

Title: The Efficacy of Absolution & Emergency Rite at sea: Insights from the Book of Common Prayer



Summary:

The Book of Common Prayer (BCP), a foundational liturgical text in Anglican tradition, provides guidance for various worship services and rites, including those administered in emergency situations. One aspect of

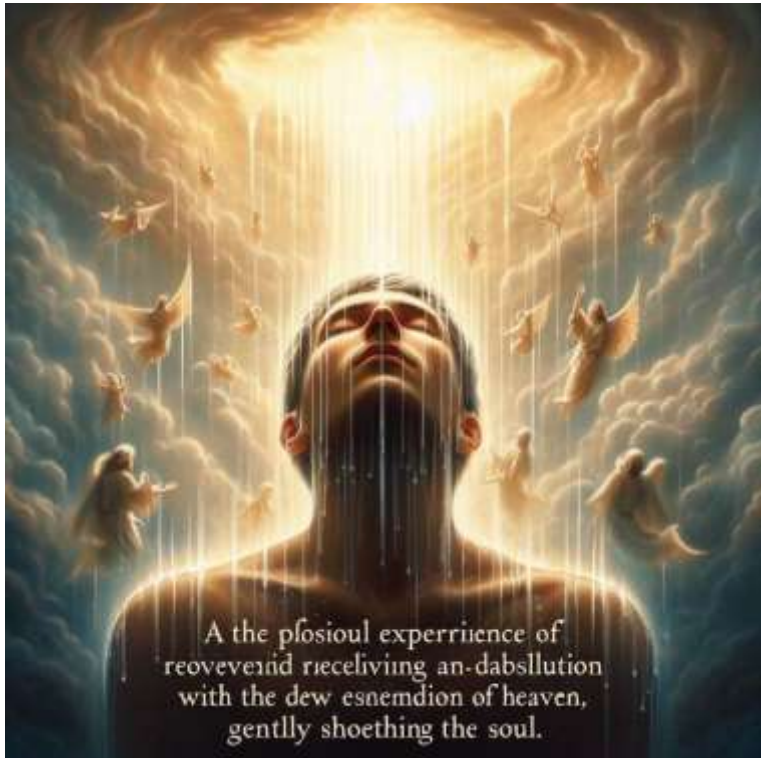
particular interest is the formulation and efficacy of absolution within these emergency rites, especially when compared to absolution administered in more traditional contexts such as the Holy Communion service.

I've spent countless hours delving into the concept of priestly absolution in the Christian Apostolic Church. Why have I focused on this? Well, for many reasons, but chiefly because it embodies the promise of forgiveness, granting access to heaven, which lies at the core of faith. However, my concern arises from my Church's (the CofE) transition from private auricular confession to general absolution (in the formation of the BCP text some 500 years ago), in contrast to the Roman mother Church. The Church of England lacks an accessible path for the daily Anglican to partake in the sacrament of private auricular confession, opting instead for general absolution as the primary means. Remarkably, the only doubt that lingers over the efficacy of general absolution stems from the Roman Church's stance, Her stance as the powerful and truly static entity with pure priestly apostolic succession. Yet, in its own doctrine, the Roman Church acknowledges general absolution, albeit reserving it for emergencies.



This underscores the fundamental effectiveness of general absolution regardless of perspective...and the CofE and thus the Anglicans, with their equally valid apostolic succession and Cranmer ingeniously incorporates private auricular confession and absolution within the BCP liturgy as an option, accommodating diverse situations and individuals. It's a beautiful synthesis.

This morning as I write this, I had the profound experience of receiving general absolution. It felt akin to dew descending from heaven, gently soothing my soul.



