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Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology

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Editorial

Mary H. Schertz

When I speak about *Vision* with people who are trying to place it in the spectrum of publications, the word I like to use is *thoughtful*. With each issue we seek to offer pastors and church leaders thought provoking articles on a theme from a variety of perspectives. But I think this issue on confession appeals as much to the heart as to the mind. As I worked with these articles, I found myself moved, sometimes to tears, sometimes to laughter, and always to compassion. Confession, it seems, is near the core of who we are as kingdom people and what we are about in the world, a core that embraces the heart as well as the mind, the affective as well as the cognitive.

We are deliberately blurring the definition of confession to include both confession of faith in God and confession to God of who we are in that relationship as well as in our relationships with others and our world.

In this issue we are deliberately blurring the definition of confession to include both confession of faith in God and confession to God of who we are in that relationship as well as in our relationships with others and our world. Some of the authors work with one of these aspects or the other, while several of them point out that these two "edges" of confession, as Alan Krieder puts it, are integrally related and interdependent.

In this issue, we deal with confession as a practice of the church in a variety of ways. Some of the articles are foundational—dealing with biblical, theological, and historical issues of confession. Karl Koop reviews ways we have used and misused confessions of faith. Jacob Elias writes about how both confession of faith and confession of sin functioned in one of the biblical communities. Marcus Smucker works with a biblical basis for both individual and congregational disciplines of confession. David Tripp and Charles Hohenstein enlarge our horizon with

their description of confession and absolution in a variety of Christian traditions.

Other authors write about how the disciplines of confession function in contemporary contexts both in the church and in the world. Mario Higueros makes the connection between confessional "reflections" and the Central American conflict in which Mennonite believers struggle to figure out what it means to be faithful. Malinda Berry calls congregations in Canada and the United States to take another look at our race politics, to think about how we have been shaped by racism even as we have at times resisted it. Rachel Miller Jacobs tells funny and poignant stories of confession in family life and makes some profound observations about why we find confession hard and how freeing it can be. Janet Schmidt reflects on the place of confession in the healing work of restorative justice, and Melanie Zuercher interviews four Mennonite leaders to help us think about what role confession has in the world that has been shaped by the war on terrorism. Arthur Paul Boers reviews *Confession: Doorway to Forgiveness*, to which several of our authors refer.

Finally, we have three contributions that could be described in a variety of ways, but that I want to highlight here as artistic. I keep returning to Ann Hostetler's poem because every time I read it I feel some of those caulked shut doors in my heart creaking open. Muriel Bechtel describes several services that were created to address various needs for confession. Michael King's sermon helps us laugh and cry our way to a healthier regard for confession in our lives.

I am grateful to all the authors who have contributed to this issue. Their stories, questions, ideas, memories, and examples will, if we open our hearts and minds, help us and our congregations move toward more authentic confession—of who God is and who we are in the light of God's redemptive love.

Lessons from history on the uses of Mennonite confessions of faith

Karl Koop

A few years ago, I led a senior seminar for seminary students in their final year of the M.Div. program. One of their assignments was to fill out the Mennonite Church's ministerial leadership information form, which asks prospective church leaders to formulate their theological views in relation to the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*.[1] A few students approached this assignment with trepidation. Although they were in basic agreement with the church's statement of faith, some had difficulty endorsing every phrase and preferred to state their views on certain matters a bit differently. We talked about the extent to which the church should tolerate theological diversity, about beliefs that should be considered foundational to the church's identity and those that could be viewed as nonbinding. At the root of the conversation was the question of the status of the church's confessional statements and the nature of their authority in congregational life.

In recent years, Mennonites have adopted a number of confessional documents, yet they have not always been able to agree about how these statements should function in the life of the church.

It is not surprising that the students focused on this question. In recent years, Mennonites have adopted a number of confessional documents, yet churches and conferences have not always been clear or have not always been able to agree about how these statements should function in the life of the church.[2]

Confessions of faith in church history

Throughout Christian history, confessions of faith have emerged under a variety of circumstances. In the first centuries of the church's existence, Christian communities produced confessional documents to prepare candidates for baptism. The Apostles' Creed, for instance, became part of the vow the catechumen

recited or responded to before submitting to the rite of baptism. Confessional statements were also used in corporate worship and confession of sin. The form of confession ranged from spontaneous ecstatic speech to ritual recitation that drew on fixed texts such as the Apostles' Creed or Nicene Creed.

