

Book review

Arthur Paul Boers

Confession: Doorway to Forgiveness, by Jim Forest. Maryknoll: Orbis Bks., 2002.

Confession, as Jim Forest notes, is more than disclosure of sin; it is also “praise of God and profession of faith.” And without praise and profession, revelation of sin has no purpose. Yet Forest marvels at the culture permeating our churches and religious sensibilities that overlooks and even denies sin. The one reason to feel guilty now is about feeling guilty. He tells the story of a preacher who celebrated the best seller *I’m O.K., You’re O.K.* from the pulpit. Afterwards, one member responded: “I haven’t read the book—maybe it’s better than the Bible. But I kept thinking of Christ on the Cross saying to those who were watching him die, ‘If everybody’s okay, what in blazes am I doing up here?’”

Jim Forest is a peacemaker of note, long associated with the International Fellowship of Reconciliation. A convert to Catholicism, he was deeply influenced by friendships with Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day (and subsequently wrote biographies of both). Involved in the international peace movement, he often traveled to the USSR during the Cold War and became enamored of the lively faith of Russian Orthodox Christians. Eventually, he joined and has since written several books to explain this Christian stream to the rest of the world.

Thus, when Forest speaks of confession he means sacramental confession, done in the context of worship as preparation for communion. But the relevance of his treatment goes beyond such settings. Older parishioners used to tell me of the service of inquiry (conducted by the bishop) that would precede each communion service: it gave everyone an opportunity to confess their sins and get right with God and each other before taking communion. Perhaps the church had good reasons to abandon that tradition, although no one has explained them to me. That

service has not been replaced, and I wonder at our present lack of discipline and accountability.

Forest argues convincingly about the need for attention to confession. He suspects that our denial of sin is connected to our avoidance of confession. But, says he, unconfessed sin grows heavier and secret sin gains power because “we are designed for confession.” *Confession* makes this case creatively and effectively. The book begins by laying out a biblical and theological case for practices of confession, along with a fascinating historical survey. Then Forest devotes a surprising chapter to repentance and confession in the fiction of Feodor Dostoevsky. Another compelling chapter considers “tools for examining the conscience,” such as the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes, and the last judgment. An insightful chapter deals with finding a confessor (and not expecting to locate someone perfect). The book closes with testimonies about giving and receiving confession. Good stories and provocative quotes provide plenty of sermon fodder. An unusual package, the book works well.

Forest resonates surprisingly with Anabaptist perspectives. Confession is about identifying where we break communion with God and neighbor, and about living differently as a result. It is social and never entirely private or individual. It is necessarily verbal and active. Forest forcefully presses the point that Christian faith calls for nonviolence.

I found myself reflecting on this book and our Mennonite faith on two levels. I wonder about the absence of—and resistance to—confession in most Mennonite worship services. What is our theological rationale for this resistance? Second, on a more personal level, I recognized within myself burdens I long to put behind me, to name to God in the presence of God’s people, so I can experience the release Forest describes and the gospel offers.

Not all of this book will be directly applicable to our Mennonite context, but most of it is too relevant for us to overlook.

About the reviewer

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