

CONFESSION

Psalm 41 • James 5:13–20 • Augsburg Confession, Article XXV

PSALM	Psalm 41:4 “As for me, I said, ‘O Lord, be gracious to me; heal me, for I have sinned against you.’”
READING	James 5:16 “Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.”
BOOK OF CONCORD	Augsburg Confession Article XXV: Confession

The Texts

Psalm 41’s connection of healing to the forgiveness of sins is not incidental. “O Lord, be gracious to me; heal me, for I have sinned against you.” The psalmist does not separate the physical distress from the spiritual condition; the plea for healing opens directly into the confession of sin. Verse 4 is a model of what the Reformers meant by confession: not a formal recitation of a classified inventory but the cry of a person who knows that the healing most urgently needed is the forgiveness of sins, and who goes directly to the Lord who alone can grant it. AC XXV reads Psalm 41 as a warrant for private confession precisely because the psalm shows what confession is for: not legal satisfaction but the medicine of the spoken word of mercy.

James 5:16’s instruction, “Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed,” is the New Testament form of the same movement. The healing is bound to the confession; the prayer is bound to the spoken acknowledgment of need. AC XXV defends the retention of private confession as the specific pastoral form in which this healing is delivered most directly and personally: the absolution spoken over a named and known sinner by a pastor who knows what specific wounds require what specific medicine. James 5 commands the practice; Psalm 41 models the posture; AC XXV defends the institutional form the Lutheran churches retained against those who abolished it.

Discuss: *Psalm 41:4 opens its plea for healing with the confession of sin, and James 5:16 binds healing to mutual confession and prayer. AC XXV retains private confession on the grounds that absolution is the specific medicine these texts describe. What is the actual obstacle in your congregation to recovering this practice: is it theological misunderstanding of what Lutheran confession is, or is it something else?*

Key Terms

Term	What It Means
Not abolished	AC XXV’s opening declaration: confession in the Lutheran churches is not abolished but retained on account of the great benefit of absolution and its usefulness to the conscience. This is a defense of a practice against those who removed it entirely, not a defense against Rome.
The end of enumeration	AC XXV’s demolition of the requirement to recount every sin. Citing Psalm 19 and Jeremiah 17, the Confession argues that if no sins were forgiven except those recounted, consciences could never find peace, because very many sins are neither seen nor remembered.
Voice from heaven	AC XXV’s instruction for receiving absolution: the penitent must have faith to receive the spoken word of forgiveness as a voice sounding from heaven, resting on the power of the Keys given by Christ rather than on the moral authority of the pastor who speaks.
Preparation for the Sacrament	The practical function AC XXV defends: the private meeting with the pastor to examine the unlearned, test understanding of the Gospel, and apply specific comfort before communing. Not an inquisition but a tending of the specific spiritual wounds of specific sheep.

Discuss: *AC XXV’s opening declaration that confession is not abolished is a defense against those who removed it entirely, not a defense against Rome. The Reformers retained it against abolitionists precisely on account of absolution’s benefit to troubled consciences. What does that history require to be said to a Lutheran congregation that has effectively abolished private confession not by theological decision but by simple disuse and pastoral neglect?*

Not Abolished: The Surprising Lutheran Defense

Augsburg Confession Article XXV begins with a sentence that surprises many Lutherans: “*Confession in the churches is not abolished among us.*” This is not a concession to Rome; it is a defense against a different error. Among some Reformation-era enthusiasts and radicals, private confession was rejected as a papist invention with no warrant in Scripture. The Reformers’ response was to retain it, citing its value not as a legal requirement but as a pastoral gift. The Confession specifies the two grounds for retention: the great benefit of absolution itself, and the usefulness of the private meeting to consciences that need specifically targeted comfort. The practice was retained for the sheep, not for the institution.

This history matters for reading AC XXV correctly. The Confession is not trying to defend against the accusation that Lutheran confession is insufficiently rigorous. It is defending the practice of private absolution against those who thought the Reformation had rendered it unnecessary. The Reformers’ answer is that the Reformation did not remove the need for the spoken word of forgiveness delivered to a specific person; it removed the legal burden that had obscured that word behind the impossibility of complete enumeration. The gift was retained; the torture chamber was dismantled.

