

A Plea for the Absolution in the Reformed Churches

At first sight the title of this article may appear strange to some readers. In the thought and practice of many of the Reformed Churches the word "absolution" brings to mind only the Roman practice of auricular confession with its attendant abuses and dangers. And yet the ministry of absolution is an integral part of the work of a Reformed Church. This article is a plea for a renewed emphasis on this ministry, and an attempt to show that such an emphasis is warranted on several grounds.

The first reference is naturally to the warrant of Holy Scripture. Firstly, there are the words of our Lord to S. Peter: "I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth, shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth, shall be loosed in heaven" ⁽¹⁾ echoed in words addressed, a little further on, to all the disciples ⁽²⁾. Secondly, there are the words spoken to the disciples by our Lord after His rising: "Receive ye the Holy Ghost: Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them: and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained" ⁽³⁾.

Inevitably there has been much controversy over these passages, but a fair statement of their teaching is offered by Dörner. Dealing with the "Contents of the Power of the Keys" he says: "the passages bearing on the question imply, first of all, the right of admitting into the house of God, and therefore of deciding on membership in or belonging to the Church. Only in the second line does that power embrace the establishment of regulations and laws as to the life of the community. Belonging to the Church depends on forgiveness of sins, forgiveness being the sign of entrance into the Church. And since an accepted member may again become unworthy of membership through unfaithfulness and apostasy, nay, since they who abide faithful need the renewal of forgiveness, the power of the keys has importance also in reference to those already received, including remission of sin or absolution on the one side, retention of sin as well as Church discipline on the other" ⁽⁴⁾. Thus

⁽¹⁾ S. Matthew XVI, 19. ⁽²⁾ S. Matthew XVIII, 18. ⁽³⁾ S. John XX, 22-23.

⁽⁴⁾ I. A. Dörner: "*A System of Christian Doctrine*", Vol. IV., p. 335.

Dorner sees the Scripture warrant as applicable not only to absolution or release from Church censure, but as a continual ministry of remission within the fellowship ”.

Reference must also be made to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, where we read in Chapter XXX., “Of Church Censures ”: “The Lord Jesus, as King and Head of His Church, hath therein appointed a government, in the hand of Church officers distinct from the civil magistrate. To these officers the keys of the kingdom of heaven are committed, by virtue whereof they have power respectively to retain and remit sins, to shut that kingdom against the impenitent, both by the word and censures ; and to open it unto penitent sinners, by the ministry of the gospel, and by absolution from censures, as occasion shall require ”. This passage is based on the Scripture texts already mentioned, and shows that the discipline of the Church of Scotland as exercised in the early days of the Reformation was formally recognised in our Subordinate Standard. For the statements in “The Order of Excommunication and of Public Repentance Used in the Church of Scotland, and commanded to be Printed by the General Assembly of the same, in the month of June 1571 ” are strongly worded. If the offender responds to the exhortations and the prayers “the Minister shall say in manner of absolution : If thou unfeignedly repent thy former iniquity, and believe in the Lord Jesus, then I, in His Name, pronounce and affirm that thy sins are forgiven, not only on earth, but also in heaven, according to the promises annexed with the preaching of His Word, and to the power put in the Ministry of His Church ”. If the offender is impenitent and excommunicated, he is only received again after absolution thus pronounced : “In the name and authority of Jesus Christ, I, the Minister of His blessed Evangel, with consent of the whole Ministry and Church, absolve thee, N., from the sentence of Excommunication, from the sin by thee committed, and from all censures laid against thee for the same before, according to thy repentance ; and pronounce thy sin to be loosed in heaven, and thee to be received again to the society of Jesus Christ, to His body the Church, to the participation of His Sacraments, and, finally, to the fruition of all His benefits. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit ”.(1) In face of words such as these,

(1) It is interesting to find that in *The Liturgy of the Reformed Church in America* there is still provision for “The Offices of Church Discipline with Orders for Excommunication and for Readmission of the Penitent ”.

and bearing in mind the words of the *Confession* and of Holy Scripture, it cannot be said that the ministry of absolution is alien to the thought and practice of the Church of Scotland.

