

Absolution: History of its Application in the Church

December 2, 2012

Defense of the Practice of Biblical Absolution over and against Protestant attacks¹

1. It's not Biblical (see last week's bible references).
 1. These Words are so clear that they need no explanation. Whoever would want to really explain them with his explanation would be acting no differently than some person who would want to light up the sun by burning a candle. For everyone knows that the Words "release sins" or forgiving means, declaring someone free of his sins and the punishment they earn; and that the Words "retain sins" mean not forgiving someone his sins and therefore sentencing him to his deserved punishment. The expressions: "bind, loose, keys," which Christ employs in the first passages are, indeed, metaphors, that means, non-literal, figurative expressions, but that doesn't mean they are ambiguous and uncertain, but are so clear that even a Christian school child can perceive that they must reveal just what is said in the last passage. Namely, it is well known that sins in the holy Scripture are very often compared to bonds and chains by which Satan has bound and taken them captive to their damnation, Prov. 5.22; 1 Tim. 6.9; 2 Tim. 2.26. Therefore if someone is given the power to free people spiritually, then this is nothing other than the power to forgive their sins and thus to sever the bonds of sins and damnation by which they were bound. And if someone is given the power to bind people spiritually, then obviously this is no other power than that by which they bind them to their sins and leave them in the bonds of damnation, sentencing them to be imprisoned in hell. Finally it seems incumbent for someone to say that those who received the keys of heaven for others, naturally, would retain the power to open or close the heavenly kingdom for a person.
- 1b. "Mr. Mulfingher first writes: "The passage: 'Whosoever's sins you forgive, etc.,' appears at first glance to be consistent with Absolution." But...the Absolution... would only be "the authority to preach the conditions of reconciliation and the forgiveness of sins through faith on JESUS."
 - So when Christ commands of his believers that they should forgive those who trespass against them, then according to the Methodists, he is not at all commanding them to actually pardon them their trespass against them, strongly assuring them with their mouths that they are really forgiven and gone, and should be considered in their hearts as if they hadn't been committed, but rather, according to the Methodists, Christ only commands here that Christians should have the power to show their enemies what they must do in order to receive forgiveness. Is that what you call good Scripture exegesis?
2. God alone can forgive sins.
 - But we reply to this: That is true, but this does not abrogate the legitimate doctrine of Absolution. There is no dispute over the fact that God alone could forgive sins. Lutherans don't deny this any more than do Methodists or any other party in Christianity. It's only a question as to whether God would forgive sins through people. This the Lutherans alone assert, and, indeed, in accord with Scripture. For it is not only written: "Whosoever's sins you forgive, etc.", but rather the preachers of the Gospel in God's Word are called "God's co-workers and assistants." (1 Cor. 3.9; 2 Cor. 6.1) So St. Paul tells the Corinthians, "I have borne witness to you in Christ Jesus through the Gospel." (1 Cor. 4.15) He tells the Galatians: "My dear children, I suffer again the pains of birth." (Gal. 4.19) Yes, the same apostle even writes to Bishop Timothy about the salvation of his hearers and says: "Give attention to yourself and defend the doctrine in these matters. For if you do this you will save yourself and those who hear you." 1 Tim. 4.16.

¹Based on C.F.W. Walther, "Holy Absolution, Rescued from the Blasphemes of the Methodists," *Der Lutheraner*. V.2 pp 59f (six instalments).

3. "How is it possible that an ignorant man can look into the heart of his fellow sinner and be able to test the authenticity of his repentance, which is necessary to declare the absolution?"

As each servant of Christ must also preach God's grace from the Gospel to his whole flock of hearers to whom he has preached God's wrath out of the law, even if he is not sure who is pious, yes, or if anyone in the flock is repentant, so also every servant of Christ must specifically speak forgiveness to each one who has confessed to him that the law has struck him, that his sins weigh him down, that he would like to be loosed and, therefore, craves the absolution, even if no human servant can ever know with divine, infallible certainty what may be the disposition of the heart of any individual penitent. The one who receives the absolution must certainly know his own heart, but not the one imparting it. By all means, a faithful steward of the mysteries of God should not absolve those of whom he has public evidence of their impenitence, for that's called making a mockery of absolution and intentionally throwing sacred things to dogs. It's for just such people that the binding key has been instituted.