In Church of England theology, an absolution is considered genuine and effective when it meets certain theological criteria:

1. **Authority:** The absolution must be pronounced by a duly ordained priest who has been given the authority to declare forgiveness of sins on behalf of God. This authority is believed to be derived from the apostolic succession and the commissioning of ministers within the Church.
2. **Repentance:** The absolution is effective for those who genuinely repent of their sins. Repentance involves contrition for wrongdoing, a sincere desire to turn away from sin, and a commitment to amend one's life.
3. **Faith:** The recipient of the absolution must have faith in the efficacy of Christ's atonement for the forgiveness of sins. Trusting in Christ's sacrifice and accepting His forgiveness is essential for the absolution to be meaningful.
4. **Sacramental Action:** The absolution is often associated with sacramental actions, such as the laying on of hands or the sign of the cross, which symbolize the impartation of God's grace and forgiveness.
5. **Scriptural Basis:** The absolution is grounded in biblical teachings, particularly in passages such as John 20:23, where Jesus grants His disciples

the authority to forgive sins: "If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Overall, an absolution in Church of England theology is understood as a solemn declaration of God's forgiveness and reconciliation to the penitent, mediated through the ministry of the ordained priest and received by those who sincerely repent and believe in Christ.

The BCP contains three distinct forms of absolution: one used in Morning Prayer, another in the Visitation of the Sick, and a third in the Communion Service. Each form emphasizes the authority of God to pardon sins through genuine repentance and faith in Christ. These absolutions are considered integral parts of Anglican liturgy, conveying God's grace and forgiveness to the penitent.

1. **Absolution in Morning Prayer:** Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who desireth not the death of a sinner, but rather that he may turn from his wickedness, and live, hath given power, and commandment, to his Ministers, to declare and pronounce to his people, being penitent, the Absolution and Remission of their sins. He pardoneth and absolveth all those who

truly repent, and unfeignedly believe his holy Gospel. Wherefore let us beseech him to grant us true repentance, and his Holy Spirit, that those things may please him which we do at this present, and that the rest of our life hereafter may be pure, and holy; so that at the last we may come to his eternal joy; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

2. **Absolution in the Visitation of the Sick:** Our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath left power to his Church to absolve all sinners who truly repent and believe in him, of his great mercy forgive thee thine offences: And by his authority committed to me, I absolve thee from all thy sins, In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.



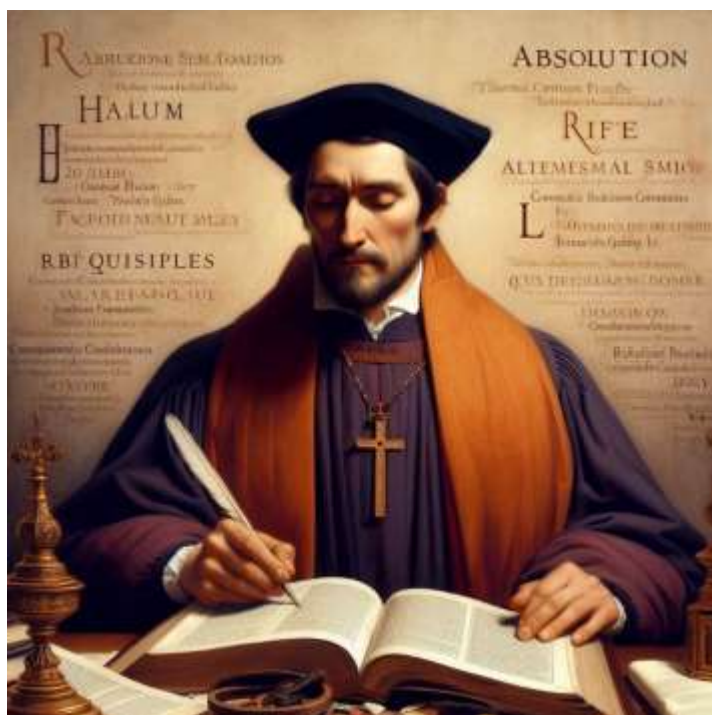
3. **Absolution in the Communion Service and the emergency rite in Prayers to be used at sea:**

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who of his great mercy hath promised forgiveness of sins to all them that with hearty repentance and true faith turn unto him; Have mercy upon you; pardon and deliver you from all your sins; confirm and strengthen you in all goodness; and bring you to everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



All of these different formulations essentially convey the same message and carry equal weight. It's akin to when a ruler grants authority to a servant to release any repentant prisoners from jail. Whether the servant says, "By the authority granted to me by the ruler, I release this prisoner," or "The ruler who gave me this authority pardons you," or simply "I pardon and release you," the outcome for the prisoner remains unchanged. Similarly, in the context of absolving sins, whether the priest says, "By the power given to me by God, I absolve you," or "By virtue of the authority granted to me from God, I absolve you," or "God pardons you through me, his servant, as promised in Scripture," the result is the same. These expressions all stem from the same authority, as mentioned in John 20: "Whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven." Whether expressed one way or another, they are effective for the penitent.

