

Gerhard Forde, "Absolution: Systematic Considerations," *The Preached God. Proclamation in Word and Sacrament*. Ed. Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007, pp. 152-62; here 61-62.

Absolution: Systematic Considerations

must be unconditional, open absolution that is at fault. Curiously the gospel and absolution are the first candidates for blame when things go wrong! As Luther already put it in the argument with Erasmus: Was not the world always full of war, deceit, violence, quarreling, and iniquity? "Yet now that the gospel has come, men start blaming the world's wickedness onto it — when the truth is, rather, that the good gospel brings the world's wickedness to light; for without the gospel the world dwelt in its own darkness. So do the uneducated blame education for the fact that as education spreads, their own ignorance becomes apparent. Such are the thanks we return for the word of life and salvation."²

Unfortunately the charge seems to stick. Absolution is too dangerous in a world of sinners. So steps are invariably taken to bring the danger under control. At least proper penance must be demanded before absolution can be granted. Absolution is made conditional, at least on demonstration of proper penance, and the deep fog begins to roll in once again. Conditional absolution is, of course, just the practical counterpart to the dissolution of the absolute by theoretical manipulation. Somehow it seems awfully difficult to get that unconditional absolution out into the open. As Luther wrote, "They fled this morning star as though their lives depended on it." So we have had, especially among Norwegian-Americans, arguments about whether public and unconditional absolution is appropriate. The pietistically inclined always suspected it was popish chicanery and that it simply ran roughshod over the need for personal conversion and repentance.

Of course, those who feared that unconditional absolution was dangerous were quite right in spite of themselves. The problem was that they did not see that if the right to absolve unconditionally costs the absolute a death, it also spells death for the sinner. All the problems with and fears about unconditional absolution are rooted in the fact that after the Reformation the prevalent tendency was to work with the wrong anthropological paradigm. They thought of the sinner as a continuously existing subject who was only *altered* by sin for the worse, as well as for the better by grace. The human was a substance whose qualities were changed. They thought in terms of *change*, not in terms of death and resurrection. Absolution is "dangerous" if it is just granted flat out to a sinner who has not "changed" in any noticeable way. So it could be granted only conditionally. The only other alternative in such a system would be to say that absolution

2. BW 94; LW 33: 55.

freely granted, publicly, unconditionally, must mean the blanket absolution of the whole world, changed or not. Some of the Norwegians who wanted to counter conditional absolution thus found themselves willy-nilly espousing "the justification of the world," the next step to universalism. In other words, absolution simply relapses once again into a universal, an idea. It disappears again into the absolutist heaven.

The problem was and still is that we work with the wrong paradigm, the wrong theological anthropology. The sinner is not just changed. Rather, the sinner must die to be made new. The paradigm is death and resurrection, not just changing the qualities of a continuously existing subject. Unconditional absolution is indeed dangerous for the sinner. It means the death of the sinner one way or another. Either the sinner will try to appropriate it on his or her own conditions as a sop to the self, and go to that death which is eternal, or the unconditional absolution will itself put to death the old and raise up the new in faith to new life.

Yes, it is a dangerous business for sinners. It spells death, and it gives new life. But what we need is precisely to see that. What we need to do, I believe, is not to chicken out, not to compromise, and fiddle away while the City of God burns (this time!), but precisely to forge ahead in uncompromising fashion. The only solution to the problem of the absolute is absolution. It is, of course, quite consequently and necessarily therefore, also the only salvation for the sinner. The absolute dies to become the absolver; to be absolved is therefore to be saved, to die to the old and be raised to the newness of life. It is the purpose of theology, therefore, to lead us to see that and to drive us to do the absolution authorized by the crucified and risen one, actually to break the silence of eternity and say it: Your sins are forgiven for Jesus' sake.