Eventually the church used confessional statements to define right doctrine. As theological controversies intensified, the church felt compelled to draw lines demarcating the parameters of orthodox belief. One could no longer simply confess that one believed in Jesus Christ; one needed to confess more specifically what one believed about this Christ. The church relied on confessions to test whether clergy were theologically fit to lead. In the Middle Ages, when ecclesiastical authority became more centralized, and when church and empire moved closer together, concern for doctrinal orthodoxy heightened. Statements of faith came to function not only ecclesially but politically, with universal authority, and the liturgical uses of the confessions receded in importance.[3]

As theological controversies intensified, the church felt compelled to draw lines demarcating the parameters of orthodox belief. One could no longer simply confess that one believed in Jesus Christ; one needed to confess more specifically what one believed about this Christ.

In the sixteenth century, Protestants likewise used their confessions to define right doctrine, and in some cases their church statements became legal documents sanctioned by the state and serving as instruments of political as well as ecclesial unity. But Protestants also embraced the primary authority of Scripture (*sola scriptura*) over church tradition. The confessions were the church's commentary and summary of Scripture, and were binding only to the extent that they were in agreement with the biblical text. Lutheran confessions tended to have authority throughout Lutheran lands; the authority of Reformed confessions tended to be limited to a particular region or locale.

Anabaptist-Mennonite perspectives

As Cornelius J. Dyck has noted, Mennonites likely produced more confessions of faith than any other Reformation tradition.[4] Michael Driedger calculates that Dutch Mennonites in the

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries published nineteen confessions of faith plus two major collections. These statements and collections were often reprinted, so that by the end of the eighteen century more than 100 printings were in circulation.[5] During this period and into the nineteenth century, Prussian and Russian Mennonites also adopted many confessions.[6] Mennonites worldwide have evidently continued this tradition; the *Mennonite World Handbook* from 1990 indicates that 104 of 126 Mennonite conferences adhere to some kind of confessional statement.[7]

Mennonites likely produced more confessions of faith than any other Reformation tradition. Even undogmatic Mennonite groups expected leaders to take seriously what the church had formulated theologically in the confessions of faith it had adopted.

Historians have disagreed about the extent to which Anabaptist and Mennonite confessions were authoritative in the churches. In the 1950s, Dutch historian Nanne van der Zijpp played down the importance of the Mennonite confessions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and emphasized their function as instruments of unity.[8] Others historians have noted that Anabaptists employed confessions within the church to teach and preserve distinctives, and outside the church to give an account of essentials of their faith to the authorities and to other Christian groups.[9] C. J. Dyck has pointed out that even the most liberal Mennonite group, the Waterlanders, did not adopt a take-it-or-leave-it attitude toward their confessions. Even undogmatic Mennonite groups expected leaders to take seriously what the church had formulated theologically in confessions of faith it had adopted.[10]

To say that Mennonites took their doctrinal statements of faith seriously, however, is not to suggest that their statements carried the same authoritative weight as the confessions of faith of other ecclesial traditions. As already noted, in Medieval and Reformation times political authorities often enforced the confessions formulated by theologians. Moreover, an ecclesiastical hierarchy usually constituted them "from above." In contrast, in the absence of centralized ecclesial authority and political sanctions, Anabaptist and Mennonite confessional statements depended on congregational assent, and their authority was

representative rather than constitutive.[11] They were authoritative only to the extent that they were perceived as consonant with Scripture and reflected agreement in the congregations, a process often requiring widespread approval.[12]

The Waterlander Mennonites seem to have been especially concerned about the potential abuse of their confessional documents and expressed a reserved attitude towards them: "We understand that all propositions in confessions of faith do not bind every individual. Rather, one must look to God's word and may accept confessions of faith only in so far as they are in agreement with the Bible."[13] In later decades, the Waterlanders generally maintained this moderate view, affirming the value of confessional statements while recognizing their limitations.

The War of the Lambs

This view did not prevail, however, as Mennonites from all the groups throughout the Netherlands became embroiled in a bitter controversy about the status of confessional statements. Less moderate voices gained prominence, which led to a conflict that observers derisively referred to as the War of the Lambs.

