The Wittenberg Opinions

on the Nürnberg Absolution Controversy, 1533–1540

German text with English translation

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I. Luther and Melanchthon to the Council — 18 April 1533

Den Ehrbaren und Weisen, Bürgermeistern und Rat der Stadt Nürnberg, unsern günstigen Herrn. Gottes Gnad durch unsern Herrn Jesum Christum. Ehrbare, weise, günstige Herrn! Auf E. W. Fragen haben wir uns untereinander unterredt, und wiefern die öffentlich gemein absolutio nit zu strafen und zu verwerfen sei, aus dieser Ursach: denn auch die Predigt des H. Evangelii selb ist im Grund und eigentlich ein absolutio, darinnen Vergebung der Sünden verkündigt wird, vielen Personen in gemein und öffentlich, oder einer Person allein, öffentlich oder heimlich. Derhalben mag die absolutio öffentlich in gemein, und auch besonders heimlich gebraucht werden, wie die Predigt in gemein oder heimlich geschehen mag. Denn obwohl nit alle daran glauben, darum ist die absolutio nit zu verwerfen; denn alle absolutio, sie geschehe in gemein oder besonders, muß doch also verstanden werden, daß sie Glauben fordere und denen hilft, so daran glauben, wie auch das Evangelium selb allen Menschen in aller Welt Vergebung verkündigt und nie-

To the honorable and wise burgomasters and council of the city of Nürnberg, our gracious lords. God's grace through our Lord Jesus Christ. Honorable, wise, gracious lords! Upon Your Honors'[1] questions we have conferred among ourselves as to how far the public general absolution is not to be censured or rejected, for this reason: the preaching of the holy gospel itself is, at its essence and core,[2] an absolution, in which forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to many persons in common and publicly, or to one person alone, publicly or privately. Therefore the absolution may be used publicly and in common, and also individually in private, just as the sermon may take place in common or in private. For although not all believe it, the absolution is not on that account to be rejected; for every absolution, whether it takes place in common or individually, must be understood as demanding faith and as helping those who believe it — just as the gospel itself proclaims

[1] "E. W." abbreviates *Eure Weisheit*, "Your Wisdom," the customary address to a city council (in fuller courtesy, *Ehrbare, weise Herren*; the 1536 letter has "E. E. W.," *Eure Erbare Weisheit*). The older English manner renders it "Your Worships"—the magistrate's honorific still heard in "His Worship the Mayor"—but it is given here as "Your Honors," lest the honorific be mistaken, in a controversy about worship, for a statement about the divine service.

[2] German *im Grund und eigentlich*, literally "in ground and properly." The phrase is adverbial: the letter does not say that preaching rests upon absolution as its foundation, but that preaching *is* absolution at its essence and core—so it is rendered here. "Fundamentally and properly" would serve equally well.

mand von dieser universali ausnimmt; aber es fordert gleichwohl unsern Glauben und hilft diejenigen nit, so nit daran glauben; und muß dennoch die universalis bleiben.

forgiveness to all men in all the world and excepts no one from this universal promise; yet it likewise demands our faith and does not help those who do not believe it — and the universal promise must nevertheless remain.

Daß aber dies mag bedacht werden, daß niemand der privat absolution begehren werde, so man die gemein hat und bleiben läßt: dazu sagen wir, daß es die Gestalt hat in rechtem Anliegen, daß die Gewissen gleichwohl dieses besondern Trostes bedürfen. Denn man muß die Gewissen unterrichten, daß der Trost des Evangelii einem jeden insonderheit gelte, und muß derhalben das Evangelium durch Wort und Sakrament insonderheit jedem applizieren; da ist leichtlich zu verstehen, daß man die privat absolutio daneben nit soll fallen lassen; und diese applicatio erhält auch deutlicher den Verstand des Evangelii und der Gewalt der Schlüssel.

As for the concern that no one will desire private absolution if the general one is kept in place, we say this: the matter rightly stands thus, that consciences do still need this particular comfort. For one must instruct consciences that the comfort of the gospel applies to each one individually, and therefore the gospel must be applied to each individually through word and sacrament; from this it is easy to see that private absolution should not be allowed to fall away alongside the general — and this application also preserves more clearly the meaning of the gospel and of the power of the keys.

Aus diesen Ursachen halten wir, daß die gemein absolutio nit zu verwerfen, auch nit abzutun sei, und daß man dennoch daneben die privat absolutio erhalten soll. Gott bewahr E. W. allzeit gnädiglich. Datum Wittenberg, Freitags nach dem Ostertag, Anno 1533. D. Martinus Luther. Philippus Melanchthon.

