

Concerning the Sacrament of Penance – By Martin Luther



Martin Luther At The Diet Of Worms.

In this third part I shall speak of the sacrament of penance. By the tracts and disputations which I have published on this subject I have given offence to very many, and have amply expressed my own opinions. I must now briefly repeat these statements, in order to unveil the tyranny which attacks us on this point as unsparingly as in the sacrament of the bread. In these two sacraments gain and lucre find a place, and therefore the avarice of the shepherds has raged to an incredible extent against the sheep of Christ; while even baptism, as we have seen in speaking of vows, has been sadly obscured among adults, that the purposes of avarice might be served.

The first and capital evil connected with this sacrament is, that they have totally done away with the sacrament itself, leaving not even a vestige of it. Whereas this, like the other two sacraments, consists of the word of the divine promise on one side and of our faith on the other, they have overthrown both of these. They have adapted to the purposes of their own tyranny Christ's word of promise, when He says: "Whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt. xvi. 19); and: "Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt. xviii. 18); and again: "Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained." (John xx. 23.) These words are meant to call forth the faith of penitents, that they may seek and obtain remission of their sins. But these men, in all their books, writings, and discourses, have not made it their object to explain to Christians the promise conveyed in these words, and to show them what they ought to believe, and how much consolation they might have, but to establish in the utmost length, breadth and depth their own powerful and violent tyranny. At last some have even begun to give orders to the angels in heaven, and to boast, with an incredible frenzy of impiety, that they have received the right to rule in heaven and on earth, and have the power of binding even in heaven. Thus they say not a word about the saving faith of the people, but talk largely of the tyrannical power of the pontiffs; whereas Christ's words do not deal at all with power, but entirely with faith.

It was not principalities, powers, and dominions that Christ instituted in His Church, but a ministry, as we learn from the words of the Apostle: "Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God." (1 Cor. iv. 1.) When Christ said: "Whosoever believeth and is baptized shall be saved," He meant to call forth faith on the part of those seeking baptism; so that, on the strength of this word of promise, a man might be sure that, if he believed and were baptized, he would obtain salvation. No sort of power is here bestowed on His servants, but only the ministry of baptism is committed to them. In the same way, when Christ says: "Whatsoever ye shall bind," etc., He means to call forth the faith of the penitent, so that, on the strength of this word of promise, he may be sure that, if he believes and is absolved, he will be truly absolved in heaven. Evidently nothing is said here of power, but it is the ministry of absolution which is spoken of. It is strange enough that these blind and arrogant men have not arrogated to themselves some tyrannical power from the terms of the baptismal promise. If not, why have they presumed to do so from the promise connected with penitence? In both cases there is an equal ministry, a like promise, and the same character in the sacrament; and it cannot be denied that, if we do not owe baptism to Peter alone, it is a piece of impious tyranny to claim the power of the keys for the Pope alone.

Thus also when Christ says: "Take, eat, this is my body which is given for you; this is the cup in my blood," He means to call forth faith in those who eat, that their conscience may be strengthened by faith in these words, and that they may feel sure that, when they believe eat, they receive remission of sins. There is nothing here which speaks of power, but only of a ministry. The promise of Baptism has remained with us, at least in the case of infants, but the promise of the Bread and the Cup has been destroyed, or brought into servitude to avarice, and faith has been turned into a work and a testament into a sacrifice. Thus also the promise of Penance has been perverted into a most violent tyranny, and into the establishment of a dominion that is more than temporal.

Not content with this, our Babylon has so utterly done away with faith as to declare with shameless front that it is not necessary in this sacrament; nay, in her antichristian wickedness, she pronounces it a heresy to assert the necessity of faith. What more is there that that tyranny could do, and has not done? Verily "by the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down; yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof." (Psalm cxxxvii. 1, 2.) May the Lord curse the barren willows of those rivers! Amen. The promise and faith having been blotted out and overthrown, let us see what they have substituted for them. They have divided penitence into three parts, contrition, confession, and satisfaction; but in doing this they have taken away all that was good in each of these, and have set up in each their own tyranny and caprice.

