

# Confession

## The way of transformation

Marcus Smucker

**N**ow, say you're sorry," your mother may have told you when you were caught grabbing your brother's toy. Although the adage says it is good for the soul, confession has negative connotations for many of us. We often associate it with getting caught and being corrected or even demeaned.

Certainly confession has a place as a response to wrongdoing, but it is much more than that. The Bible instructs us to confess in three ways: to confess Jesus as Lord in proclaiming our faith (Rom.

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10:9–10; Phil. 2:11), to confess the name of Jesus in our worship and praise (Rom. 15:9; Heb. 13:15), and to confess our sins in the act of repenting and receiving forgiveness (1 John 1:5–10; James 5:13–16).

In worship these three kinds of confession are vitally related. We acknowledge our sins and declare allegiance to Jesus as we express our praise to God. In biblical language, to confess is to give voice to, to agree with, to acknowledge the truth. True confession accepts God's judgment about who God is,

who we are in relationship with God, and how we are to live. In it we speak as God speaks about our world, our human nature, our life and our deeds. The psalmist says God desires "truth in the inward being" (Ps. 51:6). When we agree in our heart with divine truth, God releases us from the bondage of sin and wrongdoing and fills our hearts with gratitude and praise.

A number of Gospel stories highlight the centrality of repentance, confession, and forgiveness in the divine-human relationship. Examples include the paralytic who was forgiven and then healed (Mark 2:1–12), the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32), the woman caught in adultery (John 7:53–8:11), the Pharisee and

the tax collector (Luke 18:9–14), and the woman who washed Jesus’ feet with her tears (Luke 7:36–50).<sup>1</sup> These and other stories beckon us to behold God’s steadfast love graciously forgiving, cleansing, and transforming those who turn to God and seek to align themselves with God’s way.

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and confession of Jesus as Lord invite us to affirm and embrace again the truth of the gospel. Both reflect the gospel reality that God forgives and sets us free to become a new humanity in Christ (Eph. 2:15). We confess because we know that Jesus came “to bring good news to the poor..., to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free” (Luke 4:18–19).<sup>2</sup> Confession opens us to God’s liberation in life.

*Confession may happen in response to the workings of our conscience.* Conscience bears witness to our conduct, whether that conduct is right or wrong. An inner faculty that guides our choices, conscience helps us align ourselves with God, or it accuses us when we break communion with God and/or

neighbor.<sup>3</sup> To examine our conscience is to see our life and actions with greater clarity and honesty. This process helps us see as God sees our choices and directions in life.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the conscience, implanted deep in our soul, is an instrument of God by which the Holy Spirit judges our “secret thoughts” (Rom. 2:15–16).

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Whenever our attitudes (e.g., racism) or thoughts (e.g., resentments) or behaviors violate others, we must acknowledge our wrong in order to restore the relationship. True confession, born deep in one’s soul, facilitates true regret and genuine reconciliation, including reconciliation and communion with God. Even as a friendship or marriage is deeply affected by a lack

of openness and truthfulness, so our communion with God is hindered when we do not acknowledge the truth in our hearts and speak it with our lips.

***Confession is an expression of reverence for God.*** Genuine Christian confession always occurs with an eye to God. In confession we are aware that our lives are an open book before God. Ultimately our need for reconciliation and forgiveness is in relationship with God, not simply in relationship to self and others. The psalmist, in response to his own sins of adultery and murder, addresses God: “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment” (Ps. 51:3–4).

***Confession is a way of yielding to the work of God in our lives.*** In confession we acknowledge the truth about ourselves, that we are sinners created in the image of God needing ongoing conversion and redemption. It is not only what we do but even more who we are that needs to be acknowledged to ourselves and to God. What we do is always a reflection of who we are. From birth to death, God’s agenda in our lives is to transform us into the likeness of the image of God (2 Cor. 3:18).

This transformation occurs as the Holy Spirit interacts with us in our daily decisions in response to God’s initiatives toward us. The spiritual life is a journey in which we choose how much we will allow God to shape our lives. As we make decisions in response to our desires, hopes, struggles, limitations, and temptations, we choose the degree of our fidelity to God in thought, attitude, and deed. We decide again and again whether to be primarily devoted to self or to allow the light of Christ to continue to illumine, cleanse, and renew us. Confession is essential for spiritual transformation and renewal. Through it God provides for mid-course corrections when we discover we have strayed.

The first epistle of John gives hints of how this renewal works. In 1 John 1:5–10, confession is portrayed as a daily spiritual discipline in the Christian life. In part the discipline is to “walk in the light as he is in the light” (1:7), to seek to keep bringing our thoughts, attitudes, and actions into conformity with Christ. In part it entails acknowledging our tendency to stray from God

(1:8) and naming the self-serving attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors that draw us away from loving God, and our neighbors as ourselves. As we speak the truth, we receive God's forgiveness (1:9) and continued cleansing (1:7, 9). Embracing confession as a way of life is the secret of experiencing God's cleansing and transforming work.

The concept of confession is simple, but the practice of confession is not. It calls for collaborating with God, which includes continued self-reflection and being truthful with God, ourselves, and others. It calls for a thoughtful and intimate relationship with the divine (John 15:15). In the regular practice of confession we heighten our awareness of living in the presence of God. It will increase our consciousness not only of our tendency to resist God but even more of our deep desire to commune with God and join in with God's work in the world.