For these reasons we hold that the general absolution is not to be rejected, nor abolished, and that private absolution should nevertheless be retained alongside it. God keep Your Honors graciously always. Wittenberg, Friday after Easter Day, 1533. Dr. Martin Luther.[3] Philipp Melanchthon.[4]

II. The Faculty Opinion — 8 October 1533

The signers constitute the Wittenberg theological college of the day: Luther, Jonas, Bugenhagen, and Cruciger, doctors of theology—Bugenhagen and Cruciger promoted that 17 June, in Wittenberg's first evangelical doctoral promotion—together with Melanchthon, professor of Greek and theologian in all but title.

Gottes Gnade durch unsern Herrn Christum Jesum. Ehrbare, ehrsame, günstige

God's grace through our Lord Christ Jesus. Honorable, worthy, gracious

[3] Martin Luther (1483–1546), doctor and professor of Holy Scripture at Wittenberg. As the October letter notes, he had already written to Nürnberg twice in this affair—in general and to individuals—before the faculty answered jointly.

[4] Philipp Melanchthon (1497–1560), professor of Greek and of theology at Wittenberg; author of the Augsburg Confession (1530) and its Apology, whose articles on confession and absolution supply the theology of these letters.

Herrn! Nachdem uns die Uneinigkeit, so sich zwischen den Herrn Prädikanten bei euch hat zugetragen, von Herzen leid ist, und wir selbs zum höchsten geneigt sind, allen Fleiß fürzuwenden, diese Uneinigkeit zu stillen und Ärgernis zu verhüten: habe ich, D. Martinus, nicht unterlassen, vor dieser Zeit, ingemein und insonderheit, die Herrn Prädikanten zu Einigkeit und Friede treulich zu vermahnen. Und dieweil E. W. uns beider Schriften zu besehen zugeschickt, haben wir dieselben mit Fleiß gelesen und bewogen, und hab ich, D. Martinus, abermal an den Herrn Osiandrum geschrieben und ihm meine Meinung von dieser Sache angezeigt. Gott geb Gnad, daß sie diene zu Fried und Einigkeit, wie zu verhoffen. Denn wir zweifeln nicht, beide Teile meinen es treulich und mit gutem christlichen Herzen, und suchen in dieser Sachen nichts anders denn gemeine Besserung.

lords! Since the discord that has arisen among the preachers with you grieves us from the heart, and we ourselves are most highly inclined to apply all diligence to still this discord and prevent offense: I, Dr. Martin, did not fail some time ago, both in general and individually, faithfully to exhort the preachers to unity and peace. And since Your Honors sent us the writings of both parties to examine, we have read and weighed them with diligence, and I, Dr. Martin, have again written to Master Osiander[5,6] and made known to him my opinion of this matter. God grant grace that it serve peace and unity, as is to be hoped. For we do not doubt that both parties mean it faithfully and with a good Christian heart, and seek in this matter nothing but general improvement.

Und ist auf E. W. Frage dies unser Antwort und Meinung: Wiewohl wir die Privat-Absolution für sehr christlich und tröstlich halten, und daß sie soll in der Kirchen erhalten werden, aus Ursach, die wir E. W. zuvor und sonst geschrieben haben; so können und wollen wir doch die Gewissen nicht so hart beschweren, als sollt keine Vergebung der Sünden sein, ohn allein durch Privat-Absolution. Denn auch die Heiligen von Anfang der Welt bis zu der Zeit Christi nicht privatam absolutionem gehabt haben, sondern sie haben sich müssen trösten der gemeinen Promission und ihren Glauben darauf bauen. Und ob schon David von einem Fall ein Privat-Absolution

And upon Your Honors' question this is our answer and opinion: Although we hold private absolution to be very Christian and comforting, and that it should be retained in the churches, for the reasons we have written to Your Honors before and elsewhere, yet we cannot and will not burden consciences so severely as though there were no forgiveness of sins except through private absolution alone. For the saints too, from the beginning of the world until the time of Christ, did not have private absolution, but had to comfort themselves with the general promise and build their faith upon it. And even if

[5] German *Herr*, the ordinary courtesy title; rendered "Master" in the sixteenth-century English manner. Osiander held no doctorate.

[6] Andreas Osiander (1498–1552), preacher at St. Lorenz in Nürnberg from 1522 and co-author, with Johannes Brenz, of the Brandenburg-Nürnberg church order of 1533, from which he omitted the general absolution—the occasion of these letters. Called to Königsberg in 1549, he provoked the far greater controversy over justification, teaching that the believer is righteous by the indwelling essential righteousness of Christ's divine nature rather than by the imputation of Christ's obedience; the teaching was rejected after his death (17 October 1552) in Article III of the Formula of Concord.

gehabt, so hat er doch von andern Sünden, vor und nach, sich müssen halten an die gemeine Absolution und Predigt, wie auch Esaias und andere. Nu aber das Evangelium geoffenbaret, verkündigt es Vergebung der Sünden ingemein und insonderheit.