In the first place, they have so taught contrition as to make it prior to faith in the promise, and far better as not being a work of faith, but a merit; nay, they make no mention of faith. They stick fast in works and in examples taken from the Scriptures, where we read of many who obtained pardon through humility and contrition of heart, but they never think of the faith

which wrought this contrition and sorrow of heart; as it is written concerning the Ninevites: "The people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth." (Jonah iii. 5.) These men, worse and more audacious than the Ninevites, have invented a certain "attrition," which, by the virtue of the keys (of which they are ignorant), may become contrition; and this they bestow on the wicked and unbelieving, and thus do away entirely with contrition. O unendurable wrath of God, that such things should be taught in the Church of Christ! So it is that, having got rid of faith and its work, we walk heedlessly in the doctrines and opinions of men, or rather perish in them. A contrite heart is a great matter indeed, and can only proceed from an earnest faith in the Divine promises and threats—a faith which, contemplating the unshakeable truth of God, makes the conscience to tremble, terrifies and bruises it, and, when it is thus contrite, raises it up again, consoles, and preserves it. Thus, the truth of the threatening is the cause of contrition, and the truth of the promise is the cause of consolation, when they are believed; and by this faith a man merits remission of sins. Therefore faith above all things ought to be taught and called forth; when faith is produced, contrition and consolation will follow of their own accord by an inevitable consequence.

Hence, although there is something in the teaching of those who assert that contrition is to be brought about by the collection—as they call it—and contemplation of our own sins, still theirs is a perilous and perverse doctrine, because they do not first teach the origin and cause of contrition, namely, the unshakeable truth of the Divine threatenings and promises, in order to call forth faith; that so men might understand that they ought to look with much more earnest attention to the truth of God, by which to be humbled and raised up again, than to the multitude of their own sins, which, if they be looked at apart from the truth of God, are more likely to renew and increase the desire for sin, than to produce contrition. I say nothing of that insurmountable chaos of labour which they impose upon us, namely, that we are to frame a contrition for all our sins, for this is impossible. We can know but a small part of our sins; indeed even our good works will be found to be sins; as it is written: "Enter not into judgment with thy servant: for in thy sight shall no man living be justified." (Psalm cxliiii. 2.) It is enough that we sorrow for those sins which vex our conscience at the present moment, and which are easily recognised by an effort of our memory. He who is thus disposed will without doubt be ready to feel sorrow and fear on account of all his sins, and will feel sorrow and fear when in future they are revealed to him.

Beware then of trusting in thine own contrition, or attributing remission of sins to thy own sorrow. It is not because of these that God looks on thee with favour, but because of the faith with which thou hast believed His threatenings and promises, and which has wrought that sorrow in thee. Therefore whatever good there is in penitence is due, not to the diligence with which we reckon up our sins, but to the truth of God and to our faith. All other things are works and fruits which follow of their own accord, and which do not make a man good, but are done by a man who has been made good by his faith in the truth of God. Thus it is written: "Because he was wroth, there went up a smoke in his presence." (Psalm xviii. 8.) The terror of the

threatening comes first, which devours the wicked; but faith, accepting the threatening, sends forth contrition as a cloud of smoke.

Contrition, though it has been completely exposed to wicked and pestilent doctrines, has yet given less occasion to tyranny and the love of gain. But confession and satisfaction have been turned into the most noted workshops for lucre and ambition. To speak first of confession. There is no doubt that confession of sins is necessary, and is commanded by God. "They were baptized of John in Jordan, confessing their sins." (Matt. iii. 6.) "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us." (1 John i. 9, 10.) If the saints must not deny their sin, how much more ought those who are guilty of great or public offences to confess them. But the most effective proof of the institution of confession is given when Christ tells us that an offending brother must be told of his fault, brought before the Church, accused, and finally, if he neglect to hear the Church, excommunicated. He "hears" when he yields to reproof, and acknowledges and confesses his sin.

