

The two edges of confession

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Last Sunday, after a call to worship and three hymns celebrating the power and faithfulness and love of God, our typical Mennonite congregation had a prayer of confession. The worship leader invited us to spend a minute thinking about ways we had let God down in the previous week. We then joined in confessing our sins by reading together no. 696 in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*.¹ A reading of 1 John 1:8–9 proclaimed God’s forgiveness. Then

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came the children’s time, in which a parent told the children (and the rest of us) about global economic realities. He used twenty Lego people and fifty pieces of chocolate: Americans, represented by one Lego figure, got seventeen pieces of chocolate; the poorest Lego people, four out of twenty, got only one piece of chocolate to share among themselves. After reminding us that according to the Bible peace is a result of justice, the parent led us in prayer. The sermon picked up the theme, and gave us a vision, based on Isaiah 2:1–5, of God’s future of justice, reconciliation, and peace. If we are “one nation under God,” we stand under God’s judgment as well as blessing. In the sharing time, several people said they had found the sermon powerful. But no one suggested that we ought to confess our sins again. No, we had done that earlier. So we went home (to eat chocolate?), feeling happy—it had been a wonderful service—but also vaguely guilty.

I do not question the importance of the prayer of confession in our Sunday worship services, but I think we need to deepen our understanding and practice of confession. We will do this, I believe, as we discover that confession has two edges. With one, we confess the acts of God; with the other, we confess our sins and

shortcomings.² Confession, this two-edged action, is where God's story and our story meet.

Confessing God

When we gather, we confess God. We may use a creed (“creator of heaven and earth..., suffered under Pontius Pilate..., on the third day he rose again”). In our prayers at communion, we confess God by recounting the story of God's saving acts and

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giving thanks. We certainly confess God in our songs, which express our faith in the attributes of God (“Immortal, invisible, God only wise”) and also in God's actions (“Blessed be the God of Israel, who comes to set us free”). Our Bible readings, dramas, and sermons confess God by setting forth the story of God's actions and pointing to the future of justice, peace, and joy which God is determined to bring into being.

It could be that someone—the preacher or another member—will be inspired to confess God by giving testimony to God's actions today. “I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation,” says the psalmist (Ps. 40:10).

Testimonies of our own experience are vital as we learn to confess God. Through them we receive eyes to perceive that in our own apparently insignificant lives and congregations God is doing today what God did in the Bible. Confessing God thus heartens us to collaborate with God with new faith and passion as we anticipate God's future reign, a world of reconciliation, in which swords will be turned into plowshares, wolves will lie down with lambs, and no one will hurt or make afraid.

This was Jesus' task, to collaborate with God, being attentive to what God was doing and entering into the action (John 5:19). This also is our vocation: to bring our stories into harmony with God's story. As we confess God by telling the story of the Bible, we will learn to recognize the ways of God. We also will tell our own stories, of alienation and God's forgiveness, of despair and God's saving hope, of need and God's provision. And we commit

ourselves to work together with God as we treat others as God in Christ has treated us. This “motive clause” is at the heart of the ethics of both testaments: *God has forgiven us*, so we will forgive others; when we were persecuted, exiled and hungry, *God was generous to us*, so we will be generous to people today who are persecuted, exiled and hungry.³

So we confess God by telling the story of the Bible and by telling stories from our world today—from the global church, from our own experience—in which that story goes on. We praise God, the forgiver and giver; we rejoice in God who forgives us and who gives us everything we need; and we thank God for the forgiving and giving we find in the world today and in our own lives. God is good. We confess God as we celebrate what God is doing and as we commit ourselves to be God’s coworkers.

Confessing our sin

But how about when our stories are not in harmony with God’s story? Then especially we will go on confessing God, for in God is our hope. But we also will resort to the second edge of confession. We will confess our sins, our deviations from God’s way. Christian tradition provides us with two ways of doing this.

Corporate confession

Corporate confession is all-encompassing, prayed together by all members of the worshiping community. These “general confessions” are public acknowledgements of sin. Incorporated in regular Sunday acts of worship, they provide strong words and potent images: “We have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep”; “we have wounded your love and marred your image in us.”⁴ The confession we used last Sunday is one of our hymnal’s many valuable resources for congregational confession in this tradition.