David received a private absolution for one fall, still for other sins, before and after, he had to hold to the general absolution and preaching — as did Isaiah and others. But now that the gospel has been revealed, it proclaims forgiveness of sins both in general and in particular.

Wahr ist's, das Osiander sagt: das Gewissen streitet nicht ingemein drob, ob Gott barmherzig sei, sondern von der Person, ob mir Gott gnädig sein wolle. Aber wiewohl die Predigt und promissiones gemeine Reden sind, so soll doch ein jeder merken, daß sie universales sind, und soll sich selbs davon nicht ausschließen, sondern sich der annehmen als eines eigen und besondern Worts, dieweil Gott allein geboten hat, seine Verheißung zu gläuben. Und ob gleich daran wenig gläuben, so will er sie doch allen andern halten, so sich darauf verlassen, wie St. Paul spricht Röm. 3: Numquid incredulitas eorum fidem Dei evacuavit?

It is true, what Osiander says: the conscience does not struggle in general over whether God is merciful, but concerning the person — whether God will be gracious to me. But although preaching and the promises are general speech, yet each one should mark that they are universal, and should not exclude himself from them, but take them to himself as his own and particular word, since God alone has commanded that his promise be believed. And even if few believe it, he will nevertheless keep it for all the others who rely on it, as St. Paul says in Romans 3: Shall their unbelief make the faith of God without effect?

Was wollt auch folgen, so keine Vergebung wäre, ohne durch die Privat-Absolution? Wie könnte man den blöden Gewissen raten, so die Privat-Absolution nicht so oft hören können, als sie mit Schrecken und Angst angefochten werden, nicht allein in läßlichen Sünden, sondern auch in schweren hohen Sachen? Wie sollten sie auch diejenigen trösten, so mit dem Tod übereilet würden, auf dem Lande, oder sonst, da sie in der Eile nicht möchten Priester haben? Wie sich auch solchs viel zutragen mag an Örtern, da das Evangelium verfolget wird, daß einem rechten Christen auch wohl sein Pfarrherr die Absolution nicht will mitteilen. So ist christlich Leben und Wesen ein solch ewiger Streit, darin man für und für wider der Sünden Schrecken Vergebung suchet.

And what would follow if there were no forgiveness except through private absolution? How could one counsel timid consciences, which cannot hear private absolution as often as they are assailed with terror and anguish — not only in venial sins but also in grave and weighty matters? How should one comfort those overtaken by death, in the countryside or elsewhere, who in the emergency can have no priest? And such things may often happen in places where the gospel is persecuted, so that even a true Christian's own pastor will not impart the absolution to him. For the Christian life and existence is such a perpetual struggle, in which one seeks forgiveness over and over against the terrors of sin.

Zum andern, so wissen wir vor Gott nichts anders zu richten, denn daß gemeine Predigt des Evangelii auch das Werk habe, daß sie Vergebung der Sünden im Herzen wirket in denen, so ihr erschrocken Gewissen dadurch mit Glauben trösten und aufrichten; wie St. Paul spricht: das Evangelium ist eine Kraft Gottes, dadurch selig werden alle, so daran glauben. Und in Summa: dieweil das gemein Evangelium Gottes Wort ist, dem wir zu gläuben aus Gottes Befehl und Gebot schuldig sind: wo derselbig Glaube ist, da muß ja Vergebung und Seligkeit sein. Also ist das Evangelium selbs eine gemeine Absolution; denn es ist eine Verheißung, deren sich alle und ein jeder insonderheit annehmen sollen, aus Gottes Befehl und Gebot. Darum können wir die gemeine Absolution nicht als unchristlich verbieten und kondemnieren, dieweil sie doch dazu dienet, daß sie die Zuhörer erinnert, daß sich ein jeder des Evangelii annehmen soll, daß es ein Absolution sei und ihm auch gehöre; wie denn euer Form zu solcher Erinnerung gestalt ist.

Secondly, before God we know no other judgment to make than that the general preaching of the gospel also has this work: that it works forgiveness of sins in the heart, in those who thereby comfort and raise up their terrified consciences with faith; as St. Paul says, the gospel is a power of God whereby all are saved who believe it. And in sum: since the general gospel is God's word, which we are bound to believe by God's command and precept, wherever that faith is, there forgiveness and salvation must surely be. Thus the gospel is itself a general absolution; for it is a promise which all, and each one in particular, are to take to themselves by God's command and precept. Therefore we cannot forbid and condemn the general absolution as unchristian, since it serves precisely to remind the hearers that each one should take the gospel to himself — that it is an absolution, and belongs to him also; and your form is indeed framed for such a reminder.

