in many Lutheran churches today.

During the medieval period there were three distinct forms of Confession-Absolution.

In his paper on *Confession and Absolution: Sin and Forgiveness* Rev. Precht explains these three forms of Confession-Absolution³: (1) is Private Confession-Absolution which contained the indicative-operative absolution "I absolve you from your sins", (2) the *Offene Schuld* which contained a general confession of sins, followed by the optative absolution, also called the Declaration of Grace "Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, has had mercy upon us", and (3) the *Confiteor* "I confess", followed by the optative absolution or Declaration of Grace.

According to Rev. Rittgers the difference between the *Confiteor* and the *Offene Schuld* was that the *Offene Schuld* was the confession of sins spoken by the laity while the *Confiteor*, according to the Latin Mass, was spoken only by the priests to one another.⁴

According to the Roman Catholic Mass the *Confiteor* was followed with "May almighty God have mercy on you, forgive you your sins and bring you to everlasting," and "May the almighty and merciful Lord grant us forgiveness, absolution, and the remission of our sins."⁵

Neither the *Confiteor* nor the *Offene Schuld* of the Lutheran churches contained a Corporate Absolution. When Luther and his colleagues defended the use of the *Offene Schuld* in the Divine Service they were not defending the use of Corporate Confession-Absolution, but the General Confession of sins followed by the Declaration of Grace.

According to Walther, "On Luther's advice, in almost all of the church orders of the sixteenth century churches in fellowship with the Wittenberg church, the exclusive use of private confession and Absolution was established, and general confession was not permitted. In the 1542 church order, signed by Luther, it says: 'If any preacher should

¹ P.H.D. Lang, *Private Confession and Absolution in the Lutheran Church: A Doctrinal, Historical, and Critical Study*, page 252,

http://www.ctsfw.net/media/pdfs/langconfessionandabsolution.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0N26q4rXOc8YppDcrQIzvcu_mkOhSCsK3tclRY2OXn8OqSd8JINfyBIEaQ

² Ibid. page 253.

³ Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Chapter 10: *Confession and Absolution: Sin and Forgiveness*, page 333.

⁴ Ronald Rittgers, *The Reformation of the Keys: Confession, Conscience, and Authority in Sixteenth-Century Germany*, page 249, endnote 17.

⁵ *The Order of Mass (The Extraordinary Form of the Roman Rite)*, page 6-7, <http://resources.ipsissima-verba.org/documents/extraordinary-form-order-of-mass-all-draft-9.pdf>

*assemble those who want to commune in the morning and speak a general Absolution to them: that should by no means be done’.*⁶

Here we can clearly see Luther’s opposition to the use of a Corporate or General Absolution.

Rev. Precht refers to the practice of only having private absolution as, “*Luther’s procedure – the so-called Wittenberg practice.*”⁷

Early Lutherans

Rev. Precht wrote that, “*Luther’s principles were in general continued in the numerous church orders of the 16th Century. Thus private confession, with but few exceptions, became the established practice.*”⁸

The practice in most of the Lutheran churches of the Sixteenth Century was to have only Private Confession-Absolution. Some congregation did adopt the use of the General Confession or *Offene Schuld*. As we find in the *Saxon Visitation Articles* of 1533, the *Church Order of Prussia* of 1535, and the *Braunschweiger Church Order* of 1531.⁹ However, none of these adopted the corporate absolution. The *Braunschweiger Church Order* doesn’t even contain an absolution at all but only a confession of sins.¹⁰

In 1545 Melancthon prepared a church order for the Church of Mecklenburg, which used the General Confession spoken by the congregation as a whole, which was followed by the Declaration of Grace spoken by the pastor.¹¹ This order was later adopted by the Wittenberg Church in 1559.¹²

It appears that the *Merseburg Church Order* of 1544 did introduce a spoken absolution, rather than the Declaration of Grace¹³, same with the *Saxony Church Order* of 1581¹⁴. However, this spoken absolution is not the same as the Corporate Absolution, adopted much later. Instead, the *Merseburg Church Order*, the *Saxony Church Order* and also the *Schwarzburg Church Order* of 1587 followed the practice of inviting the penitents forward to the altar rail, and there they individually received absolution from the pastor with the laying on of hands.¹⁵ The *Schwarzburg Church Order* even “*makes a point of stating that the absolution with the laying on of hands is to be pronounced individually to each person, and it forbids group absolutions.*”¹⁶

The *Calenberg Church Order* also gives instruction to the pastors to pronounce an Individual Absolution and not a Corporate Absolution: “*But the pastors are to absolve each*

⁶ C.F.W. Walther, *Pastor Theology*, page 122.

⁷ Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Chapter 10: *Confession and Absolution: Sin and Forgiveness*, page 371.

⁸ Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Chapter 10: *Confession and Absolution: Sin and Forgiveness*, page 358.

⁹ P.H.D. Lang, *Private Confession and Absolution in the Lutheran Church: A Doctrinal, Historical, and Critical Study*, page 252.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Chapter 12: *The Divine Service*, page 403.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Chapter 10: *Confession and Absolution: Sin and Forgiveness*, page 383.

¹⁴ Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Chapter 12: *The Divine Service*, page 403.

¹⁵ Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Chapter 10: *Confession and Absolution: Sin and Forgiveness*, page 363.

¹⁶ Ibid. page 383.

one in particular after confession from the command and promise of Christ, and not two, three or more at the same time.”¹⁷

And another church order from this period says, “*The pastors should also interrogate every person in particular and speak absolution, and not speak a common absolution to a group at the same time.*”¹⁸

Before moving on to the section about *Martin Chemnitz*, I would like to mention another objection that Brenz raised against the *Offene Schuld*. Brenz complained that the General Confession and Declaration of Grace was not an application of the Gospel to individuals. He points out that the General Confession was not the practice of the Early Church but only a medieval development. Instead the Early Church only practiced Private Confession-Absolution, referring to it as the Sacrament of Penance. He argues that if Absolution is to be considered a Sacrament it demands “*administration, not to a group in general, but to individuals who desired it.*”¹⁹

Brenz argued that Absolution should only be pronounced to individuals and not to groups, especially not to mixed groups “*in which, besides true Christians, there might be unbelievers, hypocrites, impenitents, adulterers, fornicators, usurers, traitors, drunkards, murderers, and those who did not desire absolution, much less were determined to amend their sinful lives.*”²⁰

His objections are echoed in the *Calenberg Church Order* which instructs the pastor “*to absolve each one in particular after confession from the command and promise of Christ, and not two, three or more at the same time,*”²¹ and the *Schwarzburg Church Order* which, “*makes a point of stating that the absolution with the laying on of hands is to be pronounced individually to each person, and it forbids group absolutions.*”²²

The only problem with Brenz’s argument is that he was not protesting the use of Corporate Absolution to a mixed group of people, but the *Offene Schuld* which only pronounced the Declaration of Grace over the people; hence why Luther and his colleagues saw no issue with the use of the *Offene Schuld* in the Church.