I have come to respect the corporate general confession, and to be glad that our weekly services include it. The general confession states that we are sinners and that we have departed from God’s ways. How important it is for Christians to remember this. One is holy, and the rest of us are unholy; we have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory (Rom. 3:23). So it is sober realism to pray like this, the realism of those who know they rely on God’s

grace, the realism of truthful self-appraisal, week by week to remind ourselves, in God's presence, that we have sinned, hurt others and offended God.

Again and again, Jesus discovered that the hardest sinners to reach were the religious ones; the good were so much slower to hear his gracious words than the sinners. So too today, regular churchgoers who make their credit card payments on time and don't get drunk in public may especially need the words of the general confession. These words, said week by week, can sink into our consciousness. They can soften our spiritual hardness; they can remind us that we all, in God's sight, are infinitely-loved children in need of forgiveness.

But I confess that I have, at times, been impatient with these confessions. They have seemed so general as to cover everything, or nothing, and so routine as to permit one to say the same words week after week—and to receive the same absolution week after week—whether or not one has made attempts to repent and to amend one's life. At this, Anabaptists today, as in the sixteenth century, get restive. It appears that Christians assume that sinful actions are ordinary parts of life to be lived with, rather than extraordinary parts of life to be repented of and repudiated. To Anabaptists, the inner life must coincide with the outer life; inwardly appropriated grace must express itself in grace-filled, repentant living.⁵

To address this limitation of general confessions, I propose that we insert in them specific confessions tailored to our own congregation's struggles. Our pastoral leaders might decide that, for a period, our congregation needs to ask God's forgiveness for particular sins in order to move forward in freedom. These inserted prayers would be "proprs" in the midst of the "ordinaries." They would be provisional, prayed for a period of time, and then replaced by other specific confessions. In light of last Sunday's worship, our congregation could pray this idea: "We confess that we're living in a world in which our kind of people eat too much chocolate, and we don't know how to change. Forgive us, Lord." On next Sunday and for the coming weeks we could continue to use the same prayer of confession (no. 694) in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, interpolating the words in regular type:

*Forgiving God,
you do not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.*
We confess that we overload our lives
with too many things.
Our lives are too complex.
We possess far more than our share
of the world's resources.
Forgive us, and teach us how to live
as children of our generous God.
*For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is your steadfast love toward those who fear you;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far you remove our transgressions from us. Amen.*

Another time, the congregation's leaders might want to insert in a general confession a specific confession that grows out of the church's experience and worship. For example, the following concern may have emerged: "We're trying to be a church that shares the gospel with people unlike ourselves, but all our instincts are tribal. Have mercy on us, Lord." The church's leaders could then formulate this idea in more felicitous language and insert it as a provisional prayer within a general confession.

Leaders would review these provisional confessions regularly. They would be sure the congregation used them long enough to make them familiar; repetition would underscore their urgency. Then the church's corporate confessions will make articulate our vague guiltiness, and the God who listens to us and loves us will realign us with God's story in freedom and forgiveness.

Individual confession

Where deeper penitence and more personal confession is required, the Catholic and Orthodox traditions have the resource of private individual confession to God in the presence of a priest. Mennonites have less experience of this, and may have prejudices against it. Do we also need private individual confession? If so, what sins does one confess?

Orthodox writer Jim Forest, in his recent book *Confession: Doorway to Forgiveness*, provides four useful tools for examining

the conscience: the Beatitudes, the Ten Commandments, Jesus' parable of the last judgment (Matt. 25:31ff), and a prayer by the fifth-century writer Ephraim the Syrian: "Grant to me to see my own faults and not to condemn my brother and sister."⁶ To these four tools, I would add three I have found helpful as I attempt to come to terms with sins that require serious attention. One is

A fundamental tool of individual confession grows out of our corporate confession of God: Do I sense that I am playing my part in God's story as I am coming to understand it, or have I missed chances to collaborate with God?

monitoring my moods: Am I conscious of living in the abundance of freedom and joy that God gives to us in Christ, or is something alienating me from these? Another useful tool is listening to my brothers and sisters: When they take the risk of going to "another member of the church who sins" (Matt. 18:15), do their oblique or direct words indicate agenda that I must understand and confess? But the most fundamental tool grows out of our corporate confession of God: Do I sense that I am playing my part in God's story as I am coming to understand it, or have I missed chances to collaborate with God by not living in light of the motive clause?