Daß aber dagegen gesagt wird, man könne den Haufen nicht absolvieren, darin viel sind, die man billiger binden sollt: darauf ist zu wissen, daß zweierlei ist: Predigen und Jurisdiktion. Die Jurisdiktion gehöret zu öffentlichen Sünden; darneben sind vielmehr heimlicher Sünde, welche man nicht anders binden und strafen kann, denn ingemein durchs Predigt-Amt. Also bindet die Predigt alle Ungläubigen, und gibt dagegen zugleich allen Gläubigen Vergebung. Daß auch gedachte Absolution conditionalis ist: so ist sie wie sonst eine gemeine Predigt; und eine jede absolutio, beide gemein und privat, hat die conditio des Glaubens; denn ohn Glauben entbindet sie nicht, und ist darum nicht ein Fehl-Schlüssel. Denn der Glaube bauet nicht auf unsere Würdigkeit, sondern ist nur so viel, daß einer die

But as to the objection that one cannot absolve the crowd, in which there are many who ought rather to be bound: here it must be known that preaching and jurisdiction are two different things. Jurisdiction pertains to public sins; besides these there are far more secret sins, which cannot be bound and punished in any other way than in general, through the preaching office. Thus the sermon binds all unbelievers, and at the same time gives forgiveness to all believers. And as to the said absolution being conditional: it is so in the same way as ordinary general preaching; and every absolution, both general and private, has the condition of faith, for without faith it does not loose — and it is not on that account a faulty

Absolution annimmt und Ja dazu spricht.

key. For faith does not build on our worthiness, but amounts only to this: that one accepts the absolution and says Yes to it.

Und ist dies unser Bedenken: dieweil man des einig auf beiden Seiten, daß die Privat-Absolution christlich und zu erhalten sei, daß beide Teile die Leut zu gedachter Privat-Absolution einhelliglich ermahnen; und weil Herrn Osiandro beschwerlich, die gemein Absolution zu treiben und zu halten, daß er dazu nicht gedrungen würde, aber doch dem Frieden zu gute den andern Teil, welcher die gemein Absolution hält, unangefochten ließe, und dagegen er auch vom andern Teil unangefochten bliebe. Dieses, achten wir, sollte ein Weg sein, der niemands Gewissen beschwerlich und zum Frieden dienstlich wäre. Gott verleihe E. W. Gnad und Fried, Amen. Geben zu Wittenberg, Mittwoch nach Francisci, Anno 1533. Martinus Luther. Johann Bugenhagen. Justus Jonas D. Philippus Melanchthon. Caspar Cruciger.

And this is our counsel: since both sides are agreed that private absolution is Christian and to be retained, let both parties unanimously exhort the people to the said private absolution; and since it is burdensome to Master Osiander to practice and observe the general absolution, let him not be forced to it — yet, for the sake of peace, let him leave the other party, which keeps the general absolution, unassailed, and likewise let him remain unassailed by the other party. This, we judge, should be a way that burdens no one's conscience and serves peace. God grant Your Honors grace and peace, Amen. Given at Wittenberg, Wednesday after St. Francis, Anno 1533. Martin Luther. Johann Bugenhagen.[7] Justus Jonas, D.[8] Philipp Melanchthon. Caspar Cruciger.[9]

III. The Faculty to the Council — 28 November 1536

Den Erbarn, Fürnemen und weisen Herrn, Burgermeistern und Rath der Stadt Nürnberg, unsern günstigen Herren und Freunden. Gnad und Fride von Gott durch unsern Herrn Jesum Christum. Erbare, weise, günstige Herrn! E. Erbarn Weisheit Schrift sampt der Predig Osiandri und den beigelegten Fragestücken, darauf ihr unser Bedenken begehrt, haben wir empfangen, und wären wohl geneigt gewesen, E. E. W. mit diesem Boten Antwort zuzuschreiben.

To the honorable, distinguished, and wise lords, the burgomasters and council of the city of Nürnberg, our gracious lords and friends. Grace and peace from God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Honorable, wise, gracious lords! We have received Your Honors' letter, together with Osiander's sermon and the appended questions on which you desire our opinion, and we would gladly have been inclined to send Your Honors an

[7] Johannes Bugenhagen (1485–1558), "Doctor Pomeranus," town pastor of Wittenberg and Luther's own confessor. His Wittenberg order of 1524 already contained a general absolution spoken after the sermon.

[8] Justus Jonas (1493–1555), doctor of theology and provost of the Castle Church at Wittenberg—hence the "D. P. W." (*Doctor, Probst zu Wittenberg*) after his name in the 1536 letter. With Cruciger he is named as an author of the Saxon church order of Duke Henry (1539).