The secret confession, however, which is now practised, though it cannot be proved from Scripture, is in my opinion highly satisfactory, and useful or even necessary. I could not wish it not to exist; nay, I rejoice that it does exist in the Church of Christ, for it is the one great remedy for afflicted consciences; when, after laying open our conscience to a brother, and unveiling all the evil which lay hid there, we receive from the mouth of that brother the word of consolation sent forth from God; receiving which by faith we find peace in a sense of the mercy of God, who speaks to us through our brother. What I protest against is the conversion of this institution of confession into a means of tyranny and extortion by the bishops. They reserve certain cases to themselves as secret, and then order them to be revealed to confessors named by themselves, and thus vex the consciences of men; filling the office of bishop, but utterly neglecting the real duties of a bishop, which are, to preach the gospel and to minister to the poor. Nay, these impious tyrants principally reserve to themselves the cases which are of less consequence, while they leave the greater ones everywhere to the common herd of priests,—cases such as the ridiculous inventions of the bull "In Cæna Domini." That their wicked perverseness may be yet more manifest, they do not reserve those things which are offences against the worship of God, against faith, and against the chief commandments, but even approve and teach them; such as those journeyings hither and thither on pilgrimage, the perverted worship of saints, the lying legends of saints, the confidence in and practice of works and ceremonies; by all which things the faith of God is extinguished, and idolatry is nourished, as it is at this day. The pontiffs we have nowadays are such as those whom Jeroboam established at Dan and Beersheba as ministers of the golden calves—men who are ignorant of the law of God, of faith, and of all that concerns the feeding of the sheep of Christ, and who only thrust their own inventions upon the people by terror and power.

Although I exhort men to endure the violence of these reservers, even as Christ bids us to endure all the tyrannical conduct of men, and teaches us to obey such extortioners; still I neither admit nor believe that they have any

right of reservation. By no jot or tittle can they prove this; while I can prove the contrary. In the first place, if, in speaking of public offences, Christ says that we have gained our brother, if he hears us when told of his fault, and that he is not to be brought before the Church, unless he has refused to hear us, and that offences may thus be set right between brethren; how much more true will it be concerning private offences, that the sin is taken away, when brother has voluntarily confessed it to brother, so that he need not bring it before the Church, that is, before a prelate or priest, as these men say in their foolish interpretation. In support of my opinion we have again the authority of Christ, when he says in the same passage: "Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." (Matt. xviii. 18.) This saying is addressed to all Christians and to every Christian. Once more he says to the same effect: "Again I say unto you, that if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven." (Matt. xviii. 19.) Now a brother, laying open his secret sins to a brother and seeking pardon, certainly agrees on earth with that brother in the truth, which is Christ. In confirmation of what he had said before, Christ says still more clearly in the same passage: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." (Matt. xviii. 20.)

From all this I do not hesitate to say that whosoever voluntarily confesses his sins privately, in the presence of any brother, or, when told of his faults, asks pardon and amends his life, is absolved from his secret sins, since Christ has manifestly bestowed the power of absolution on every believer in Him, with whatever violence the pontiffs may rage against this truth. Add also this little argument, that, if any reservation of hidden sins were valid, and there could be no salvation unless they were remitted, the greatest hindrance to salvation would lie in those things which I have mentioned above—even those good works and idolatries which we are taught at the present day by the pontiffs. While, if these most weighty matters are not a hindrance, with how much less reason are those lighter offences so foolishly reserved! It is by the ignorance and blindness of the pastors that these portents are wrought in the Church. Wherefore I would warn these princes of Babylon and bishops of Beth-aven to abstain from reserving cases of any kind whatever, but to allow the freest permission to hear confessions of secret sins to all brethren and sisters; so that the sinner may reveal his sin to whom he will, with the object of seeking pardon and consolation, that is, the word of Christ uttered by the mouth of his neighbour. They effect nothing by their rash presumption, but to ensnare needlessly the consciences of the weak, to establish their own wicked tyranny, and to feed their own avarice on the sins and perdition of their brethren. Thus they stain their hands with the blood of souls, and children are devoured by their parents, and Ephraim devours Judah, and Syria Israel, as Isaiah says.