It is true, however, to say that this ministry has so far been exercised as *judicial*. It has dealt with the exceptional rather than with the normal. But if absolution is admitted in principle, may not the ministry of absolution be extended in its scope? What other means can be used to this end?

More than a hint of a possible further development may be found in the *Book of Common Prayer*, in the Order for the Visitation of the Sick. The sick person is, in the words of the rubric, to be "moved to make a special Confession of his sins, if he feel His conscience troubled with any weighty matter. After which Confession the Priest shall absolve him (if he humbly and heartily desire it) after this sort : Our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath left power to His Church to absolve all sinners who truly repent and believe in Him, of his great mercy forgive thee thine offences : And by his authority committed to me, I absolve thee from all thy sins, In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost ". This, it is to be noted, is not the auricular confession of the Roman Church. Confession may be urged, but not demanded ; absolution is given only at the request of the penitent. There is nothing here that any Reformed minister need be afraid to say or do. But surely this intimate and personal ministry is not to be confined to those sick in body only. There are many consciences troubled with weighty matters, and it would be unreal to confine absolution to those who are sick, while the guilty consciences and the uneasy minds of others were left bereft of the word of forgiveness. There is a need for the Reformed Churches to see the ministry of absolution as *pastoral*. We may often have to turn to the psychologist for help and guidance ; it may be well to develop the art of the spiritual counsellor, as they do across the Atlantic. But it would be better if the Church's own instruments were tried first, and many a heart would be lightened and many a soul cleansed if, instead of analysis and conference, there were confession and absolution. As regards the form of words used, Dr. Harris says : " Although precatory absolution is equivalent *theologically* to the form 'I absolve thee', it is far from equivalent *psychologically*. Our Reformers were guided by a sound psychological instinct when they refused

to weaken the authoritative and emphatic form of Absolution provided in the Sarum Manual ".⁽¹⁾

In this connection it may be of interest to note Luther's remark : " Private confession, which alone is practised, though it cannot be proved from Scripture, is wholly commendable, useful and indeed necessary. I would not have it cease, but rather I rejoice that it exists in the Church of Christ, for it is the one and only remedy for troubled consciences ".⁽²⁾ In the service book used by the American Lutherans⁽³⁾ there is an Order for Private Confession and Absolution, where the rubric reads : " Private Confession and Absolution has been used by the Church from ancient times, and persons who are burdened in conscience on account of sin may always seek the personal ministration of the pastor before the Holy Communion, or at any other time ". The absolution is given thus : " Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, hath had mercy upon thee, and for the sake of the sufferings, death and resurrection of His dear Son Jesus Christ, our Lord, forgiveth thee all thy sins. Upon the confession which thou hast made, and in obedience to our Lord's command, I declare unto thee the entire forgiveness of all thy sins : In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost ". This form is also used in the Order for the Communion of the Sick. In the Small Catechism printed in this book, to the question " What is Confession ? ", the answer is given : " Confession consists of two parts : the one is, that we confess our sins ; the other, that we receive absolution or forgiveness through the pastor as of God himself, in no wise doubting, but firmly believing, that our sins are thus forgiven before God in heaven ". This is based directly on Luther's own Short Catechism of 1529, where the prescribed absolution is : " As thou believest, so be it unto thee. And, by command of our Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive thee thy sins, in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost ".⁽⁴⁾

May we not in our Reformed practice learn in these matters from the Anglican and Lutheran Churches of the Reformation ?

(1) *Liturgy and Worship*. Art. Visitation of the Sick, p. 529.

(2) *The Babylonish Captivity of the Church*, quoted in Bettinson : *Documents of the Christian Church*, p. 279.

(3) *Common Service Book of the Lutheran Church in America*. Quotations from this work are made by permission of the Board of Publication.