[9] Caspar Cruciger (1504–1548), professor of theology at Wittenberg, Luther's amanuensis and one of the editors of his works; named with Jonas as an author of the Saxon church order of Duke Henry (1539).

Wir sind aber auf diesmal also mit unsers gnädigsten Herrn des Churfürsten zu Sachsen Händeln beladen gewest, daß in dieser Eil die Antwort auf E. E. W. Fragen nicht haben mögen gefertiget werden, zudem daß der Handel wichtig ist, und Zeit dazu gehört, nach Notdurft davon zu reden.

answer by this messenger. But we are at this time so laden with the affairs of our most gracious lord the Elector of Saxony that in this haste the answer to Your Honors' questions could not be prepared — the more so since the matter is weighty, and time is required to speak of it according to its need.

Denn wiewohl wir auch die privat absolutio mit allem Ernst erhalten und für sehr nützlich achten, und haben allezeit gelehrt, daß aus vielen Ursachen zu verhüten, daß sie in der Kirchen nicht abgethan werde oder verlösche: so schließen wir doch, daß Vergebung der Sünden nicht allein durch die privat absolutio erlanget werde, sondern auch, so das Herz aus gemeiner Predig rechten Glauben und Trost empfähet. Denn Predig und absolutio haben Kraft derhalben, daß Gott zugesagt, mit seinem Wort zu wirken, es werde ingemein oder sonst geredt; item, hat geboten, dem Evangelio zu gläuben, es werde auch in gemein oder sonderheit fürgetragen. Auf diesem Artikel stehet die Summa und der Grund dieses Streits, und haben wir diesen Artikel also kürzlich itzund gemeldet, damit anzuzeigen, was unser Meinung ist vom Hauptstück dieses Handels.

For although we too maintain private absolution with all earnestness and esteem it most useful, and have at all times taught that for many reasons it must be prevented from being abolished in the church or dying out, yet we conclude that forgiveness of sins is obtained not through private absolution alone, but also when the heart receives true faith and comfort from the common preaching. For preaching and absolution have their power because God has promised to work through his word, whether it be spoken in general or otherwise; likewise he has commanded that the gospel be believed, whether it be set forth in general or in particular. On this article stands the sum and ground of this dispute, and we have now briefly stated this article to indicate what our opinion is on the chief point of this matter.

Wiefern aber Herr Osiander dieses zuläßt, und warumb er ein gewöhnliche absolutio strafet, dieweil solche disputatio etwas länger, wollen wir dieselbige nach Gelegenheit fürderlich fürnehmen, und E. E. W. unser Bedenken durch eigne Botschaft zuschicken. Gott bewahre E. E. W. gnädiglich und verleihe eurer Kirchen Frid und Einigkeit in Christo. Datum Wittenberg, Dinstags nach Catharina im Jahr 1536. Martinus Luther D. Justus Jonas D. P. W. Caspar Cruciger D. Philippus Melanchthon.

But how far Master Osiander concedes this, and why he censures a general absolution — since such a disputation is somewhat longer — we shall take up promptly as opportunity serves, and send Your Honors our opinion by our own messenger. God keep Your Honors graciously and grant your church peace and unity in Christ. Given at Wittenberg, Tuesday after St. Catherine's, in the year 1536. Martin Luther, D. Justus Jonas, D., Provost of Wittenberg. Caspar Cruciger, D. Philipp Melanchthon.

IV. Luther's Absolution Formula for Nürnberg — 15 February 1540

In the winter of 1539/40 the formula of the general absolution was again under discussion at Nürnberg. The older literature, following Strobel, speaks of Osiander renewing his campaign "for the third time" at the end of 1539; the report is noted here, but it cannot be defended or supported from the surviving evidence, and the proximate occasion remains unclear.[10] *What is documented is this: on 12 February 1540 Melanchthon wrote to Veit Dietrich*[11] *that a formula proposed by the Nürnbergers pleased neither him nor Luther: "Rogavi Lutherum ut ipse formam componeret, et promisit"—I have asked Luther to compose a form himself, and he has promised (CR 3:945). On the 15th Melanchthon sent a draft of his own, which he judged a failure—"nec Luthero nec mihi satis placet… Lutherus fortasse, cum erit animo tranquilliore, componet formam" (CR 3:955–57 = MBW 2374)—and then, in a second letter the same day, what Luther had meanwhile written: "Mitto tibi Lutheri αὐτόγραφον, in quo est forma ἀπολύσεως, qua, si voles, uti poteris"—I send you Luther's autograph, in which is a form of absolution, which you may use if you will (CR 3:957f. = MBW 2375). The autograph text survives (Nürnberg, Stadtbibliothek, Cod. Solger 70, f. 445); it is printed in Enders XII, no. 2825 = WA Br 12:298–300, no. 4275, and was already in De Wette–Seidemann VI, 245. Neither Melanchthon's draft nor Luther's formula appears ever to have been used in Nürnberg's services, and whether Osiander saw them is not known;*[12] *with them the controversy was at an end.*