Luther himself opposed the use of Corporate Absolution, saying that “*If any preacher should assemble those who want to commune in the morning and speak a general Absolution to them: that should by no means be done.*”²³ But the Declaration of Grace is not an absolution of those gathered but merely a declaration that Christ has died for them and won for them the forgiveness of sins.

Brenz does make a good point that Absolution should be administered to individuals. This can be achieved through the practice of the Merseburg, Saxony, and Schwarzburg church orders which had a General Confession of sins followed by the practice of inviting the penitents forward to the altar rail and there they would individually received absolution from the pastor with the laying on of hands.²⁴

¹⁷ See: P.H.D. Lang, *Private Confession and Absolution in the Lutheran Church: A Doctrinal, Historical, and Critical Study*, page 252. Lang provides only the German, the English translation was provided by myself.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid. page 253.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ See: P.H.D. Lang, *Private Confession and Absolution in the Lutheran Church: A Doctrinal, Historical, and Critical Study*, page 252. Lang provides only the German, the English translation was provided by myself.

²² Ibid. page 383.

²³ C.F.W. Walther, *Pastor Theology*, page 122.

²⁴ Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Chapter 10: *Confession and Absolution: Sin and Forgiveness*, page 363.

Martin Chemnitz

In his *Enchiridion*, Chemnitz states that, in the Early Church there was the practice of both private and public (or General) confession, and that the Lutherans churches had retained both kinds of confession.²⁵ He adds that the practice among the Lutherans was that none were to receive the Lord's Supper without first making the General Confession of sins.²⁶ However, he then adds that following this the pastor and the penitent enter in a private discussion and receive an individual absolution.²⁷ Possibly referring to a one on one interrogation followed by an individual absolution.

On the other hand, it does appear that Chemnitz did write a church order which contained a Corporate Absolution.²⁸ This church order contains a fairly standard General Confession followed by this very unique absolution from Chemnitz:

“Thereupon shall immediately follow the Absolution:

The Almighty God has had mercy on you and by the merit of the most holy suffering, death, and resurrection of His beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, forgives you all your sins; and I, as an ordained minister of the Christian Church, announce to all who truly repent and who, by faith, place all their trust in the sole merit of Jesus Christ and who intend to conform their lives according to the command and will of God the forgiveness of all your sins, in the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

But to the impenitent and unbelieving, I say, on the basis of God's Word and in the name of Jesus Christ, that God has retained their sins and will certainly punish them.”

There is quite a lot in this absolution that needs to be discussed. Firstly, Chemnitz does truly include a Corporate Absolution pronounced to the congregation. It is interesting that he begins with the Declaration of Grace and then moves into the Corporate Absolution, followed by a warning to the impenitent.

The most striking feature of Chemnitz's Corporate Absolution, however, is that it is conditional. In many modern Lutheran churches the Corporate Absolution is indiscriminate; they declare an absolution over all who are gathered there, true believers and hypocrites, the repentant and the unrepentant, Christians and non-Christians. The pastor says *“I announce the grace of God to all of you. On behalf of my Lord Jesus Christ and by His command, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”*²⁹

Here the Absolution is pronounced blindly and indiscriminately to *“all of you”*. This statement is addressed to all who are gathered in the church building that Sunday. Hence, the pastor is pronouncing the Absolution to everyone in his church, repentant and unrepentant, believers and unbelievers. It is only after this Absolution is pronounced that the pastor adds, *“God forbid that any of you reject his grace and forgiveness by refusing to repent and believe, and your sins therefore remain unforgiven.”*³⁰

This statement makes it appear as if the pastor is only pronouncing the Absolution to the repentant believers, but that is not the case, he has already pronounced the Absolution over everyone present. This statement does not make the Absolution conditional on faith and repentance, in reality it only attempts to withdraw the Absolution if it so happens to be

²⁵ Martin Chemnitz, *Ministry, Word, and Sacraments: An Enchiridion*, page 136.

²⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*

²⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*

²⁸ I have not seen a copy of this church order myself, the section on Confession-Absolution was provided to me via Rev. Joshua Sullivan of the *Evangelical Lutheran Diocese of North America*, and I trust this to be an accurate replication of Chemnitz's church order.

²⁹ Lutheran Church of Australia, *Lutheran Hymnal with Supplement*, page 7.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

pronounced over someone who does not believe. Essentially the modern form of Corporate Absolution says, “I pronounce the Absolution to all of you gathered here, but if it turns out that some of you are not actually repentant then I take it back I didn’t really mean it.”

The other form of Absolution is slightly better, beginning with the warning “*Christ gave to His Church the authority to forgive the sins of those who repent and to declare to those who do not repent that their sins are not forgiven.*”³¹

However, this form of Absolution still goes on to pronounce the same blind Corporate Absolution “*to all of you.*” In doing so the pastor has actually contradicted his own words. The pastor says that he is permitted to forgive the sins of those who repent and to declare to those who do not repent that their sins are not forgiven, and yet he proceeds to pronounce a blind Absolution over a mixed group of penitent and impenitent, thus not declaring to the impenitent that their sins are not forgiven but in fact the opposite. By pronouncing this blind and indiscriminate Corporate Absolution the pastor is pronouncing the forgiveness of sins to those who do not repent and failing to follow the instructions of Christ, which was to “*declare to those who do not repent that their sins are not forgiven.*”

Chemnitz’s Corporate Absolution follows a different form and makes the Absolution conditional on the state of the hearer. He only pronounces the Absolution to “*to all who truly repent and who, by faith, place all their trust in the sole merit of Jesus Christ and who intend to conform their lives according to the command and will of God.*” Chemnitz is not pronouncing a blind and indiscriminate Absolution to all who are present, instead he is pronouncing the Absolution only to those who are present and who truly repent and believe.