Thomas Cranmer, the architect of the Book of Common Prayer (BCP), drew upon various sources, including the Sarum Rite, in formulating the absolution formulas found in the BCP.



In the Sarum Rite, absolution typically involved the priest pronouncing God's mercy and forgiveness upon the penitent. Cranmer adapted and reworded these formulas to reflect the theological principles of the English Reformation. In the BCP, Cranmer provided three distinct absolution formulas, each emphasizing God's mercy and forgiveness. While retaining the essence of the Sarum Rite, Cranmer's revisions aimed to align the Church of England's liturgy with

Reformation theology, emphasizing salvation by grace through faith. The absolution formulas in the BCP reflect Cranmer's theological convictions, seeking to reassure the penitent of God's pardon and the promise of eternal life through Christ.



One example of an absolution formula from the Sarum Rite is as follows:

"Absolution and remission of all your sins, space for true repentance, amendment of life, grace, and the consolation of the Holy Spirit, the Almighty and merciful God grant to you."

This formula reflects the medieval Catholic understanding of absolution, seeking God's mercy and forgiveness for the penitent. While this formula shares similarities with the absolution formulas found in the Book of Common Prayer, Cranmer made significant revisions to the language and theology of the absolution in line with the theological principles of the English Reformation.

The Sarum Rite was the liturgical form used in most of the English Church prior to the introduction of the first Book of Common Prayer in 1549. Like most of the liturgies of the Church at that time, it was extensive and complicated.

1. **BCP Communion Absolution Formula:**

"Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who of his great mercy hath promised forgiveness of sins to all them that with hearty repentance and true faith turn unto him; Have mercy upon you; pardon and deliver you from all your sins; confirm and strengthen you in all goodness; and bring you to everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

2. **Sarum Absolution (as noted):** "Absolution and remission of all your sins, space for true repentance, amendment of life, grace, and the

consolation of the Holy Spirit, the Almighty and merciful God grant to you."

Comparison:

- **Similarity in Theme:** Both formulas emphasize forgiveness of sins, repentance, amendment of life, and the grace of God.
- **Differences in Length and Detail:** The BCP absolution is longer and more detailed, including a reference to the promises of God and a plea for confirmation and strength in goodness. The Sarum absolution is more concise, focusing directly on absolution, remission of sins, repentance, amendment of life, and the grace of God.
- **Theological Emphasis:** The BCP formula reflects a Protestant theological perspective, emphasizing repentance and faith as conditions for forgiveness. The Sarum formula, being pre-Reformation, does not explicitly mention repentance and faith but emphasizes the granting of absolution and grace by God.

Overall, while both formulas convey similar themes of forgiveness and grace, they differ in their theological emphases and the level of detail provided.

Here are the key phrases from the three absolutions in the Book of Common Prayer:

1. **Morning Prayer Absolution:** "Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ... He pardoneth and absolveth all those who truly repent, and unfeignedly believe his holy Gospel."
2. **Visitation of the Sick Absolution:** "Our Lord Jesus Christ... I absolve thee from all thy sins, In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."
3. **Communion Service Absolution & Emergency Rite in Prayers to be Used at Sea:** "Almighty God, our heavenly Father... Have mercy upon you; pardon and deliver you from all your sins; confirm and strengthen you in all goodness; and bring you to everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

These words are considered significant within the liturgical context as they convey the priest's authoritative declaration of God's forgiveness and reconciliation to the penitent. They are understood to have a sacramental quality, conveying God's grace to

the individual who receives them with genuine repentance and faith.

it's possible that Cranmer, in formulating the absolution in the Book of Common Prayer (BCP), drew inspiration from similar prayers and rituals within the Christian tradition, including those emphasizing forgiveness, repentance, and the grace of God. The BCP, first compiled by Thomas Cranmer in the 16th century, aimed to create a unified liturgy for the Church of England that reflected Protestant theology while retaining elements of traditional Catholic worship. So, while the exact wording might not be identical, the general themes and intentions could certainly have influenced Cranmer's formulation of the absolution in the BCP.