Also, unbelief robs the unbeliever of the benefit given, but that does not nullify the truth of the offer, nor the love of the giver. So the absolution is still always valid even when refusal keeps the refuser from receiving it.

4. "It (the absolution) strangles the root of the compelling work of the Holy Ghost who is the only one who brings grace, in that the preacher arrogates to himself the high office of the Holy Ghost, to impart to the sinner a witness of the forgiveness of his sins and to declare peace through his spirit." If Mr. Nast has ever more clearly betrayed what an arch-enthusiastic religion Methodism is, he has done it with this charge.

But then what is used, even by the Holy Ghost, in order to bear witness and seal Christ's grace in the hearts of men? Is it not even the written and preached Word? Does not Christ say: "The Words that I speak are Spirit and they are life"? Doesn't he say to the apostles: "You will not be the ones who speak. Rather it is the Father's Spirit who speaks through you!" Mt. 10.;20. Did not St. Paul say: "We are God's co-workers"? 1 Cor. 3.9. "God admonishes you through us"? 2 Cor. 5.20. We bear the "office, not of the letter, but of the Spirit and that gives the Spirit"? Eph. 3.6,8. "You are a letter of Christ, prepared through our preaching office and written through us, not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God"? Eph. 3.3 Didn't John write: "Three are the witnesses upon the earth: The Spirit (the Word inspired by the Holy Spirit), and the water (holy Baptism) and the blood (the holy Lord's Supper)"? 1 John 5.8

Therefore it is public blasphemy to pit the witness of the written and the preached Word of God against the witness of the Holy Ghost, since the Holy Ghost witnesses and comes into the heart solely through the mediation of the Word and witnesses nothing inwardly in the heart besides and apart from what he previously has witnessed through the Word, read or heard. Now, according to Mr. Nast the preacher of the Gospel is not allowed to give a sinner any witness of the forgiveness of his sins as this is, according to him, an imposition into the office of the Holy Ghost. So what sort of attitude must Mr. Nast have towards the Word of God and the preaching office? This fellow must thereby also view it as a crime when the preacher wants to comfort, teach or rebuke a sinner, since all these are offices of the Holy Ghost alone. O you blind enthusiasts! We hear Luther: "In the church," he writes, "preachers and parsons are placed in the order. If you should hear them, you are hearing God himself. Therefore it is Satan's striving and chief skill that he goes around so that he draws such external offices into disrepute. It is certainly true that the Holy Ghost alone enlightens the heart and kindles faith. But he doesn't do so apart from the external office and without the external use of the holy Sacraments. That is why Paul was commanded to heed Ananias in Damascus. Acts. 9.6. If you will retreat from the ordered office, and want to follow your own imagination and bright ideas, then you will thereby not only not accomplish anything, but will also grasp and receive Satan as God, and you will never be sure if your thoughts are coming from God or the devil..."

That is, "No one stands between me and God!"

Therefore it is not the doctrine of absolution that "attacks the root" of the activity of the Holy Ghost, but rather – it is the spirit of Methodism that does so...The external witness of the Holy Ghost through the Word and the holy sacraments is despised in contradistinction to the inner witness...Souls are thus turned inward to one's own false works and advised that they must struggle and fight for grace within while, according to God's Word, receiving grace does not come from one's striving, but rather once one has received grace the struggle and the pursuit of it begins and continues, until he's entered through the narrow gate and the goal of salvation has been reached. (Luke 13.24; Phil. 2.12,13; 3.13-15)...Whoever wants to fight to get grace strives against grace, for the holy apostle says, "if it is from grace, then it is not a reward for works" (for fighting and the like), "else grace would not be grace. If it were a reward for works" (battling), "then it is not grace. Else a wage would not be a wage." Rom. 11.6. This invention of self righteousness and one's own working, that is innate to all this, is the real root of Methodism.