By doing so Chemnitz’s warning to the impenitent at the end is not an attempted take back of the Absolution, but is instead a declaration to the impenitent as to what they receive instead of the Absolution. By wording his Corporate Absolution in this way Chemnitz is giving two separate declarations, one of forgiveness to the penitent and one of warning to the impenitent, thus obeying the Words of Jesus to “*forgive the sins of those who repent and to declare to those who do not repent that their sins are not forgiven.*”

The Development of the Corporate Absolution

According to Rev. Precht, the development of a Corporate or General Confession and later the Corporate Absolution was due to the fact that private confession-absolution was “*time consuming.*”³² As congregations grew, pastors found it less easy to cope with giving every member weekly private confession-absolution prior to Sunday Holy Communion. Hence why Lutheran churches in the later 1500’s, such as Saxony and Schwarzburg, adopted a public General Confession followed by individual absolution. But as time progressed churches adopted the practice of “*hearing and absolving groups at one time. Here is a decided break with Luther’s practice. The personal element faded into the background.*”³³

As we enter into the 17th Century (1600’s) some church leaders among the Pietists did away with absolution altogether, and instead urged the penitents to make personal confession to God rather than a pastor.³⁴

Due to this Private Confession-Absolution fell out of use altogether. And when the Lutheran Churches recovered the practice of Confession-Absolution it was often a Corporate Confession-Absolution. Some early examples of this occurred among military chaplains who

³¹ Ibid.

³² Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Chapter 10: *Confession and Absolution: Sin and Forgiveness*, page 358.

³³ Ibid. page 358-359.

³⁴ Ibid. page 359.

opted to use a Corporate Confession-Absolution for soldiers rather than Private Confession-Absolution.³⁵

By the end of the 18th Century (1700's) most provinces in Germany had introduced Corporate Confession-Absolution, with some still offering Private Confession-Absolution as an option.³⁶ According to Rev. Precht, "*In the corporate confession the absolution was either spoken to each penitent individually with the laying on of hands or, more customarily, over the entire group,*"³⁷ demonstrating that Corporate Absolution had become the preferred method. Rev. Wilhelm Löhe in his 1836 *Simple Instruction in Confession* states that the common practice in Bavaria was that "*the pastor absolves everyone at one time.*"³⁸

Early LCMS

In the 19th Century (1800's) the dispute over Private Confession-Absolution verses Corporate Confession-Absolution arose in America. In 1856 the subject was brought to the fore when the practice of Private Confession-Absolution was questioned in Wisconsin.³⁹ The Northern District of the *Lutheran Church Missouri Synod* urged the retention of Private Confession-Absolution. The District also declared that an absolution pronounced by a pastor was effective, that individuals didn't need to enumerate their sins, and that the disuse of Private Confession-Absolution had been brought about by Reformed influences on the Lutheran Church, and that too many congregations had rejected the practice of Private Confession-Absolution as a "Roman Catholic practice".⁴⁰

One point of interest was the Northern Districts stance on the General Confession (or Corporate Confession) and Corporate Absolution. The District declared that a Corporate Absolution could be pronounced over a General Confession, however, they also confessed that the Corporate Confession-Absolution was not a genuinely Lutheran institution, "*since it did not arise in the most healthy period of the Lutheran Church.*"⁴¹ They also enjoined the pastors of the LCMS to educate their congregations on the salutary effects and benefits of Private Confession-Absolution.

There was further controversy over this matter when the *Trinity Lutheran Church* in Freistatt, Wisconsin insisted on using Corporate Confession-Absolution rather than Private Confession-Absolution. This controversy evoked a detailed letter from the Northern District leadership, written by Rev. Ottomar Fuerbringer and Rev. Friedrich Lochner, in 1859. The letter conceded that the use of either Private Confession-Absolution or Corporate Confession-Absolution was an adiaphoron, but argued that, in keeping with Luther and the Lutheran Confessions, the practice of Private Confession-Absolution should be retained in the congregations of the LCMS.⁴²

In regards to the early LCMS's stance on Corporate Confession-Absolution we need to look at two significant theologians of the 19th Century.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid. page 347.

³⁹ Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Chapter 10: *Confession and Absolution: Sin and Forgiveness*, page 338.

⁴⁰ Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Chapter 10: *Confession and Absolution: Sin and Forgiveness*, page 338-339.

⁴¹ Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Chapter 10: *Confession and Absolution*, page 339.

⁴² Ibid.

The first is Johann Konrad Wilhelm Löhe, a man closely associated with the beginnings of the LCMS. As stated above, Löhe acknowledged that in his day the common practice in Bavaria was Corporate Absolution. He states that “*the pastor absolves everyone at one time.*”⁴³ He continues on with his opinions on this matter, “*pastor absolves people with whom he is not acquainted; the contemporary procedure is a dead ceremony and a gross abuse.*”⁴⁴ Löhe criticizes this practice rather harshly, calling it a “*gross abuse.*” And on another occasion Löhe admitted to close friends, “*the worst private confession is better than the general confession.*”⁴⁵

Rev. Precht mentions that Löhe was content to permit both Private Confession and General Confession to remain in use, stating that if only Private Confession were available, either very few would come, or numbers of hypocrites would make insincere confessions.⁴⁶ Precht also states that every Saturday evening Löhe would hold a confessional vespers service with a General Confession-Absolution for those who had not attended Private Confession.⁴⁷ However, Precht states the while Löhe was content to permit both Private and Corporate Confession of sins, during the confessional vespers service he would give an individual absolution to each penitent.⁴⁸

Thus, Löhe, who had called Corporate Absolution a “*gross abuse*”, never made use of the practice himself, opting to instead have a Corporate Confession followed by an individual absolutions.

