

Public Confession of Sins

The evangelistic fervor and spirit of revival in the Nineteenth Century brought a new element and terminology to which we have become accustomed. The “invitation song” became an accepted innovation. It urged respondents to “come forward” in accepting Christ. In congregations in our Movement, persons came forward to confess faith in Christ and request baptism, that is, to express and complete their conversion, though we did not make “conversion” one of our main words. It became a time also for disciples overtaken in sin to make public confession of sin and ask for prayers of the congregation - to be “restored.” In my lifetime, another added purpose in coming forward was for disciples to “place membership,” another invented term. So, “invitation song,” “come forward,” and “place membership” were added to our vocabulary as though they came right out of the Bible.

This lesson will focus on confession of sin. Is acknowledgment of sin required of us? If so, to whom is confession to be made, and what is the purpose of it? Why involve others as one admits sinful conduct? Let’s spend a bit of time here trying to measure traditional practice by the will of God.

Confession of sin is an imperative. To those already children of God, John wrote, “*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness*” (1 John 1:9; please read the context). Since confession is expressed as a condition of forgiveness for the disciple who sins, it necessarily implies that lack of confession will prevent forgiveness. Notice that we are not called upon to admit that we are sinners. John tells us that we are all sinners. He makes that “confession” for us! John is referring to specific sins rather than generalities.

These words by James have been quoted often as a proof-text: “*Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed*” (James 5:16). The Greek word James uses expresses greater intensity than the one John used above. It is used to denote public acknowledgment. This setting for that admission of guilt is not before the congregation, but in the sick room. Why call upon the seriously ill person to confess his sins when he has called the elders to his bedside to anoint him with oil and to pray for him? It is no ritual of absolution or healing. It is the prayer of faith that is effective toward both healing and forgiveness, James explains. But impenitence would make the patient’s prayers ineffective. It is the prayer of the righteous man, not the impenitent man covering his sins, that is effective. Please read the context.

In Acts 8:9-24 we are informed of a magician named Simon who was converted even as many others in Samaria. He was later amazed by the signs and miracles he saw Peter and John performing. That was right down his alley! That was like a penitent, reformed alcoholic accepting Christ only to be offered cocktails the next week! He asked to purchase the gift like they had to dispense the Holy Spirit. Many have denied his sincerity in conversion, but the text does not sustain that evasion. Philip did not tell him

his conversion was defective so that he needed to believe and be baptized again, but he told him to repent and pray that he might be forgiven. Simon's response, though not a specific confession of sin, was in acceptance of Peter's accusation. So he humbly pled for their prayers. We have termed that "God's second law of pardon." That terminology may not be the best, but it is true that, after a person's conversion, when he falls into condemnation again (which many contend cannot happen!), his hope of forgiveness is through recognition of his sin and prayer for forgiveness. If one recognizes no guilt and confesses none, what is his hope of forgiveness?

As a teenager, I attended revivals at other churches in our community. I recall hearing preachers explain the eternal security of the believer. Then during the invitation song penitent "backsliders" came forward for prayers for forgiveness. Even a teenager could see an inconsistency there. But the confession and prayer was commendable.

An injected note: Years ago I taught many Africans by correspondence courses. Almost without exception, the students were confused in being taught to confess Christ. With English being their second language, they thought of confession only as being an admission of guilt. We understand confession to be an admission either of faith or sin.

We are not trying to define a ritual of confession for no such legal matter is defined in the scriptures. We will try to see general principles involved in the call for confession of sins.

As I go to bed thinking of happenings in the past day, I may build hatred toward you and wish some tragedy would strike you dead. That would be sinful. As I arise the next morning, should I call you and confess my sin to you? That would fill no good purpose for I did not sin against you but against God. My confession should be made to God. If, however, in some encounter with you, I cursed you expressing my hatred to you, my confession of sin should be made to you and God and to any others who might have witnessed it.

In addressing Jews serving through the rituals of Moses, Jesus instructed, "*So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift*" (Matt. 5:23). It is easy to detect universal principles here that would apply to us, not just as we worship in assemblies, but also as we present ourselves in worshipful service constantly. A person cannot honor God who dishonors his brother in impenitence. An offended brother sees the hypocrisy of one who worships God while being guilty of offense against him and making no effort toward reconciliation. In such a situation, religion becomes a facade to cover sinful relationships that alienate the worshipper from God and dishonor the religion of all who serve Christ.

Suppose the evening news carries the picture of a policeman arresting me for the tenth time for drunken driving as I resist and curse him. Later, I am sincerely penitent and confess my sin to God privately and pray for his forgiveness. Then I continue to teach a

class at church making no mention of my misbehavior. You would rightly conclude that I thought my behavior was appropriate or that I was too proud to face my shameful conduct which was so dishonoring to Christ and to all who serve him. So a public confession becomes imperative even though I might not be able to make it as widely known as my sin was.

Public confession is not for the purpose of humiliating the sinner, but recognition of one's guilt should produce enough humility to bring about confession. "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (1 Peter 5:5).

In my experience, most of the persons "coming forward" to confess sin did not tell what sin they had in mind. The congregation might assume that the fellow was at last confessing his well-known sin of alcoholism, profane speech, and beating his wife, but he might only have in mind that he willfully missed last week's assembly. So it is important to specify the sin being confessed.

Visiting preachers especially have felt it appropriate to arouse doubts, insecurity, and fear in intimidating efforts to "bring them down front." Seldom did those tirades shake those who needed shaking the worst, but it was the most sincere and emotionally unstable persons who filed forward in fear. Such tactics were both ill-advised and counter-productive for they fostered more fear than assurance.

A few years back, it seemed to be popular for speakers at youth rallies to tell how horrible and sinful they were formerly. The lower, dirtier, and more depraved they described their former state, the more appealing they were as speakers. Forgive me if I am judging, but it appeared to be more a boasting for the sake of appalling than a confession of sins.

Sometimes persons respond asking for prayers for strength and support in general without being specific about areas of weakness. We are by no means ruling out the great value of enlisting the aid of the congregation through prayer and supportive fellowship. Our fellow disciples can intercede for us though they neither individually nor as a group can mediate for us.

When a person acknowledges penitently an entanglement in sin, it is heart-rending both for that person and those who hear it, whether it is done privately or publicly. It reminds everyone of their own vulnerability. All are humbled by it. There is an outreach to that person, a collective embrace and reaffirmation of affection. As all pray about it, there is a confidence of strength from both God and those involved. Like when a member of the family suffers from an accident or illness, the concern of the whole family is reassuring. It pulls us all together. The support of others makes it easier to resist overpowering temptations and paralyzing discouragement. So why should we become too proud and sophisticated to confess our sins?

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