Lieben Freunde, weil wir alle sterblich, keine Stunde des Todes sicher sind, so demütiget euch vor Gott, bekennet in euren Herzen, daß wir alle arme Sünder, seiner Gnaden und Vergebung alle Augenblick bedürfen. Und ob Gott heut oder morgen jemand unter euch von diesem Jammerthal fordern würde, so spreche ich als ein Pfarrherr, Prediger, aus seinem Befehl alle, die jetzt hier sind und Gottes Wort hören, und mit rechter Reue ihrer Sünden an unsern Herrn Jesum Christum glauben, los von allen Sünden, im Namen des Vaters, Sohns und heiligen

Dear friends:[13] since we are all mortal, and sure of no hour of death, humble yourselves before God and confess in your hearts that we are all poor sinners, in need of his grace and forgiveness every moment. And should God today or tomorrow summon anyone among you out of this vale of tears,[14] then I, as a pastor and preacher, by his command[15] declare all who are now here and hear God's word, and who with true repentance for their sins believe on our Lord Jesus Christ, loosed from all sins, in

[10] Georg Theodor Strobel, *Nachricht von dem Leben und den Schriften Veit Dietrichs* (Altdorf, 1772), 45–46; the claim, repeated by Klaus, finds no support in the surviving correspondence and is judged untenable by Terence McIntosh, "The Words of Forgiveness: Luther, *The Keys*, and the Nuremberg Absolution Controversy," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 113 (2022): 36–69, at 63 n. 76, whose pp. 63–64 treat the 1540 formulas and include an independent English rendering of Luther's formula; the translations in this edition remain the editor's own. Strobel also misassigned Melanchthon's 1540 draft to October 1533 (McIntosh, 56 n. 50).

[11] Veit Dietrich (1506–1549), a Nürnberger; Luther's famulus and table companion at Wittenberg, with him at Coburg in 1530, and from 1535 preacher at St. Sebald in Nürnberg. His *Agendbüchlein* for the parish pastors (1543) carried the Nürnberg usage into the next generation.

[12] McIntosh, "Words of Forgiveness," 64.

[13] The 1536 opinion (Letter III) had closed by promising a fuller judgment "by our own messenger." What in fact came, in February 1540, was shorter and better: this formula in Luther's own hand.

[14] Enders observes that the formula thus ties the absolution to an eventuality—"should God today or tomorrow summon anyone among you"—and could be read as absolving only against that case: the emergency of death, the very case the 1533 opinion had urged (those "overtaken by death… who in the emergency can have no priest"). The declaration itself, however, is unconditional in form and present in tense: "I declare… loosed from all sins."

[15] German *aus seinem Befehl*, "out of his command"—God's institution, not the congregation's commission; the same warrant Bugenhagen's 1524 Wittenberg formula claims ("aus Befehl unsers Herrn Jesu Christi").

Geistes, Amen. Gehet hin im Fried, es sei Leben oder Sterben.

the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Go forth in peace, whether it be to live or to die.

Editorial note: here is the condition of faith of the 1533 opinion ("every absolution… has the condition of faith") built into the address itself—"all… who with true repentance for their sins believe"—the same structure the Saxon formula of c. 1580 and its Missouri descendants still carry: "you who heartily repent of your sins [and] believe on Jesus Christ."

Appendix. Luther's Private Letters of 8 October 1533

On the same day the faculty signed its opinion (Letter II), Luther wrote privately, in Latin, to each party: to Osiander, and to Wenceslaus Linck.[16] *The two letters are the diplomatic machinery behind the public settlement: the same counsel—keep the question out of the pulpit, neither side forced, neither side molested—urged on each man in the terms he could hear. German text of neither exists; Latin after De Wette IV, nos. 1541–42 (pp. 483–86). Set in roman, as the originals would have been written; translations by the editor.*

A. To Osiander

Gratiam et pacem in Christo Jesu, qui est pax nostra vera. Legi et priores tuas literas et postea scriptum tuum senatui vestro oblatum, optime frater in Domino. Legi et literas alterius partis et scripta, et testis est mihi Christus, gloria mea, quanto dolore vestrum istud dissidium me discruciet in isto miserrimo scandalorum et odiorum tempore, quibus plane obruti iacemus. Sed quantum ex omnibus capio literis et scriptis vestris, illi tibi non videntur satisfacere, nec tu illis. Quid ergo? Numquid si neutra pars putat sese ab altera convinci posse, ideo in aeternum litigabitis et perpetuo ac sine fine vos invicem mordebitis tanto multorum et piorum hominum scandalo?