The other great figure of the LCMS who spoken on this topic was Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther. Walther “*did not conceal his strong personal opinions regarding this issue.*”⁴⁹

Walther believed that the General Confession was the least perfect method of confession, and that Private Confession was the preferred method.⁵⁰

Walther believed that a pastor should not force Private Confession-Absolution upon a congregation but that he should, in an evangelical way, through instruction and admonition attempt to ensure that firstly Private Confession is diligently used side by side with General Confession and, when and where it is desirable, finally to restore Private Confession as the sole mode of confession of sins.⁵¹

Note that Walther’s goal was for Corporate Confession-Absolution to be phased out and for Private Confession-Absolution to become the sole practice in the LCMS. This is most evident in his *Pastoral Theology* where he says a preacher must, “*in an evangelical way, through instruction and exhortation, and through praising it, work toward the goal that it [private confession-absolution] be diligently used in addition to general confession and that, where it is possible and advisable, it be finally reintroduced as the exclusive custom and that it be properly preserved where it exist.*”⁵²

From Walther’s own hand, writing in 1872, some 16 years after the Northern District controversy, we learn some key points about the state of Corporate Confession-Absolution in the LCMS:

⁴³ Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Chapter 10: *Confession and Absolution*, page 347.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Chapter 10: *Confession and Absolution*, page 349.

⁴⁶ Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Chapter 10: *Confession and Absolution*, page 348.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Chapter 10: *Confession and Absolution*, page 360.

⁴⁹ Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Chapter 10: *Confession and Absolution*, page 340.

⁵⁰ Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Chapter 10: *Confession and Absolution*, page 345-346.

⁵¹ Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Chapter 10: *Confession and Absolution*, page 340-341.

⁵² C.F.W. Walther, *Pastor Theology*, page 120.

- a. In 1872 Corporate Confession-Absolution was still the common practice
- b. That Walther's preference was that one day Private Confession-Absolution would be the only practice
- c. That Corporate Confession-Absolution would be gradually phased out

Later on Walther referenced the Lutheran theologian Balthasar Meisner, who in his disputation on adiaphora of 1616 states that "*General Absolution is still true and effective but that private Absolution is more fitting.*"⁵³

But while Walther accepted that a Corporate Absolution was true and effective, his personal opinion was that the practice would be eventually phased out in favour of Private Confession-Absolution becoming the sole Absolution in the LCMS. And it would appear that Walther did get his wish for several decades, but let us discuss that in the next section on *Lutheran Hymnals*.

Lutheran Hymnals

The first Lutheran hymnal used by the LCMS was the *Kirchengesangbuch für Evangelisch-Lutherische Gemeinden ungeänderter Augsburgischer Confession*, or the *Church Hymnbook for Evangelical Lutheran Congregation of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession*, released in 1847. However, this was merely a hymnal and did not contain a Order of Service. Thus the LCMS originally used Wilhelm Löhe's 1844 *Agende*, although its use was not universal amongst the synod. Later the LCMS produced their own *Kirchen-Agende* or *Church Agenda* in 1856, the first official agenda of the LCMS.⁵⁴

This *Church Agenda* contained *The Morning Service on Sundays and Festivals with Communion*, which was based upon the Saxony church order of 1581. As this morning service was based on the Saxony church order it contained the "*indicative-operative absolution*"⁵⁵, that is the "*Upon this your confession, I, by virtue of my office, as a called and ordained servant of the Word....*"

As stated above in the *Early Lutherans* section, while the Saxony church order contained this *indicative-operative absolution* this was not a Corporate Absolution as it was common practice for the penitents to come forward and kneel at the altar to receive Individual Absolution from the pastor.⁵⁶ And as stated in the *Early LCMS* section, while Löhe used the Saxony church order in his *Agende* he had the practice of pronouncing absolution individually to each penitent.⁵⁷

Now *The Morning Service on Sundays and Festivals with Communion* used in the 1856 *Church Agenda* does not have clear instruction as to whether or not the pastor was to pronounce the absolution corporately or individually, nor are we aware of which practice Walther followed. What we can assume based on Walther's comments in his *Pastoral Theology*⁵⁸ is that Walther most likely went the same route as Löhe and pronounced the absolution individually. However, we do know from both Walther's *Pastoral Theology* and

⁵³ C.F.W. Walther, *Pastor Theology*, page 123.

⁵⁴ Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Chapter 10: *Confession and Absolution*, page 363 and 403.

Matthew Carver, *Walther's Hymnal: Church Hymnbook for Evangelical Lutheran Congregation of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession*, footnote 64, page 389

⁵⁵ Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Chapter 10: *Confession and Absolution*, page 403.

⁵⁶ Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Chapter 10: *Confession and Absolution*, page 363.

⁵⁷ Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Chapter 10: *Confession and Absolution*, page 360.

⁵⁸ Cf. C.F.W. Walther, *Pastor Theology*, page 120.

some early conferences of the LCMS that Corporate Confession-Absolution was being practiced inside the LCMS.

Walther did, however, intend for the Corporate Confession-Absolution to be eventually phased out⁵⁹, and it would appear that his desire was fulfilled.

In 1889 the *English Evangelical Lutheran Conference of Missouri*, a branch synod of the LCMS, released an English hymnal called the *Evangelical Lutheran Hymn-Book*. In 1911 the EELCM changed from being a branch synod to merely the *English District* of the LCMS, and in 1912 the LCMS took over control of the *Evangelical Lutheran Hymn-Book*, making it the first English hymnal of the LCMS. This hymnal contained a service called *The Order of Morning Service, or the Communion*. Having been written in 1889 by the branch synod of the LCMS, this was the first service order for Holy Communion prepared by the LCMS. This order shows that Walther had gotten his wish to phase out the Corporate Absolution. For this service order retained the General or Corporate Confession, but is then followed by the pastor reciting the Declaration of Grace, just as Melanchthon had done in 1545 with Mecklenburg church order.

But the LCMS wasn't alone in this decision. In 1888 the Joint Liturgical Committee of *General Synod* and the *General Council*, the two dominant pan-Lutheran groups in America, adopted *The Common Service* which also used the Declaration of Grace rather than a Corporate Absolution.⁶⁰ In 1914 the LCMS would adopt *The Common Service* order for usage in their own synod.⁶¹

In 1917 the *General Synod*, the *General Council* and the *United Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the South* released their *Common Service Book of the Lutheran Church* (commonly called the *Common Service Book*) which also followed *The Common Service* order.

