

To the Council of the City of Nürnberg Wittenberg, April 18, 1533

In addition to many other problems, the evangelical church had to come to terms with the question of ecclesiastical discipline.¹ In this connection confession and absolution were of special importance. While in the papal church private confession and absolution administered in the confessional box were the universal and mandatory practice, there was also the custom of administering a general, public confession and absolution immediately aft the sermon.² Luther had summarized his position on these matters in his Babylonian Captivity of the Church (1520) and On Confession (1521). In the spring of 1533 he became involved in a controversy on confession and absolution which was boiling in Nürnberg.³ The issue was private confession and absolution (advocated and demanded by Osiander⁴ to the exclusion of general, public confession and absolution) versus general, public confession and absolution (advocated by the majority of the Nürnberg clergy, among them Link,⁵ though not to the exclusion of private confession and absolution). While the city council tried to do justice to both sides, it leaned definitely toward Link and his followers.⁶ On April 8, 1533, the city council asked Luther and Melanchthon for an opinion on this controversy.⁷ In their joint answer, letter No. 255,⁸ Luther and Melanchthon set forth what seems to be a compromise, but which nevertheless was based on solid theological considerations. Since the preaching of the gospel is identical with the proclamation that forgiveness of sin is at hand, Luther and Melanchthon say, and since this preaching can and ought to be done both in public and in private, both forms of confession and absolution ought to be retained. Both forms of absolution demand and aid faith. Private absolution, as the personal application of forgiveness, has a great advantage, however, because it speaks to the individual personally, and thus directly helps the faith of the individual and aids in the proper understanding of the public absolution. On the other hand, general public confession and absolution need not be rejected only because there might be people in the congregation who do not believe the word of forgiveness.

Text in German (with some words in Latin): WA, Br 6, 454–455.⁹

To the Honorable and Wise Mayors, and to the Council of the City of Nürnberg,
Our Dear Sirs

God's grace through our Lord Jesus Christ! Honorable, Wise, Dear Sirs! Regarding Your Honors' inquiry, we have discussed this matter among ourselves and do not see that public, general absolution is to be censured or rejected, for the [following] reason[s]:

The preaching of the holy gospel itself is principally and actually an absolution in which forgiveness of sins is proclaimed in general and in public to many persons, or publicly or privately to one person alone. Therefore absolution may be used in public and in general, and in special cases also in private, just as the sermon may take place publicly or privately, and as one might comfort many people in public or someone individually in private. Even if not all believe [the word of absolution],¹⁰ that is no reason to reject [public] absolution, for each absolution, whether administered publicly or privately, has to be understood as demanding faith and as being an aid to those who believe in it, just as the gospel itself also proclaims forgiveness to all men in the whole world and exempts no one from this universal context. Nevertheless the gospel certainly demands our faith and does not aid those who do not believe it; and yet the universal context of the gospel has to remain [valid].

Regarding the idea that no one might desire private absolution if one has public absolution and keeps it in use, we say that this is definitely a weighty issue, [but] that consciences nevertheless are in need of this special comfort. For one has to instruct consciences that the comfort of the gospel is directed to each individual particularly; therefore, as you people who understand these matters know, the gospel has to be applied through Word and sacrament to each individual particularly, so that each individual in his conscience is tossed about by the question whether this great grace, which Christ offers to all men, belongs to him too. Under these circumstances it can easily be understood that one is not to abolish private absolution in favor of public absolution; also, this application¹¹ makes more clear the meaning of the gospel and the power of the keys. For very few people know how to use public absolution or apply it to themselves, unless in addition this application reminds them that they also ought to apply the general absolution to themselves as if it belonged to each individually; for this is the true office and task of the gospel: definitely to forgive sins by grace.

For these reasons we do not consider that general absolution is either to be rejected or to be abolished, but¹² that nevertheless the personal application and [private] absolution should be maintained.

May God always graciously protect Your Honors. We are always ready and willing to serve Your Honors.¹³

Written at Wittenberg, April 18, 1533

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¹Luther, M. (1999, c1975). *Vol. 50: Luther's works, vol. 50 : Letters III* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). *Luther's Works* (Vol. 50, Page 75-78). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

Jeremiah 9:23 ff. is cited in 1 Cor. 1:31: "He who glories, let him glory in the Lord." Jer. 23:6, "The Lord Jehovah our righteousness," [is referred to in 1 Cor. 1:30]. Also compare Heb. 10:16 [and Jer. 31:33]: "the new covenant."

From Ezekiel [34:11 ff.], Christ cites in John 10:11 the statement regarding the good shepherd who lays down his life.

Daniel [2:44; 7:14–27] and ch. 9 are referred to in Matt. 24:15 and Luke 1:33: "Of His kingdom there shall be no end." Compare also the Epistle to the Hebrews.