Grace and peace in Christ Jesus, who is our true peace. I have read both your earlier letter and, afterward, the writing you laid before your council, best brother in the Lord. I have also read the other party's letter and writings; and Christ, my glory, is my witness with what grief this dissension of yours torments me, in this most miserable time of offenses and hatreds under which we lie wholly buried. But so far as I gather from all your letters and writings, they do not seem to satisfy you, nor you them. What then? If neither side thinks it can be convinced by the other, will you therefore litigate forever, and bite one another perpetually and without end, to the great offense of many godly people?

Quando propter Christum hoc agitis, scilicet tu, qui conscientia tua victus illis cedere non putes, dignus es venia: rursus illi, qui conscientia victos sese asserunt, itidem venia digni sunt: date ergo hanc invicem vobis veniam, et ferte alter alterius onus in legem Christi, et hac

Since you act in this for Christ's sake—you, who, bound by your conscience, do not think you may yield to them, deserve forbearance; and they in turn, who assert that they too are bound by conscience, likewise deserve forbearance—grant one another, then, this forbearance; bear one another's burden

[16] Wenceslaus Linck (1483–1547), doctor of theology, Luther's fellow Augustinian and successor as vicar-general of the order; from 1525 preacher in Nürnberg. The disputed general absolution spoken after the communion admonition was the usage of Linck's side.

ratione dissidium tollite, ut utrinque deinde sileatis in publico illam quaestionem, donec in se ipsa cum tempore sopiatur; interim tu apud te istam sententiam teneas, et, ut hactenus, in tua ecclesia non graveris usu absolutionis publicae: rursus illi suam sententiam apud se retineant, et, ut hactenus, utantur ista absolutione, donec, animis pacatis et priore pace firmata, sine animorum offensione de hac re statuere liceat.

according to the law of Christ; and on this plan lift the dissension: that hereafter both sides keep silence in public on that question, until with time it fall asleep of itself. Meanwhile keep your opinion to yourself and, as hitherto, do not take offense at the use of public absolution in your church; and let them in turn keep their opinion to themselves and, as hitherto, use that absolution—until, tempers calmed and the former peace made firm, the matter may be settled without wounding anyone.

Vos in tanta animorum commotione nihil boni statuetis aut efficietis, et fieri facile potest, ut ex festuca trabem faciatis, si pergetis vos contendendo involvere fortasse vos omnes, et magnum inter vos motum movebitis ad laetificandum Satanam et suos, quem difficillimum sit postea compescere. Nam tu mihi quidem multa praeclare disputare videris pro singulari tuo ingenio et eruditione: utrinque tamen sunt, qui nec mihi satisfaciunt. Homines sumus, et a carne nostra nobis facile imponi potest, ubi non invicem nos audiverimus unus alterum, et sensu cesserimus. Quis finis sequi posset, satis intelligis.

In so great a commotion of spirits you will settle or accomplish nothing good; and it may easily come about that you make a beam out of a splinter, if you go on entangling yourselves in contention—perhaps all of you—and stir up a great tumult among you, to the delight of Satan and his own, which afterward would be most difficult to quell. For you indeed seem to me to argue many things brilliantly, after your singular talent and learning; yet on both sides there are things that do not satisfy even me. We are men, and our flesh can easily impose on us where we have not listened to one another and yielded a little in our judgment. What end could follow, you understand well enough.

Igitur per Christum te oro, quando vestrae contentionis finis et modus nullus alius nunc nobis videatur, ut digneris istam susceptam quaestionem, ut in spongiam cadat, et invicem ab armis discedatis, ut supra consului, atque interim rebus immutatis et in publico tacitis, ea, quae communiter docetis, urgeatis. Si hoc consilium, quod arbitror Christi esse, sequimini, dabit ipse gratiam et gloriam optatae pacis. Credo certo, credere te, quam magni te in animo meo faciam, ut digna sunt dona Dei, quae habes; alioqui tam serio et ardenter in hac re non agerem. Quare tu rursus fidele meum erga te cor ne despicias, mi frater in communi nostro Domino, et connitere, ut ista scintilla inter vos sopiatur, ne incendium crescat, quo nos simul corripiamur. Dominus noster, solatium nostrum, Christus Jesus gubernet et

Therefore I beg you through Christ, since no other end or measure of your contention now appears to us: deign to let this question you have taken up fall to the sponge,[18] and lay down your arms on both sides, as I have counseled above; and meanwhile, things standing unchanged and the question silent in public, press those things which you teach in common. If you follow this counsel, which I judge to be Christ's, he himself will give the grace and glory of the longed-for peace. I believe assuredly that you believe how highly I esteem you in my heart, as the gifts of God which you have deserve; otherwise I would not act so earnestly and ardently in this matter. Do not, then, despise in turn my faithful heart toward you, my brother in our common Lord, and strive that this spark

dirigat corda vestra in charitate et patientia sua, Amen. 8. Octobr., anno MDXXXIII.

