

Exhortation to Confession – Henkel Edition

1 In reference to Confession, we have ever taught that it should be free, that the tyranny of the Pope should be put down, and that we should be liberated from all his constraints, and relieved from the intolerable burdens imposed on the Christian community. For hitherto, as we have all experienced, nothing has been more grievous than the compulsion of every one to confession, at the hazard of incurring the highest displeasure. 2 And this, moreover, was so very burdensome, and the consciences of men were tormented to such a degree with the enumeration of so many kinds of sins, that no one could confess fully enough; 3 and what was the worst, no one taught or knew what confession was, or the benefit and consolation resulting from it, but made of it nothing but anguish and fiendish torture, we being compelled to submit to it, when at the same time there was nothing to which we were more averse. 4 We are now favored by proper instruction on these points, that we are permitted to make our confession through no constraint or fear, and are relieved of the torments resulting from so close an enumeration of all sins; and besides, we have the advantage to know how we may happily use it to the consolation and strengthening of our consciences.

5 But all men are inclined to this, and have, indeed, too readily learned to do that in which they delight, and thus assume to themselves the liberty as if they had no obligation or necessity to confess. For that which meets our approbation we soon embrace, and it is easily imbibed, where the Gospel operates gently and mildly. But such creatures, I have said, ought not to be under the Gospel, nor enjoy any of its blessings; but they should remain under the Pope, and suffer themselves to be coerced and tormented, so as to be compelled to confess, fast, &c.;, more than before. For whoever will neither believe the Gospel or live according to it, and do that which it is the duty of a Christian to perform, should likewise not enjoy its blessings. 6 What would it be, if you wished to have enjoyment only, and would neither add nor contribute any thing to it? For this reason we would have nothing preached to such persons; and by our consent, we would permit none of our liberty to be shared or enjoyed by them, but suffer the Pope or his representative to reign over them again, who would constrain them like a real tyrant; for nothing else belongs to that order of men, who will not be obedient to the Gospel, but a task-master who is God's avenger and executioner. 7 But to others who freely permit themselves to be informed, we must ever preach, encouraging, inciting, and entreating them not to suffer that precious and consolatory treasure, which is presented through the Gospel, to pass in vain. We shall, therefore, say something also in reference to Confession, for the purpose of instructing and admonishing the inexperienced.

8 In the first place, I have said that besides this confession, concerning which we here speak, there are two kinds of confession, which might rather be called a common confession for all Christians; namely, that in which we confess to God alone, or to our neighbor alone, and ask for remission, acknowledgments which are also implied in the Lord's Prayer, where we say: Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. 9 Yes, the whole of this Prayer is nothing else than such a confession; for what is our prayer, but that we confess our wants and the neglect of that which it is our duty to perform, desiring grace and a peaceful conscience? Such confession shall and must be made without omission, while we live; for in this, especially, consists the character of a Christian, that we acknowledge ourselves to be sinners, and pray for grace.

10 In like manner the other confession, in which each one acknowledges before his neighbor, is also included in the Lord's Prayer, namely, where we confess and forgive trespasses among each other, before we approach God and ask for remission, Now, all of us are guilty; hence we should and may with propriety confess publicly, without fearing one another; 11 for no one is pious, and no one performs his duty towards God or his neighbor; yet besides this general, there is also a particular guilt, where one has provoked another to anger, on account of which he should ask his pardon. 12 Consequently, in the Lord's Prayer, we have two absolutions, namely, for sins committed against God, and for sins committed against our neighbor, which are forgiven us if we forgive our neighbor and reconcile ourselves with him.

13 Besides this useful, daily, and open confession, there is also a confession which may take place privately between two brothers. And if, from some special cause, we become disturbed with restless anxiety, and find our faith insufficient, we can make our complaint to a brother in this private confession, and obtain his advice, comfort, and support, whenever we desire. 14 For this confession is not embraced in a command, like the other two, but it is left optional with every one who needs it, to use it to his necessity. And it derives its origin and authority from the fact that Christ himself has placed and committed the absolution into the mouth of his Christian

community, to release us from sins. Now wherever there is a heart which feels its sins and desires consolation, it has here an unfailing resource in the Word of God, that God through a human being releases and acquits it of sins.

15 Thus observe then, as I have frequently said, that confession comprises two parts. The first is our work and act, to deplore our sins and desire consolation and renovation of soul. The other is a work of God, who through the work, in the mouth of man, absolves me from my sins, which is the chief and most valuable thing, rendering it desirable and consolatory. Now hitherto our work alone was insisted upon, and no further thought was indulged but for us to confess fully indeed; 16 but the other most essential part was neither regarded nor preached; precisely as if it were only a good work, with which we might compensate God; and that unless confession were made perfectly and in the most accurate manner, absolution would avail nothing, and our sins would not be forgiven. 17 By this means the people were driven to such excess that every one had to despair of confessing so fully, (which was impossible,) and no conscience was able to be at peace, or to depend on this absolution. Thus they have rendered this desirable confession not only useless to us, but severe and grievous, to the evident injury and ruin of souls.