Hosea [11:1] is cited in Matt. 2:15: "Out of Egypt have I called My Son." Rom. 9:25, "I will call My people those who were not My people," [is quoted from Hosea 2:23]; 1 Cor. 15:55: "O death where is your sting?" [Hos. 13:14].

The statement of Joel [2:28–32] concerning the sending of the Spirit is cited in Acts 2:16 ff. [Joel 2:32] in Acts 2:21: "Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord . . ."

Amos [5:25] is cited in Acts 7:42 and [Amos 9:11 ff.] in Acts 15:16 in connection with the Council of Jerusalem.

The figure of Jonah is used in Matt. 12:38–40, as well as in 16:4.

Micah [5:2] is quoted in Matt. 2:6: "And you, Bethlehem . . ."

Nahum [1:15] is cited in Rom. 10:15: "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the Gospel. . ."

Habakkuk [2:4] is quoted in Rom. 1:17: "The just shall live by faith."

Haggai [2:6] is cited in Heb. 12:26: "Yet once more . . ."

Zechariah [9:9] is cited in Matt. 21:5: "Behold, your King is coming. . . ." Also Luke 1:78: "The Day Star from on high" [cf. Zech. 8:7 (Vulgate)].

Malachi [3:1] is quoted in Luke 1:17 and Matthew 11 with reference to the Messenger of the covenant.

Many testimonies are drawn from the Psalms: Acts 2:25, 30, 31, and 34; Rom. 4:7; Matt. 27:35, 43, 46, and 48; Rom. 3:4, 10, 13, 14, 16, and 18; Acts 4:25 and 13:33–35. Likewise to the statement in Ps. 143:2, "In Your sight shall no living person be justified," reference is made in Romans 7, Galatians 3, and 1 Corinthians 4. . . .

Finally, lest speculations about predestination disturb the doctrine of justification, **universal statements** are to be noted and considered. There are these points:

1. The Son of God, the Mediator, "gave His life as the ransom for all," 1 Tim. 2:6. 1 John 2:2: "He is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world."

2. It is the will of God the Father "that no one should perish," 2 Peter 3:9, but that all should be saved through Christ, 1 Tim. 2:4. He also adds the reason, because "there is one God and one Mediator between God and men . . . who laid down His life as a ransom for all," vv. 5–6. Therefore, since He wants all to be

saved, He did not lay down His life only for certain classes or certain kinds of individuals. It is incorrect to say that the words "He wants all to be saved" means that He wants some out of each of the orders or classes of people.

3. The Holy Spirit in His ministry universally announces repentance and remission of sins to all. We should note that Paul joins these two concepts together in Rom. 11:32, "For God has imprisoned all under disobedience that He might have mercy on all." Therefore in the same way that He wants to have mercy on all, He also has confined all under sin, that is, just as the sins of all are condemned by the Law, and just as the wrath of God accuses all, so also the promise of grace is universal.

4. It is the universal command of God that all should hear the voice of the Gospel and embrace the promise in faith. Peter also affirms in 2 Peter 3:9 that it is the will of God that "all should come to repentance," and Paul says in 1 Tim. 2:4: ". . . all should come to the knowledge of the truth." Also in Ezek. 33:11 God confirms by an oath that it is His will that "the wicked shall turn from his ways and live."

5. All who believe in Christ, without discrimination and exception, receive forgiveness of sins and are saved.

It is also useful to observe how Scripture sets forth the concept of universality and explains and develops it. Cf. Rom. 3:22; 10:12; Matt. 11:28; John 3:16; 1 John 4:14; John 3:17; Mark 6:15; Col. 1:23; Gen. 22:18; Matt. 28:19. In Rev. 5:9, 7:9, and 11:9 this division is noted: "You have redeemed us to God with Your blood out of every tribe and people and nation and tongue." Acts. 3:25: "All the families of the earth shall be blessed." For a "people" (*gens*) is divided into tribes and families. Cf. John 1:12; Matt. 22:9; 2 Peter 3:9; Matt. 18:14. Rom. 2:11, 3:9, 4:12, and 10:12: "There is no difference between Jew and Greek." And we should note that just as there is no distinction in the preaching of repentance, so there is none in the promise of grace. And just as there is the same Lord of all, so He is rich toward all. Cf. Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11; Rom. 10:2–3. Eph. 2:3 and Titus 1:10: There are Jews who live licentiously. Rom. 1:28 and 2:14: There are gentiles of reprobate mind and those of honorable behavior; cf. Phil. 3:6; 1 Tim. 1:15; Gal. 2:1.

These observations which involve words denoting universality, show us a great deal.

Let this be the explanation of the locus of justification by way of instruction and equipping us for the battle. But the refutation of the errors cannot be better accomplished than by first dealing with the doctrine of good works, to which we shall now proceed.

**To God alone the praise and glory
forever and ever! Amen.**

**The end of the second part of the *Loci Theologici*
of Dr. Martin Chemnitz.**