T. Martinus Luther.[17]

among you be quenched, lest the fire grow and seize us all together. May our Lord, our comfort, Christ Jesus govern and direct your hearts in his love and patience, Amen.
8 October, in the year 1533.

Yours, Martin Luther.

B. To Wenceslaus Linck

Dn. Wenceslao Linco, Sacrae Theologiae Doctori. Gratiam et pacem in Christo. Respondetur a nobis senatui vestro in causa vestra de absolutione publica, mi Wenceslae. Scripsi et ipsi Osiandro. Nunc te per Christum oro, ut una cum tuis sodalibus velis oculos istos misericordiae vestrae non claudere, et hunc hominem suis opinionibus captum, velut aegrotum, agnoscere, et hoc cogitare, non quomodo publice confundatur et damnetur, ne ex scintilla ista fiat incendium, sed potius, quanta fieri potest adhuc modestia et prudentia et simul patientia vestra, liberetur et sanetur. Omnino studendum est, qua ratione anima istius fratris lucrifiat per vos.

To Master Wenceslaus Linck, doctor of sacred theology. Grace and peace in Christ. Answer is being given by us to your council in your case concerning public absolution, my Wenceslaus. I have also written to Osiander himself. Now I beg you through Christ that you, together with your colleagues, be willing not to close those eyes of your mercy, but to regard this man, captive to his own opinions, as a sick man; and to consider, not how he may be publicly confounded and condemned—lest out of that spark there come a conflagration—but rather how, with all the modesty and prudence, and with all the patience, you can yet muster, he may be freed and healed. Every effort must be made that the soul of this brother be won through you.

Non credidissem ego (hoc neque iactabis, neque disseminabis in publicum) istum hominem tot cogitationibus occupatum, et ut ex suo scripto intelligo, tam procul a sinceritate nostrae doctrinae positum: sed, ut dixi, si magis irritaretur, effunderentur maiora scandala, per quae, etiamsi non vinceret, tamen turbas moveret, et negotia faceret, quae melius esset praecaveri. Si igitur vobis nostrum consilium placuerit, speramus, cum tempore rem istam in se quieturam esse, et illum interim propius ad nos accessurum esse. Nihil amittemus ista patientia et modestia, et ille si non resipuerit, postea magis obfuerit sua pertinacia. Sic sentimus. Dominus Jesus componet istam et omnes turbas, Amen. In quo bene vale, mi frater. Saluta D. Thomam Venatorium, et differri suas propositiones non aegre ferat. Est

I would not have believed—and this you shall neither boast of nor spread abroad—that the man was occupied with so many notions and, as I gather from his writing, stood so far from the purity of our doctrine; but, as I said, if he were further provoked, greater offenses would pour out, by which, even if he did not prevail, he would yet stir up tumults and make trouble that were better forestalled. If, then, our counsel pleases you, we hope that with time the matter will grow quiet of itself, and that he meanwhile will draw nearer to us. We shall lose nothing by this patience and modesty; and if he does not come to his senses, his obstinacy will afterward hurt him the more. So we judge. The Lord Jesus will compose this and all tumults, Amen. In him farewell, my brother. Greet Dr. Thomas

[17] "T." abbreviates *Tuus*, "Yours"—the familiar close of a personal Latin letter. In the official German letters (I–III) Luther signs instead as "D." (*Doctor*) Martinus Luther.

[18] *Ut in spongiam cadat*: be wiped out, expunged—as an author sponges out a draft.

causa, qua differri oportet, donec nubila ista transeant. Octavo Octobris, MDXXXIII.

T. Martinus Lutherus.

Consulit D. Pomeranus, et ego rogo, ne has litteras tuis comministris aut ullis aliis, excepto Spenglero, communices.

Venatorius,[19] and let him not take it hard that his theses are deferred; there is reason they must be deferred until these clouds pass.
8 October 1533.

Yours, Martin Luther.

Dr. Pomeranus [Bugenhagen] so advises, and I ask that you communicate this letter to none of your fellow ministers nor to anyone else, except Spengler.[20]

EDITIONS CITED

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[19] Thomas Venatorius (c. 1488–1551), preacher at St. Jakob in Nürnberg, theologian and mathematician (the first editor of Archimedes); his theses were to wait until the storm passed.

[20] Lazarus Spengler (1479–1534), *Ratsschreiber* (chief secretary) of the Nürnberg council, confidant of Luther and author of the hymn "Durch Adams Fall ist ganz verderbt"; the one layman Luther would trust with the letter.