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Confession in Christian experience is essential, not optional. When we are aware of sin but refuse to confess, we experience the heavy hand of conscience or the Spirit of God disturbing us. As the psalmist writes, "When I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me: my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer" (Ps. 32:3-4). When we ignore our sins and fail to confess, they become enmeshed in our inner being. We embrace our sinfulness as normal and no longer seek to grow in conformity to Christ. Instead of being on a journey of transformation toward God, we begin to be shaped by the thoughts, deeds, and attitudes that wound us and hinder our new life in Christ. Indeed the old adage is true: Confession is good for the soul.

Confession in Scripture is both personal and communal. Our task is to speak the truth not only to ourselves and to God but also to and with one another (James 5:16). In the journey of life our experiences of corporate confession and personal confession are vital to each other. In corporate confession we own the truth about our human condition, our common failures and

transgressions, our cultural sins. When together we join in confession and receive words of assurance of forgiveness, we

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remember that we are children of God.

Together we remember that God welcomes us home again and embraces us with acceptance and love. We are reminded that sin does not have the last word, God does!

Thus, corporate confession brings depth and reality to our expressions of praise and our commitment to walk anew in the way of God. It encourages us to a deeper walk with God. When our practice of communal confession is genuine and devout, we are each

encouraged to open ourselves anew to the voice of the Spirit when we are alone with God. In turn, our personal experience with God prepares us to join again in worship with the community.

Despite confession's significance for our spiritual life, the practice is in some neglect in western society today. One reason is the loss of a sense of sin. Writer Garrison Keillor explains, "We're capable of doing some rotten things, and not all of these things are the result of poor communication. People do bad, horrible things. They lie and they cheat and they corrupt the government. They poison the world around us. And when they are caught they don't feel remorse—they just go into treatment. They had a nutritional problem or something. They explain what they did—they don't feel bad about it. There's no guilt. There's just psychology."<sup>5</sup>

Even in the confessional, Catholic priests report, most people do not admit "to having committed any sin whatsoever."<sup>6</sup> Phyllis McGinley writes, "Sin has always been an ugly word, but it has been made so in a new sense over the last half century. It has been made not only ugly but passé. People are no longer sinful, they are only immature or underprivileged or frightened or, more particularly, sick."<sup>7</sup> So people may confess their struggles, failures, or irrational behaviors, but not as sin.

Another reason for the neglect of confession has been serious misuse of the language of sin, guilt, and confession in the life of the church. What has been intended by God as a means of

transformation and liberation has at times been used “to control and manipulate people, to make them ‘behave’..., [with] catastrophic consequences causing some...to lose hope, to turn inward in self contempt and despair.”<sup>8</sup>

Accordingly, many have sought to use less destructive language to describe our problem behaviors. “Instead of sin we may speak of neurosis, mental illness or ‘hangups,’ and instead of forgiveness we speak of therapy, of self-acceptance, and so on.”<sup>9</sup> But all too often this language has encouraged a narcissistic self-preoccupation. It was fear of such self-absorption that led psychiatrist Karl Menninger to write *Whatever became of sin?* Instead of setting us free, the way of narcissism has encouraged us in the most fundamental human sin, egocentrism.

To be liberated and transformed, we must acknowledge and name the truth. In the act of confession, we see more clearly both ourselves and the world. We also name what is real. When we name reality, we call things as they are. Naming enables us to embrace the good and cast out what is not good. When we have wrong thoughts, we say so. When we fail to love neighbor as self, we acknowledge it. When we do wrong, we face it and seek to embrace behaviors that can bless others. As we do this, we cooperate with God’s agenda for us—to transform us into the image of God.

For those who would reclaim the discipline of confession in personal prayer, the consciousness examen is an excellent resource.<sup>10</sup> In this practice one sets aside time to review each day’s events and experiences in the presence of God. One asks, how was God present or not present in my thoughts, actions, behaviors, and awareness during this day? What were the movements of God in my day? One who practices this discipline each day acknowledges and names what needs correction and give thanks for what is good. Doing it at the end of the day gives opportunity to release what needs to be let go, to embrace what is meant to bless life, and to be at rest.

The possibilities for structuring and practicing confession in our personal and communal life are numerous. The major difficulty is not lack of opportunity but insufficient conviction and commitment. But those who have not been in the habit of practicing confession as a regular discipline will experience

renewal of their lives and substantial change in their perception of self and God. To paraphrase 1 John 1:9, if we keep on confessing our sins, God, who is faithful and just and has already provided for our forgiveness, will keep on cleansing us from all our wrongdoing and unrighteousness.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Jim Forest, “Basic Stories,” in *Confession: Doorway to Forgiveness* (Maryknoll: Orbis Bks., 2001).

<sup>2</sup> For more on this theme, see Theodore W. Jennings, *The Liturgy of Liberation: The Confession and Forgiveness of Sins* (Nashville: Abingdon Pr., 1988).

<sup>3</sup> Forest, *Confession*, 92.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>5</sup> *Garrison Keillor and the Hopeful Gospel Quartet* (Sony Music, Epic label, EK52901, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Forest, *Confession*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Phyllis McGinley, “In Defense of Sin,” in *The Province of the Heart* (New York: Viking Pr., 1959), quoted in Forest, *Confession*, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Jennings, *The Liturgy of Liberation*, 22.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Some helpful resources for the practice of consciousness examen include “The Prayer of Examen,” chap. 3 in *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home*, by Richard J. Foster (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992); “Of Conscience and Consciousness: Self-Examination, Confession and Awareness,” chap. 6 in *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*, by Marjorie J. Thompson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Pr., 1995); Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn, and Matthew Linn, *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life* (New York: Paulist Pr., 1995).

## About the author

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