In the Communion service:

"O LORD, we beseech thee, mercifully hear our prayers, and spare all those who confess their sins unto thee; that they, whose consciences by sin are accused, by thy merciful pardon may be absolved; through Christ our Lord. Amen."

This prayer reflects the plea for mercy and forgiveness, asking God to hear the prayers of those who confess

their sins. It emphasizes the hope for absolution and pardon from the weight of sin, seeking reconciliation with God through the merciful act of forgiveness, mediated by Christ.

In the context of absolution within the Church of England, the effectiveness of an absolution typically hinges on specific words spoken by the priest during the pronouncement of absolution. The prayer you mentioned from the Communion service, while fervently seeking forgiveness and pardon, doesn't contain the explicit language traditionally associated with absolution.

Absolution generally involves a direct pronouncement of forgiveness, often invoking the authority given to priests to declare remission of sins on behalf of God. The Communion prayer, while petitioning for pardon and absolution, lacks this specific formulaic language of absolution.

Therefore, based on the traditional understanding of absolution within the Church of England, the Communion prayer, as it stands, may not be considered a formal absolution when uttered by an Anglican priest. It serves more as a supplication for divine mercy and forgiveness rather than a direct pronouncement of absolution.

Furthermore, the analogy of the servant releasing the jailed individual could extend to a scenario where the servant pronounces the release to a group of people, ensuring the efficacy of general absolution. It's worth noting that while the concept of general absolution is recognized in Roman Catholic doctrine, there are doctrinal differences between the practices of the Church of England (CofE) and Roman Catholicism regarding its use. Roman Catholics typically favour private auricular confession, whereas the Church of England acknowledges the validity of both private confession and general absolution, albeit with differing emphasis and theological nuances.

Of particular significance is the identical nature of the absolution in both the Communion Service and the emergency rite for use at sea outlined in the BCP. Both formulations convey God's pardon and deliverance from sin, highlighting the consistency of Anglican theology regarding absolution across different liturgical contexts. This consistency raises an intriguing theological question: If the emergency absolution is identical to the one pronounced during Holy Communion, does it carry the same efficacy and assurance of forgiveness, especially in dire circumstances such as a sinking ship?



In "A Rationale upon the Book of Common Prayer" by Anthony Sparrow, D.D., he asserts, "All these several Forms, in sense and virtue, are the same." This assertion underscores the theological perspective that the different forms of absolution found within the Book of Common Prayer are fundamentally equivalent in their efficacy. Sparrow's assertion implies that regardless of the specific formulation used, each

absolution carries the same authority and power to convey God's forgiveness to the penitent. This theological viewpoint suggests a uniformity in the effectiveness of absolutions across various liturgical contexts, including emergency rites and traditional services.

In situations of imminent danger, where individuals face the prospect of death, the need for spiritual comfort and reassurance becomes paramount. The provision of a standardized form of absolution for such emergencies underscores the Church's recognition of its efficacy in providing solace and assurance to those in dire need.

Reflecting on the scenario of a general confession and absolution aboard ship in imminent danger the BCP states *When there shall be imminent danger, as many as can be spared from necessary service in the Ship shall be called together, and make an humble Confession of their sin to God: In which every one ought seriously to reflect upon those particular sins of which his conscience shall accuse him: saying as followeth [the confession as is in the communion service follows here]... Then shall the Priest, if there be any in the Ship, pronounce this Absolution [the absolution as is in the communion service follows here].*

Imagine a ship facing imminent danger, where the crew, likely gripped by fear, gathers together. It's often said

that there are no atheists on a sinking ship, highlighting the profound existential awareness that emerges in such dire situations. In this moment of vulnerability, the priest leads the assembled group in a humble confession of their sins before God. In moments of imminent danger, such as being on a sinking ship, individuals are often confronted with their mortality and the weight of their sins. In this setting, fear may indeed be palpable, but so too is the hope and comfort found in the assurance of divine forgiveness. The absolution offered by the priest, though general in nature, carries with it the **promise of cleansing** and reconciliation with God.