(4) *The Short Catechism*, 1529. Quoted in Bettinson : *Documents of the Christian Church*, p. 291.

When we consider the ministry of absolution in relation to common worship we find that it may be fulfilled in several ways. The first may be called the *prophetic* way, in which the forgiveness of God is conveyed by the use of Scripture texts or liturgical declarations. As to the use of texts, it is interesting to turn to a passage from John Calvin, quoted by Dr Sprott :⁽¹⁾ " There is none of us but must acknowledge it to be very useful, that after the General Confession some striking promise of Scripture should follow, whereby sinners might be raised to the hope of pardon and reconciliation. And I would have introduced this custom from the beginning, but some fearing the novelty of it would give offence, I was over easy in yielding to them ". The use of such texts is becoming quite general in modern service books. The use of liturgical statement may be found in the first part of the absolution at Morning and Evening Prayer in the *Book of Common Prayer* : " Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who desireth not the death of a sinner, but rather that he may turn from his wickedness, and live ; and hath given power and commandment to his Ministers to declare and pronounce to his people, being penitent, the Absolution and Remission of their sins : He pardoneth and absolveth all them that truly repent and unfeignedly believe his holy Gospel ". But this is so grammatically involved as to remove the affirmative quality so essential in such a statement. This form, it may be noted, is retained in the *Methodist Book of Offices*. A more helpful example is perhaps found in the Lutheran book already mentioned, where, in the Communion Service, the absolution reads thus : " Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, hath had mercy upon us, and hath given His only Son to die for us, and for His sake forgiveth us all our sins. To them that believe on His Name, He giveth power to become the sons of God, and bestoweth upon them His Holy Spirit. He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved. Grant this, O Lord, unto us all ". Again, in the new *Book of Public Worship*,⁽²⁾ compiled for the use of Congregationalists, under the heading " Assurances of Pardon ", there are three examples using texts, followed by a fourth statement : " Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, hath promised to all those that repent, and who truly believe in Christ, our Lord, and desire to follow Him as His disciples, forgiveness, grace

⁽¹⁾ Sprott : *Scottish Liturgies of the Reign of James VI.* Notes, p. 136.

⁽²⁾ *A Book of Public Worship*, Oxford University Press, 1948.

and everlasting life ; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord ". This recalls the proposed absolution in the *Pia Deliberatio* of 1545.

A second way in which the ministry of absolution is exercised in public worship may be called the *priestly* way, where the minister pleads before God for the forgiveness of the sins of those whom he leads in worship. This is the personal intercession of the minister, his prayer over his people. An ancient prayer of this type is found in the Order for Holy Communion of the *Book of Common Prayer*, where absolution is thus pronounced : " Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, who of his great mercy hath promised forgiveness of sins to all them that with hearty repentance and true faith turn unto him ; have mercy upon you ; pardon and deliver you from all your sins ; confirm and strengthen you in all goodness ; and bring you to everlasting life ; through Jesus Christ our Lord ". And, lest any good Presbyterian protest that this is too " high ", let it be noted that this prayer is used in the first Order for the Holy Communion in the *Book of Common Worship Approved by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America*, published in 1946, with the sole alteration that for " them that " are substituted the words " those who ", which hardly affects the doctrinal content of the prayer ! A similar prayer is found in the same book in the " Order for the Service of Preparation for Holy Communion ".

But there is a third method, deeply rooted in the Reformed tradition, but long disused, which can be best described as *liturgical* absolution, and seems more satisfactory than either the prophetic or priestly forms. The weakness of the prophetic form is this,—that while it proclaims " God forgives ", it leaves the question in the mind of the worshipper : " Does God forgive *me* ? " The priestly form uses the same words, with a different emphasis ; for, when the minister has prayed, the question arises : " Does God forgive *me* ? " Let us admit that this is an over-simplification of a very involved problem ; yet it does suggest that an adequate ministry of absolution must be at once personal and positive. That the liturgical leaders of the early Reformed Churches clearly recognised this need may be seen from the following examples.