Even the Australian Lutheran churches followed the same progression. In 1914, the Australian Lutherans (seeking to avoid persecution due to the war) sought to adopt an English service. The *Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Australia*, a synod in full fellowship with the LCMS, produced the *Church Liturgy for Evangelical Lutheran Congregations in Australia* which largely copied *The Order of Morning Service, or the Communion* from the LCMS's *Evangelical Lutheran Hymn-Book* of 1889/1912.⁶² Then in 1922 the ELSA produced the *Australian Lutheran Hymn-Book*. This book contained two service orders. The first was *The Order of Morning Service with Holy Communion*, which was essentially the LCMS's *The Order of Morning Service, or the Communion*. The other service was the *Another Order of Service with Holy Communion* which was essentially the 1888 *The Common Service*. Both these orders in the *Australian Lutheran Hymn-Book* used the Declaration of Grace and not the Corporate Absolution. And since the other Lutheran synod, the *United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Australia*, didn't have their own hymnal printed, they opted to use the ELSA's *Australian Lutheran Hymn-Book*.⁶³

Therefore, from at least 1888 onwards all the Lutheran churches in both America and Australia were using the Declaration of Grace and not the Corporate Absolution. But this changed in the year of 1941.

⁵⁹ C.F.W. Walther, *Pastor Theology*, page 120.

Cf. Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Chapter 10: *Confession and Absolution*, page 340-341.

⁶⁰ Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Chapter 12: *The Divine Service*, page 404.

⁶¹ Matthew Carver, *Walther's Hymnal: Church Hymnbook for Evangelical Lutheran Congregation of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession*, footnote 64, page 389

⁶² Jake Zabel, *ALHB-LHS Analysis*, page 2, www.knightgeorge.info/files/ALHB-LHS.pdf

⁶³ *Ibid.*

Walther had desired to phase out the practice of Corporate Absolution in the LCMS. Whether or not it was achieved in his lifetime we are unsure as he died in 1887, and the *Evangelical Lutheran Hymn-Book* only came out in 1889. Whatever the case, by 1914, the LCMS had adopted *The Common Service* as the common order of service for use in the synod. Thus as late as 1914, if not earlier, the entire LCMS had ceased the practice of using the Corporate Absolution and were instead using the Declaration of Grace. This would be the practice of the LCMS for the next few decades until 1941.

In 1941 the LCMS released the new hymnal *The Lutheran Hymnal*. This hymnal had two services, the first being *The Order of Morning Service without Communion*, which retained the Declaration of Grace, while the other service, *The Order of Holy Communion* had replaced the Declaration of Grace with the Corporate Absolution. As Precht acknowledges, the use of the Corporate Absolution is “*contrary to that in the Common Service of 1888 and in the Evangelical Lutheran Hymn-Book (1912).*”⁶⁴

Precht states that the reason the Declaration of Grace was left in the Non-Communion Service was because the Declaration of Grace did not require a call and ordained minister to pronounce it.⁶⁵ In this way the Non-Communion Service could be taken by a lay-reader.

Many years later when the ELSA (now ELCA) and the UELCA in Australia united to form the *Lutheran Church of Australia* they prepared a new hymn, the *Lutheran Hymnal* of 1973. This hymnal followed the example of the LCMS using the Corporate Absolution for *The Service with Communion* and reserving the Declaration of Grace for *The Service without Communion*, which could be “*used by Lay-Readers.*”⁶⁶

This, however, was not the practice of the other Lutheran churches in America. In 1947 Rev. Lutheran Reed, a then member of the *United Lutheran Church in America* (which later became the *Lutheran Church in America* in 1962), wrote a book which analysed the *Common Service Book* of 1917. In this book Reed shows that the ULCA was still using the Declaration of Grace in 1947.⁶⁷ Eleven years later, in 1958, the ULCA joined with the *American Evangelical Lutheran Church*, the *American Lutheran Church*, the *Augustana Evangelical Lutheran Church*, the *Evangelical Lutheran Church*, the *Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*, the *Lutheran Free Church* and the *United Evangelical Lutheran Church* to produce the *Service Book and Hymnal of the Lutheran Church in America* (commonly called the *Service Book and Hymnal*), which still used only the Declaration of Grace and not the Corporate Absolution. The hymnal also provides *A Brief Order for Public Confession* which uses the public Declaration of Grace, but also gives the option of “*where customary, the Minister may lay his hand on the heads of the penitents and says*”⁶⁸ the Individual Absolution on each penitent. On the other hand, the hymnal also included *The Order for Public Confession*, which was to be used as a service of preparation for Holy Communion on a day prior to Sunday⁶⁹, which did allow for a Corporation Absolution or where customary to use the Individual Absolution for each penitent.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Chapter 12: *The Divine Service*, page 404.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ LCA, *Lutheran Hymnal* (1973), page 18.

⁶⁷ Luther Reed, *The Lutheran Liturgy*, page 259.

⁶⁸ Churches cooperating in the Commission on the Liturgy and the Commission on the Hymnal, *Service Book and Hymnal of the Lutheran Church in America*, page 248.

⁶⁹ Churches cooperating in the Commission on the Liturgy and the Commission on the Hymnal, *Service Book and Hymnal of the Lutheran Church in America*, page 249.

⁷⁰ Churches cooperating in the Commission on the Liturgy and the Commission on the Hymnal, *Service Book and Hymnal of the Lutheran Church in America*, page 252.

This decision to allow a Corporate Absolution in *The Order for Public Confession* was undone twenty-one years later in 1979 when the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship, made up of the LCMS, the *Lutheran Church in America*, the *American Lutheran Church* and the *Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada*, released the *Lutheran Book of Worship*. This hymnal provided a *Brief Order for Confession and Forgiveness*, which was to be used as part of the Sunday liturgy but was to be understood as a separate preparatory service which “*may be used before*” the *Holy Communion* service.⁷¹ This brief order used the Declaration of Grace rather than the Corporate Absolution. This hymnal also provided a service for *Corporate Confession and Forgiveness*, but unlike the *Service Book and Hymnal* which provided the option of Corporate Absolution the *Lutheran Book of Worship* only provides the option of Individual Absolutions: “*those in the congregation may come and kneel before the altar. The minister, laying both hands on each person’s head, addresses each in turn...*”⁷²