To these evils they have added circumstances—mothers, daughters, sisters, relatives, branches, fruits of sins, all devised at complete leisure by the most subtle of men, who have set up, even in the matter of sins, a sort of tree of consanguinity and affinity. So fertile of results are ignorance and impiety; for these devices of some worthless fellow have passed into public

law, as has happened in many other cases. So vigilantly do the shepherds watch over the Church of Christ, that whatever dreams of superstition or of new works these senseless devotees indulge, they forthwith bring forward, and dress them up with indulgences, and fortify them with bulls. So far are they from prohibiting these things, and protecting the simplicity of faith and liberty for the people of God; for what has liberty to do with the tyranny of Babylon?

I should advise the total neglect of all that concerns circumstances. Among Christians there is but one circumstance, and that is, that a brother has sinned. No character is to be compared to Christian brotherhood; nor has the observation of places, times, days, and persons, or any other such superstitious exaggeration, any effect but to magnify things which are nothing, at the expense of those things which are everything. As if there could be anything greater or more weighty than the glory of Christian brotherhood, they so tie us down to places and days and persons, that the name of brother is held cheap, and instead of being freemen we are slaves in bondage—we to whom all days, places, persons, and all other outward things, are equal.

How unworthily they have treated the matter of satisfaction. I have abundantly shown in the case of indulgences. They have abused it notably, to the destruction of Christians in body and in soul. In the first place, they have so taught it that the people have not understood the real meaning of satisfaction, which is a change of life. Furthermore, they so urge it and represent it as necessary, that they leave no room for faith in Christ; but men's consciences are most wretchedly tortured by scruples on this point. One runs hither, another thither; one to Rome, another into a convent, another to some other place; one scourges himself with rods, another destroys his body with vigils and fasting; while all, under one general delusion, say: Here is Christ, or there; and imagine that the kingdom of God, which is really within us, will come with observation. These monstrous evils we owe to thee, See of Rome, and to thy homicidal laws and rites, by which thou hast brought the world to such a point of ruin, that they think they can make satisfaction to God for their sins by works, while it is only by the faith of a contrite heart that He is satisfied. This faith thou not only compellest to silence in the midst of these tumults, but strivest to destroy, only in order that thy avarice, that insatiable leech, may have some to whom to cry: Bring, bring; and may make a traffic of sins.

Some have even proceeded to such a length in framing engines of despair for souls, as to lay it down that all sins, the satisfaction enjoined for which has been neglected, must be gone over afresh in confession. What will not such men dare, men born for this end, to bring everything ten times over into bondage? Moreover, I should like to know how many people there are who are fully persuaded that they are in a state of salvation, and are making satisfaction for their sins, when they murmur over the prayers enjoined by the priest with their lips alone, and meanwhile do not even think of any amendment of life. They believe that by one moment of contrition and confession their whole life is changed, and that there remains merit enough over and above to make satisfaction for their past sins. How should they know

better, when they are taught nothing better? There is not a thought here of mortification of the flesh; the example of Christ goes for nothing; who, when he absolved the woman taken in adultery, said to her: "Go, and sin no more;" thereby laying on her the cross of mortification of the flesh. No slight occasion has been given to these perverted ideas by our absolving sinners before they have completed their satisfaction; whence it comes that they are more anxious about completing their satisfaction, which is a thing that lasts, than about contrition, which they think has been gone through in the act of confession. On the contrary, absolution ought to follow the completion of satisfaction, as it did in the primitive Church, whence it happened that, the work being over, they were afterwards more exercised in faith and newness of life. On this subject, however, it must suffice to have repeated so far what I have said at greater length in writing on indulgences. Let it also suffice for the present to have said this much in the whole respecting these three sacraments, which are treated of and not treated of in so many mischievous books of Sentences and of law. It remains for me to say a few words about the remaining sacraments also, that I may not appear to have rejected them without sufficient reason.

[Next: [Of Confirmation](#)]