This act of communal confession, particularly in the face of impending peril, is profoundly significant. Despite the general nature of the absolution pronounced by the priest, it carries with it the assurance of divine forgiveness and cleansing. It's as if the priest, acting on behalf of God, extends a lifeline of hope and redemption to each individual present, preparing them spiritually to confront whatever fate awaits them, even the possibility of death.

This poignant scene serves as a powerful testament to the efficacy of absolution within the Anglican tradition. It underscores the transformative power of God's grace,

offering solace and reassurance in moments of crisis. Despite the collective nature of the absolution, each individual is afforded the opportunity for spiritual renewal and reconciliation with God.

In essence, this scene exemplifies the truth that absolution, though administered to a group, is indeed effectual on a deeply personal level. It speaks to the profound belief that God's forgiveness knows no bounds and that even in the darkest of moments, there is hope for redemption and salvation.

Ultimately, the act of absolution in such circumstances not only offers solace and reassurance to those facing imminent danger but also serves as a reminder of the hope and redemption found in God's unconditional love and forgiveness...and it's the same confession and absolution found in the communion service.

In Appendix 1: The Ministry of Absolution: GS Misc 1085 (October 2014), the Archbishops' Council acknowledges the well-established role of absolution within the Church of England, recognizing its significance in shaping the spiritual lives of members and its integral part in the ministry of clergy. This recognition underscores the multifaceted nature of absolution practices within the Church, encompassing both general absolution and private auricular confession. The Book

of Common Prayer's provision for the visitation of the sick further supports this duality, indicating that while general absolution was intended as the normative approach, private auricular confession was reserved for specific circumstances. Cranmer's influence is evident in this approach, emphasizing the normative use of general absolution while reserving private auricular confession for those on their deathbed or individuals struggling to find peace of conscience. This nuanced approach reflects the Church's commitment to providing accessible means of absolution, particularly for individuals unable to find solace through conventional channels.

In conclusion, the Book of Common Prayer offers a consistent and reassuring framework for absolution across various liturgical contexts, including emergency situations. The similarity between absolutions administered in the emergency rite at sea and those in traditional services underscores the Church's belief in the effectiveness of absolution to convey God's forgiveness and mercy to all who sincerely repent and believe in Christ.

Common Worship and the efficacy of absolution.

In the list of authorized absolutions (16 in total) from the Church of England's liturgical resources. These absolutions cover a range of themes and expressions, all conveying God's forgiveness and grace to the penitent. From the general absolutions that emphasize God's mercy and forgiveness to those focusing on specific aspects such as relationships, healing, and living in the world, each prayer seeks to bring comfort and assurance to those seeking forgiveness. Here is a breakdown of the different absolutions:

1. **General Absolutions (B69-B76):** These prayers offer pardon, forgiveness, and strength through the Holy Spirit, emphasizing repentance and trust in God's mercy.
2. **Absolutions Centered on the Trinity (B77, B78):** These absolutions invoke the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, seeking forgiveness and renewal in the divine relationship.
3. **Absolutions Focused on Relationships and Healing (B79, B80):** These prayers specifically address healing and restoration, asking God to draw the penitent closer and cleanse them from sin.

4. **Absolutions for Living in the World (B81, B82):**
These prayers ask for forgiveness and empowerment to live according to God's will, acknowledging the challenges of worldly life.
5. **Absolutions for Holy Communion and Heaven (B83, B84):** These prayers connect forgiveness with participation in the communion of saints and the eternal joy of God's kingdom.

Overall, these authorized absolutions reflect the Church of England's theology of forgiveness and reconciliation, offering hope and assurance to believers seeking God's mercy.