In the *Psalter mit aller Kirchenübung* of 1537-39, the Strasbourg German Rite of Bucer gives the following " Absolution or Comfortable Word " : " This is a faithful

saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus is come into the world to save sinners. Let each make confession in his heart with St. Paul in truth, and believe in Christ. So in His Name do I pronounce forgiveness unto you of all your sins, and I declare you to be loosed of them in earth, so that ye may be loosed of them also in heaven and in all eternity".⁽¹⁾

Calvin in his Strasbourg French Rite of 1545, *La Forme des Prières*, has this absolution: "Let each of you acknowledge himself indeed a sinner, humbling himself before God, and believe that the Heavenly Father wills to be gracious unto him in Jesus Christ. To all those who thus repent, and seek Jesus Christ to their salvation, I pronounce the absolution of sins to be performed in the Name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit".⁽²⁾

A similar line was taken in other continental Reformed liturgies, but these two examples will illustrate the immediacy of this type of absolution. The minister does not exalt himself, but fulfils his part in the reconciliation of men to God by pronouncing forgiveness or absolution. The conditions of a belief in Christ and the necessity of repentance are clearly stated. There is nothing here to deter the Reformed minister or his people. Nothing, indeed, could be more in harmony with an evangelical faith. One Reformed Church,⁽³⁾ at least, has recognised this in our own day, and has the following absolution in its Order for Holy Communion: "Upon this humble confession which you have made, and by the authority of the Word of God, as a Minister of the Lord Jesus Christ, I declare unto you, who do truly repent and heartily believe in Jesus Christ, and are sincerely determined to amend your sinful life, the forgiveness of all your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit".

Liturgical seems the best word to describe this action. It sums up pastoral, prophetic, and priestly attitudes. It is the forgiveness not only of sins against God, but also of sins against the brotherhood that is conveyed. And whenever the corporate life of the Church as the Body of Christ is emphasised, the actions and words of the minister are *liturgical* words and actions, spoken and performed for it

⁽¹⁾ Quoted from W. D. Maxwell *An Outline of Christian Worship*, p. 103.

⁽²⁾ The original is quoted in W. D. Maxwell; *John Knox's Genevan Service Book*, 1556, notes p. 97: (The English translation is by the present writer). "Performed" is unsatisfactory for *faicte*, but the meaning is clear enough.

⁽³⁾ The Evangelical and Reformed Church in the U. S. A., in the *Book of Worship*, submitted to the General Synod in 1942. Quoted by permission.

and by it, through his ministry. The great actions of the Church in its liturgies are ever performed in the three-fold Name. Surely the declaration of forgiving and redeeming love should share such an emphasis.

This is a case where human need clinches the argument from liturgical history. For many people the great climax of worship is found in the solemn words of the Benediction. Whatever else may have been said and done, this is a blessing ; not a prayer for blessing, but the actual means by which grace is conveyed to the waiting and trusting soul. D. H. Hislop has said : " The sense of Divine forgiveness it is that restores to unity the life (thus) divided, and the pardon of God makes the fragmentary split consciousness a whole. This involves that a service must provide opportunity for the silent discovery of what there is to confess, and also, I think, points to the spoken declaration of God's forgiveness in a formula of absolution ".⁽¹⁾ Public worship would gain much in reality if that note of assurance which always ends our common worship were also found at its beginning. The other acts of praise and prayer, reading and preaching would be held together in an atmosphere of complete confidence and trust in God. The present prayer for pardon does not meet the situation.

This plea for a re-consideration of the Absolution is offered, therefore, against a background of Scriptural warrant and Confessional authority, of Reformed practice both traditional and contemporary. Human need and divine grace met at the Cross. The redemption there won may well be sealed to the people of God when we fulfil our ministry of reconciliation through the " liturgical absolution ".

(1) D. H. Hislop : *Our Heritage in Public Worship*, p. 48.

JAMES ROBERT THOMSON.