As for the LCMS, in 1969 the LCMS and the *Synod of Evangelical Lutheran Churches* (which merged with the LCMS in 1971) jointly produced the *Worship Supplement*. In this supplement the service of *The Holy Eucharist I* skips straight to the Introit, however the supplement does provide a brief *An Order of Public Confession* that is to be used prior to the Introit. This *An Order of Public Confession* has returned to using the Declaration of Grace, rather than the Corporate Absolution. This supplement also provided two other Holy Communion services, *The Holy Eucharist II* has a Corporate Confession and a prayer for healing, but has neither an absolution or the Declaration of Grace, while *The Holy Eucharist III* uses the Declaration of Grace. On the other hand the supplement also provides *An Order of Corporate Confession and Absolution* to be used as a confessional service in preparation for Sunday which follows the *Service Book and Hymnal* and provides the option of either Individual or Corporate Absolution, “*The minister shall preferably absolve the penitents individually at the altar, laying his hands on each and saying the following absolution over the first penitent and beginning with the words, ‘I forgive you’ over the succeeding penitents, or the minister may absolve all the penitents corporately from the altar.*”⁷³

This marks an interesting, yet temporal, change in the LCMS, for while *An Order of Corporate Confession and Absolution* in the *Worship Supplement* did provide the option of Corporate Absolution all the Holy Communion services returned to using the Declaration of Grace. This continued with the release of the 1979 *Lutheran Book of Worship*, which the LCMS participated in, which only had the Declaration of Grace.

This change was undone, however, in 1982 when the LCMS released their own revision of the *Lutheran Book of Worship* titled *Lutheran Worship*.⁷⁴ This hymnal retains the *Service of Corporate Confessional and Absolution* with the option of either Individual or Corporate Absolution. And in the *Divine Service* setting I and II the option is given to use either the Declaration of Grace or the Corporate Absolution. This is retained in the LCMS’s latest hymnal, the 2006 *Lutheran Service Book* which has the option for either the Declaration of Grace or the Corporate Absolution in the *Divine Service* setting one, two, three and five. Setting four of the *Divine Service* stands out as being the only service to not have the Corporate Absolution, instead providing the option of either the Declaration of Grace or a prayer for mercy and forgiveness. Like the previous hymnal before it, the *Lutheran Service*

⁷¹ Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship, *Lutheran Book of Worship*, page 57.

⁷² Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship, *Lutheran Book of Worship*, page 194.

⁷³ Commission on Worship, *Worship Supplement*, page 58.

⁷⁴ Carl Schalk, *A Brief History of LCMS Hymnals*, page 3.

Book provides a service of *Corporate Confession and Absolution* with the option of either Individual or Corporate Absolution.

Reasons to Avoid the Use of the Corporate Absolution

Regarding Corporate Absolution Luther said, “*should by no means be done*,”⁷⁵ the Schwarzburg Church Order forbade Corporate Absolution⁷⁶, Löhe called Corporate Absolution “*a dead ceremony and a gross abuse*,”⁷⁷ and Walther desired for Private Confession-Absolution to become the exclusive practice in the Church.⁷⁸

There seems to be two main reasons to avoid the practice of Corporate Absolution. The first is that when pronouncing a Corporate Absolution, often the pastor is declaring a blind absolution to all who are present. The Corporate Absolution in most hymnals has the pastor declaring absolution “*to all of you*”. This may be okay if it were a Service of Corporate Confession and Absolution done in preparation for the Service of Holy Communion and the only people present were members of your congregation. But what if this is done during the Service of Holy Communion and there are visitors present that may not even be Christian? Löhe condemned the practice of Corporate Absolution because the pastors in Bavaria would just announce the absolution to all gathered, even “*people with whom he is not acquainted*.”⁷⁹

This is not right. Firstly, a pastor cannot absolve the sins of a person who does not repent and believe, and thus he should not absolve unbelievers present in his midst. Secondly, if the pastor is unacquainted with those whom he is absolving, such as visitors, then how is he to know who he is pronouncing absolution to and who is a believer? Now, one could argue that the pastors says, “*upon this your confession*,” and thus the “*all of you*” that he speaks to is only those who confess. And some could argue that the absolution says “*God forbid that through impenitence and unbelief any among you should reject His grace and forgiveness, and your sins be retained*,” and thus if anyone in the congregation is an unbeliever the absolution was not spoken to them. There is, however, two issues with this argument. The first is that the line “*God forbid...*” is only ever used in the LCA’s *Lutheran Hymnal* of 1973, this does not appear in any of the LCMS hymnals.

Secondly, this line is aimed at being a warning to those who may have lied in their confession of sins. God alone can see into the hearts and minds⁸⁰ of those who confess their sins, a pastor cannot. A pastor can only make a judgement based upon your outward confession, therefore, he pronounces absolution to those who confess their sins and withholds absolution from those who do not confess their sins. The line “*God forbid...*” is meant to be a warning to the hypocrites in the church who lies and confesses with his mouth “*I repent*” but in his heart does not truly mean it. This line is meant to be a warning to such a person to remind them that “*I the pastor have absolved your sins because you confessed them to me, but beware God knows your heart and if you have lied to me God will not absolve your sins*.” This is the true purpose of this “*God forbid...*” line. However, in most modern Lutheran churches today it is done as an attempt to retract absolution. It is done as an insurance policy for the pastor. The pastor is only meant to absolve the sins of the penitent and to withhold absolution from the impenitent, however, many pastors will blindly announce absolution to

⁷⁵ C.F.W. Walther, *Pastor Theology*, page 122.

⁷⁶ Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Chapter 10: *Confession and Absolution*, page 383.

⁷⁷ Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Chapter 10: *Confession and Absolution*, page 347.

⁷⁸ C.F.W. Walther, *Pastor Theology*, page 120.

Cf. Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Chapter 10: *Confession and Absolution*, page 341.

⁷⁹ Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Chapter 10: *Confession and Absolution*, page 347.

⁸⁰ 1 Samuel 16:7

all gather there. They then use the “*God forbid...*” line as a way to say, “I only absolved the penitent, anyone here who isn’t repentant ignore what I said as I wasn’t actually speaking to you.” Such an argument would be legitimate if the pastor used the Discriminate Corporate Absolution of Chemnitz which specifically says, “I pronounce this absolution to all who truly believe and are repentant, but I withhold it from all who do not believe or are unrepentant.” Such an argument fails when one says, “I absolve all of you... but if you aren’t a believer or repentance then I take it back.”