These tools may reveal what I have to confess, and where I need help to see my life afresh from God's perspective.

Do I need to go to a priest for this kind of confession? James 5:16 admonishes us, "Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed." This confession has a reciprocal quality, a mutuality among brothers and sisters that priestly traditions do not emphasize as much. Of course, a Catholic priest may make an excellent confessor; he may enable one to track one's true sins amid a plethora of false leads and be a good midwife of confession. But while many ordained people are gifted as spiritual guides, others are relatively ungifted. Similarly, many helpful confessors are not ordained; in this category come many spiritual directors. Indeed, some of the most fruitful confession may take place in the context of committed spiritual friendship which is intrinsically reciprocal.

Some intractable spiritual problems—such as those having to do with money or life style—may best be discussed between couples, or in small groups. Repentance, enabling creative and

risky living in a world in which, for example, we eat grotesquely more than our share of the world's chocolate, can probably only be undertaken in solidarity with others who confess the same sin.

Does it matter what kind of person or group we make our confession to? I don't think so. What matters is absolution and accountability. At various times in my life, I have needed someone who has listened to my confession and has said, in the name of Christ, "Alan, your sins are forgiven." This priestly figure does not need to be ordained, but he or she does need to represent Christ, my savior, Lord, forgiver.

It is essential that I know that it is Christ who forgives me, when I am so poor at forgiving myself. Like other people of scrupulous conscience who pay too much attention to the voice of Satan the accuser, I need the word of Jesus the Savior, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again." My confessional priestly figure will also hold me accountable for what I have promised God and will help me express penitence in action. I have been impressed by the early medieval Irish penitentials, which direct the repentant sinner in acts of restorative justice that heal relationships and make things right.⁷ A good confessor may address us to committed relationship with people in Serbia or Colombia or Palestine, which will remind us of the social impact of our and our nation's sin.

What if we continue to sin? What if our sins are deep-seated and intractable? It may take years to unlearn the habits of workaholism or miserliness. What if the structures in which we find ourselves make complicity with sin almost inevitable? However much we try to be alert to the violence and exploitation on which our society is based, we will nevertheless be complicit, closer to the sumptuously fed rich man than to the beggar Lazarus. When our sins have rooted themselves deeply in our personalities and our society, then especially we need help. Testimony and preaching, strong worship, healthy relationships, and committed friendship—all these are confessional resources to help us monitor our journeys and ascertain whether our lives are becoming more coordinated with the story of God.

Conclusion

I suspect that many of us, and many of our congregations, have

much to learn about both edges of confession. So there is goodness in store for us! We will know delight and growth as we learn in new ways to confess God, telling God's story across the centuries and giving testimony to the work of God in our own time. We will also know healing and hope as we learn to confess our sins.

Notes

¹ *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (Elgin: Brethren Pr.; Newton: Faith & Life; Scottsdale: Mennonite Publishing Hse., 1992).

² Eleanor Kreider, *Enter His Gates: Fitting Worship Together* (Scottsdale: Herald Pr., 1990), 139.

³ Millard C. Lind, "Law in the Old Testament," in *The Bible and Law*, ed. Willard M. Swartley, Occasional Papers, no. 3 (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1982), 17–18; Christopher D. Marshall, *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 260–2.

⁴ "General Confession," from *Book of Common Prayer* (1662); *Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England* (London: Church House Publishing, 2000), 257.

⁵ C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (Kitchener: Pandora Pr., 1995), 88–9.

⁶ Jim Forest, *Confession: Doorway to Forgiveness* (Maryknoll: Orbis Bks., 2002), 91–115.

⁷ Ian Bradley, *Colonies of Heaven: Celtic Models for Today's Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000), 99.

About the author

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