18 For this reason we should so view confession as to distinguish and separate these two parts far from each other, and esteem our own work as insignificant; but the Word of God we should esteem as great and exalted; and we should not enter upon our confession as if we wished to perform a precious work, and make a contribution to God, but to obtain and receive something from him. You need not come and declare how pious or wicked you are; 19 if you are a Christian, I know it well enough otherwise; if you are none, I know it still more readily. But it is to be done, in order that you may lament your wants, and obtain help, a joyful heart, and a peaceful conscience.

20 No one is allowed to force you to confession by authority; but we say, whoever is a Christian, or freely wishes to be one, has an impressive admonition here, to enter upon his confession, and obtain the precious treasure. If you are no Christian, or do not desire this consolation, we shall let some one else compel you. 21 By this means we abolish altogether the Pope's tyrannical authority, which is nowhere to be tolerated; for, as said, we teach that whoever does not go to confession willingly and for the sake of absolution, should omit it. Yes, whoever presumes, on account of the purity of his confession, to rely on his own work, no matter how pure and excellent he may have made his confession, let him abstain from it. 22 But we admonish you to confess and make known your wants, not in order to perform it as a work, but to hear what God permits to be declared to you; the word, I say, or the absolution, you should consider, and esteem great and precious, receiving it with all the honor and gratitude, as an excellent and valuable treasure.

23 Should we illustrate this, and in connection with it exhibit the necessity which should urge and impel us to the confession of our sins, we would need but little compulsion or constraint; our own conscience would truly urge each one, and so alarm him, that he would be glad of the opportunity to confess his sins; and he would embrace it like a poor indigent beggar, when he hears that at a certain place a rich distribution of money and clothing is made: here there is no need for a beadle to urge and to force him; he would indeed run of himself with whatever speed his physical powers would allow, lest he should fail in securing these benefits. 24 Now, if we were to enjoin a command respecting it, that all beggars must run thither, insisting on this alone, and keeping silent in reference to what should be sought and obtained there, how could it be otherwise than that they would approach with reluctance, not expecting to obtain any thing there, but to be exposed in their poverty and imperfection? From this there would be but little enjoyment and consolation derived, but they would become only the more hostile to this injunction, as if it were imposed upon them for reproach and derision, compelling them to let their poverty and wretchedness be seen.

25 Even so the legates of the Pope have hitherto remained silent with respect to this rich and excellent privilege and inexpressible treasure, forcing multitudes to confession for no other purpose than to expose our impurity and pollution. Who, under these circumstances, could go to confession with cheerfulness? 26 We do not say, however, that people must see how full of pollution you are, and thus contrast themselves with you; but that they should advise you, and say: If you are poor and wretched, come, and use this salutary remedy. 27 Now whoever feels his want and wretchedness, will indeed experience such a desire for confession, that he will attend to it with pleasure; but those who do not regard it or come of themselves, we suffer to take their own course; but this they must know, that we do not regard them as Christians.

28 Thus then we teach how excellent, how precious, and consolatory confession is; we admonish, moreover, that this precious treasure should not be held in contempt, but be regarded as highly necessary. Now if you are a Christian, you need neither my constraint nor the Pope's command, but you will indeed importune, and

entreat me, that you may become a participant in it. 29 But if you despise it, and go on so haughtily without confessing, we conclude that you are no Christian; and that you should also not enjoy the sacrament of the Lord's Supper; for you despise that which no Christian should despise, and by this means render it impossible for you to have remission of sins. It is a sure indication too that you hold the Gospel in contempt.

30 In a word, we would know of no constraint; but we have nothing to do with those who neither hear nor obey our preaching and admonition; nor shall they enjoy any of the privileges of the Gospel. If you were a Christian, you should be glad to embrace the opportunity of going even a hundred miles or more to discharge the duty, and not permit yourself to be compelled, but come and urge us to hear your confession. 31 For here the constraint must be reversed, so that we are subjected to the command, and you be vested with the liberty; we force no one, but permit ourselves to be urged, even as we are constrained to preach, and to administer the sacraments.

32 When we admonish to confession, therefore, we do nothing else but admonish every one to become a Christian; if I succeed in bringing you to this, I have also brought you to confession. For those who long to be pious Christians, to be free from their sins, and to have joyful consciences, have the right hunger and thirst already, eagerly to grasp this bread even as the hart when pursued, and wearied with heat and thirst, as the 42nd Psalm, verse 1, says: As the hart panteth after the water-brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. 33 That is, as longing and anxious as the hart is after the fresh streams, so anxious and concerned am I about God's Word or absolution and the Sacrament. 34 Behold, this is correct teaching concerning confession; thus we should create a love and desire for it, so that people would come to it, and solicit us more than we might wish or desire. We shall let the Papists plague and torment themselves and other people who do not esteem this treasure, and debar themselves from it; 35 but let us lift up our hands, and praise and thank God, that we have arrived at this knowledge and grace. Amen.