Thirdly, if we accept the premise that the Corporate Absolution is spoken only to believers, the question is raised about those not in fellowship with your church. While a pastor could absolve the sins of a non-Lutheran, or a Lutheran not in fellowship with him, this is generally not an appropriate practice. If a layperson or even a pastor, does not recognise fellowship with me then they do so because they believe I teach a false doctrine. If this is the case, then why would they seek absolution from a person that they believe teaches false doctrine? They should instead seek absolution from a pastor whose teaching they do accept. Alternatively, if a layperson is not in fellowship with me then they are not under my care but the care of another pastor and it is not my place to interfere with the sheep that belong to another shepherd. In a situation where two pastors are in fellowship, then it is okay for pastors to care for each other’s parishioners, but if the pastors are not in fellowship then what right do I have to care for the parishioners of this other pastor?

The other reason to avoid Corporate Absolution is the “*for you*” nature of the Sacraments. Christ commands us to proclaim the Gospel to all people⁸¹, and hence the Gospel proclamation is for all people to hear, even the unbelievers. But the Sacraments of Baptism, Communion and yes Absolution⁸² are given for individuals and the forgiveness of their particular sins. When you are Baptized, it is you the individual that receives that washing of regeneration, it is your sins and not the sins of the whole world that are washed away in that moment. When you receive the Lord’s Supper, it is the Lord’s Body and Blood give for you the individual for the forgiveness of your sins. The bread that you receive and the wine that you receive forgive your sins and not the sins of everyone else. Each communicant receives their own bread and wine. And when the pastor pronounces absolution he says “*I forgive you all your sins.*” But if this is a Corporate Absolution then the “you” here is also corporate and the sins are also corporate. By pronouncing absolution over everyone, then the “*for you*” nature is lost, the Individual Absolution is lost in the crowd. As Precht said, “*The personal element faded into the background.*”⁸³

If the sin were a corporate sin, for example something that a group did together, then it would be fitting for the pastor to pronounce a Corporate Absolution over the group for that corporate sin. But when the pastor announces this over a generic group, the individuals in that group have different individual sins and thus deserve an Individual Absolution. Chemnitz wrote in his *Enchiridion* that “*general preaching of the Gospel often does not satisfy a troubled and disturbed conscience, nor does it give that comfort that suffices to strengthen weak and feeble faith, therefore that conscience...is troubled above all by this doubt in temptations: perhaps those blessing and divine promises are not intended for you... In order, then, that conscience might have thorough, sure, and strong comfort in temptation, Christ not only taught the Gospel in general but also proclaimed forgiveness of sins to individual*

⁸¹ Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8; etc.

⁸² *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, Article XIII: The Number and use of the Sacraments.4

⁸³ Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Chapter 10: *Confession and Absolution: Sin and Forgiveness*, page 359.

penitents.”⁸⁴ The general Declaration of Grace, that Christ died for all, is a Declaration that can be proclaimed to all believer and unbeliever alike, but the absolution of sins is something that is meant for individual believers and their own sins, not the sins of a group. We wouldn’t have a Corporate Baptism where I pronounce “*I Baptise you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*” to a whole group of people while I pour water over the whole group. Instead each individual receives Baptism for the promise is for them as an individual not just some nameless person mixed into a larger group.

As Walther said, “*Christ did not only issue a general command to His Apostles and their successors in the office to preach the Gospel, hence the forgiveness of sin, but to minister to each individual who desires it... If I may offer it to all, I may offer it to each individual. Not only may I do this, I am order to do it.*”⁸⁵

When Christ commanded the Apostle to pronounce Absolution it was intended for individual sinners to have their individual sins absolved, not for a generic absolution over a faceless group. Regarding the General Confession and Corporate Absolution Christhard Mahrenholz (1900-1980) said, “*In the practice of this confession there can evidently be no real absolution in the sense of the Office of the Keys. For one thing, there can be no individual consolation through absolution.*”

Reasons to Use the Corporate Absolution

In regards to reason to use Corporate Absolution, there seems to be four.

The first is so the pastor can pronounce absolution to all who are gathered, even guests. We already addressed, in the section above, why that is not an appropriate practice. Absolution is meant for believers, while the public Declaration of Grace is a message for all people, believers and unbelievers.

The second reason in time. By the 1580’s the Lutheran had introduced the practice of Corporate Confession. The reason this was done was because the practice of Private Confession-Absolution “*was time consuming. As the number of penitents grew, pastors were frequently unable to cope with the situation, hence the custom arose of using prescribed formulas of confession. This facilitated hearing and absolving groups at one time.*”⁸⁶ As mentioned above these early services of Corporate Confession, forbade the use of Corporate Absolution⁸⁷ and instead the individuals would come forward to the altar for an Individual Absolution⁸⁸. But soon enough that practice was also deemed too time consuming and the pastors just pronounced a Corporate Absolution over the group. This is probably the worst reason (or might I say excuse) to have a Corporate Absolution and flows from impatience and laziness. There is no reason for us to have to rush the Absolution. If the pastor cannot find enough time in a week to provide each member with Private Absolution, then let the Absolution be done during the Sunday Service. But there is no reason why the Absolution of the individuals must be rushed through with a single Corporation Absolution. Absolution is a gift from the Lord and should be cherished. Therefore, we should not be impatient but take our time to allow each individual to hear those comforting words and have their sins absolved. There is no reason, other than laziness and impatience, that we must try and compress the Sunday Divine Service into a single hour. Let us cherish and enjoy our time with the Lord, and take our time to receive and enjoy His gifts.

⁸⁴ Martin Chemnitz, *Ministry, Word, and Sacraments: An Enchiridion*, page 134.

⁸⁵ C.F.W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, pages 169-170.

⁸⁶ Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Chapter 10: *Confession and Absolution*, page 358.

⁸⁷ Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Chapter 10: *Confession and Absolution*, page 383.

⁸⁸ Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Chapter 10: *Confession and Absolution*, page 363.