Discuss: *AC XXV defends private confession against those who abolished it, arguing that the spoken absolution over a specific person carries a benefit the public sermon alone cannot fully supply. James 5’s command to confess sins to one another and pray for healing is one of its warrants. If that command is genuinely applicable, what specific form should it take in the life of your congregation, and who bears the pastoral responsibility for creating the conditions in which it can be practiced?*

The End of Enumeration

The specific burden AC XXV demolishes is the requirement of complete enumeration: the demand that the penitent recount every single sin committed since the last confession, in sufficient detail, before receiving absolution. The Confession’s argument against this is both logical and pastoral. It cites Psalm 19:13, “*Who can understand his errors?*” and Jeremiah 17:9’s declaration that the heart is deceitful beyond knowing, and draws the conclusion that if no sins were forgiven except those specifically recounted, consciences could never find peace. Very many sins are neither seen nor remembered, and a system that makes completeness of recollection the condition of forgiveness places the ground of assurance on human memory rather than on God’s mercy.

The replacement is not license but pastoral realism. The penitent who comes to private confession under AC XXV’s form is not coming to complete an inventory. He or she is coming to bring specific, troubling sins into the light where the specific medicine of the Gospel can be applied to them. The pastor’s role is not interrogation but tending. If the conscience is burdened by something particular, it is brought and addressed. The general confession before God comprehends all sins, including those unremembered; the specific confession before the pastor carries the specific wounds to the specific healer. Psalm 41’s “*O Lord, be gracious to me; heal me*” is the posture, not a completed accounting.

Discuss: *AC XXV argues that requiring complete enumeration destroys the conscience’s peace by placing the ground of assurance on human memory. The replacement is the specific confession of what specifically troubles, received into the specific absolution that addresses it. How does a pastor teach a congregation member who has been shaped by either the Roman system of enumeration or by the Protestant dismissal of confession entirely to approach private confession with the posture Psalm 41 models?*

The Healing Voice from Heaven

AC XXV’s most important pastoral claim is about the nature of the spoken absolution itself. The Confession states that people are carefully taught to prize the absolution as the voice of God, pronounced by God’s command. The penitent must have faith to receive the spoken word as a voice sounding from heaven, and this faith in Christ truly obtains and receives the forgiveness of sins. This is not a claim about the pastor’s personal holiness or hierarchical authority. It is a claim about what the office delivers when it speaks the words Christ authorized: not a human opinion about the person’s standing but the actual word of God’s mercy applied to that person by name.

James 5:16’s command to confess and pray for one another in order to be healed locates the healing in the spoken exchange, not merely in the internal state of the penitent. The elders of James 5:14 who are called to pray over the sick and anoint them in the Lord’s name are the pastoral form of this exchange. AC XXV’s defense of private absolution is the institutional form that preserves this spoken healing as a regular practice of the Church rather than an emergency measure for the dying. Psalm 41’s Lord who is gracious and heals the sinner who confesses speaks through the voice of the one He has authorized to speak in His name, and that voice is to be received as His own.

Discuss: *AC XXV says the spoken absolution must be received as a voice from heaven, carrying the actual word of God’s mercy rather than a human opinion about the penitent’s standing. James 5’s healing is bound to the spoken exchange of confession and prayer. What would it take for the members of your congregation to receive the pastor’s absolution with that weight, and what specific pastoral and liturgical practices would need to change for that reception to become normal?*

The Payoff

Psalm 41 opens with the blessing on those who consider the poor and closes with the confidence that the Lord upholds the one He has chosen. Its central plea, “*O Lord, be gracious to me; heal me, for I have sinned against you,*” is answered not by a feeling of wellness but by the spoken word of a God who has taken the sin behind His back, cast it into the depths of the sea, and authorized His Church to say so out loud, by name, to each specific sinner who brings specific wounds to the one Christ appointed to speak in His name. James 5’s healing is that word received in faith; AC XXV’s retained confession is the form in which the Lutheran Church kept that word available to every troubled conscience that was willing to come and hear it.