The third reason for Corporate Absolution is so that those who could not make it to weekly Private Confession-Absolution, can still receive a weekly Absolution. This, is a good and noble reason, except that there is no reason that it must be a Corporate Absolution, rather than an Individual Absolution. It is true that due to the business of life either the pastor can't get to each parishioner or all the parishioners can't get to the pastor in order to receive a weekly Confession-Absolution in preparation of Holy Communion. Therefore, even the early Lutherans found it necessary to have Corporate Confession. But there is no need that the pastor must then pronounce a Corporate Absolution. For since the congregation has gathered in a single location at a single time he now has the opportunity to speak the Words of Absolution to each individual gathered there.

The fourth reason, and this seems to be the reason why the LCMS readopted the use of Corporate Absolution, is the argument over whether pastor can or cannot forgive sins in the place and stead of Jesus. Some Lutherans argue that a pastor, since he is man, cannot forgive sins for God alone forgives sins. But other Lutherans argue that God gave to man the authority to forgive sins⁸⁹ and that Christ gave to His ministers the authority to absolve sins⁹⁰ in the place and stead of Christ Himself⁹¹. Therefore, pastors can in the place and stead of Christ absolve sins. However, because of this debate there arose confusion among Lutherans in churches that only used the Declaration of Grace. They felt that the church was saying a pastor can't absolve sins, but must only declare grace to all people. This confusion is made worse by two factors. Firstly, in churches like the LCMS and LCA, the Declaration of Grace is reserved for lay-readers, because they haven't been given the Office of the Keys or the authority to absolve sins in the place and stead of Christ. Therefore, if a church uses the Declaration of Grace for lay-readers and also pastors, then a layperson may be confused as to whether a pastor is allowed to absolve sins or not. Secondly, in Pietist Lutheran churches that teach that pastors cannot absolve sins, they have deliberately chosen to use the Declaration of Grace, teaching that a pastor can only announce God's grace and not actually absolve sins. This causes people to assume that if a church uses the Declaration of Grace that they are saying that a pastor can't absolve sins. Due to this confusion many Lutheran churches have found it necessary to use the Corporate Absolution rather than the Declaration of Grace in order to avoid confusion and make a public declaration that pastors can absolve sins. This is a noble reason with good intentions, but again there is no reason to use the Corporate Absolution rather than the Individual Absolution. In order to avoid confusion it may be beneficial to either not use the Declaration of Grace or to use the Declaration of Grace and have a public absolution. In this way you can make it clear that your church does believe that a pastor can absolve sins in the place and stead of Christ. But this doesn't mean the absolution has to be corporate, as you always have the option of inviting the congregants up to the altar for an Individual Absolution.

Blind Corporate Absolution or Discriminate Corporate Absolution

Balthasar Meisner, in his disputation on adiaphora of 1616 states that "*General Absolution is still true and effective but that private Absolution is more fitting.*"⁹² Here Meisner states that a General or Corporate Absolution is still a true and effective Absolution. However, it is unclear whether he is referring to a Discriminate Corporate Absolution, in which the pastor

⁸⁹ Matthew 9:8

⁹⁰ Matthew 16:19; 18:18; John 20:23

⁹¹ Luke 10:16; 1 Corinthians 4:1; 2 Corinthians 5:20

⁹² C.F.W. Walther, *Pastor Theology*, page 123.

only pronounces Absolution to those who truly repent and believe, as was the practice of Chemnitz, in which the pastor says “*to all who truly repent and who, by faith, place all their trust in the sole merit of Jesus Christ and who intend to conform their lives according to the command and will of God the forgiveness of all your sins, in the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.*” But also says, “*to the impenitent and unbelieving, I say, on the basis of God’s Word and in the name of Jesus Christ, that God has retained their sins and will certainly punish them.*”

Or whether Meisner is referring to a Blind Corporate Absolution, in which the pastor indiscriminately Absolves everyone who is present, as was the common practice of Löhe’s duty when, “*the pastor absolves people with whom he is not acquainted,*”⁹³ which should be regarded as “*a dead ceremony and a gross abuse.*”⁹⁴

In the former practice the pastor as the Steward of the Mysteries of God⁹⁵ has done his proper duty of only pronouncing Absolution to the penitent and withholding Absolution from the impenitent⁹⁶. But in the latter practice the pastor has abused his office by pronouncing Absolution to the impenitent. Such a practice is an abomination and a gross abuse.⁹⁷

Since Meisner was writing in 1616, centuries before the Blind Corporate Absolution was happening in Bavaria, we can assume that he was referring to Chemnitz’s practice of a Discriminate Corporate Absolution (although we cannot be certain).

If Meisner was referring to the practice of Discriminate Corporate Absolution then he is correct, the practice is still a true and effective Absolution, although Private or Individual Absolution is preferable. Discriminate Corporate Absolution is permissible, even though not preferable.

However, the practice of Blind Corporate Absolution is a violation of the Office of the Keys and should not be tolerated in the Lutheran Church.

Alternatives to Corporate Absolution

Some final thoughts on the matter of Corporate Absolution:

This practice was rejected by many early and later Lutherans. While many theologians have acknowledged that a Corporate Absolution is still a valid absolution it has historically been regarded as an inappropriate practice and even forbidden by certain theologians.

Therefore, it would be best if this practice was done away with. Instead Lutherans should always seek to promote and encourage the use of Private Confession-Absolution and urge our members to make use of this important gift of God. As Luther said in 1529 concerning private confession, “*if I were offered all treasure in a world where all the leaves on the trees and all the grains of sand in the ocean were gold, on the condition that I abstain from private confession, I would immediately turn down the offer.*”

For numerous reasons, it is helpful and beneficial to have a Corporate Confession, whether this is done as a separate service or as part of the regular Sunday Divine Service. In such a case though, it would be best to avoid the use of Corporate Absolution and to instead invite the members of your congregation forward to receive an Individual Absolution. This can be done in either tables, like Holy Communion, or in a continuous fashion if needed.

In agreement with the thoughts of C.F.W. Walther, it would be best if the practice of Corporate Absolution was phased out and done away with.

⁹³ Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Chapter 10: *Confession and Absolution*, page 347.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ 1 Corinthians 4:1

⁹⁶ John 20:23; Matthew 16:19; 18:18; see also: James 5:16; Luke 13:3,5; 1 John 1:8-10

⁹⁷ Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Chapter 10: *Confession and Absolution*, page 347.