The conflict erupted during a time when questions of Mennonite identity were at the forefront. As Mennonites were becoming a part of the cultural mainstream, some leaders saw a need for greater discipline within the churches and called for greater accountability and loyalty to the confessions of the church. Others advocated a more a relaxed attitude. In 1657, for instance, two leaders in the Flemish Mennonite church in Amsterdam, Galenus Abrahamsz and David Spruyt, presented a nineteen-article manuscript that denied that any church could be the one true church. They advocated that church leaders conform solely to New Testament principles and not demand uniformity in doctrinal and other church matters.[14]

In 1660, Mennonite church leaders met under the chairmanship of Thieleman van Braght in an attempt to resolve the dispute. Those meeting determined that a single new and authoritative confession of faith based on the older confessions should be formulated. Further, they decided that Galenus Abrahamsz and David Spruyt should be asked to conform to the teachings of the church or give up their ministry. But the two

Amsterdam preachers refused these alternatives, arguing that only their local congregation—not a meeting of congregations—had the authority to make such decisions. An attempt to influence the Amsterdam congregation failed because many members did not share the views of the larger body.[15] The acrimony reached new heights when David Spruyt proclaimed from the pulpit that "synods and the like were the work of the Antichrist."[16]

The confessionalists held their ground and soon took further action. Van Braght released his *Martyrs Mirror*,[17] a project he had been working on for some time, which built on the martyr tradition begun a century earlier.[18] In van Braght's view, Mennonites were succumbing to worldly pleasures and distractions, and he intended to call them back to the faithfulness of the early church and the sixteenth-century Anabaptist martyrs. But in issuing his martyrology van Braght was also advancing the confessionalist cause. His introduction in the *Martyrs Mirror* included the Apostles' Creed and three Dutch Mennonite confessions of faith. The three confessions, van Braght argued, "might seem in superficial ways to be different, but, as was the case with the whole tradition of Christian faith since the time of the first persecutions, all orthodox confessions elaborated on the same unchanging beliefs."[19]

As Mennonites were becoming a part of the cultural mainstream, some leaders saw a need for greater discipline within the churches and called for greater accountability and loyalty to the confessions of the church. Others advocated a more a relaxed attitude.

Van Braght's use of the martyr tradition did not impress his opponents, and the dispute widened, as did the nature of the theological debate. Eventually the conflict spread throughout much of Holland and into other Dutch provinces. When in the spring of 1664 the differences of opinion could not be resolved, the two factions moved apart; the confessionalists came to be known as Zonists, the anticonfessionalists came to be known as Lamists. The Zonists continued to work toward church unity on the basis of the confessional tradition, a new constitution, and a five-article document requiring preachers and deacons to conform to the principles of the confessions. Over time, the tension between the two factions diminished, although the Zonists and the Lamists remained divided until the early nineteenth century.

Michael Driedger has noted, "It is ironic that the root of the schism which led to the creation of the Zonist and Lamist societies was disagreement over the strategy of using confessions of faith to repair or avoid schisms."[20]

Striking a balance

Mennonite confessions of faith were initially useful in giving Mennonites a theological orientation. They helped congregations preserve Anabaptist distinctives, were instrumental in bringing Mennonite groups together in a process of integration, and facilitated ecumenical conversation with outsiders. However, as history has shown, statements of doctrine could also become instruments of disunity. The War of the Lambs resulted when Mennonite churches wanted to give confessions of faith a kind of authority that left little room for dialogue or theological diversity.

We should not fault the confessionalists for their interest in doctrinal integrity. By the middle of the seventeenth century they probably had reason to be concerned about preachers who were calling for a freer form of piety. History has shown that Mennonite groups that cared little about doctrinal matters eventually ran into problems, including loss of identity and an inability to resist the temptations of modernity.[21] However, at the dawn of the modern era, the confessionalists failed to recognize that religious pluralism and theological diversity were emerging realities that would require skillful and careful handling. If the church was going to survive and be a life-giving organism, it would need to find creative and constructive ways of dealing with these challenges. Neither a dismissal of confessional statements nor a rigid confessionalist stance would serve the church well in meeting the challenges of the age.

Notes

[1] *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottdale, Waterloo: Herald Pr., 1995).
[2] On this issue, see Ben C. Ollenburger, "*Sola Scriptura*/No Other Foundation and Other Authoritative Sources?" in *Without Spot or Wrinkle: Reflecting Theologically on the Nature of the Church*, ed. Karl Koop and Mary H. Schertz (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2000), 65–92.
[3] See J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, third edition (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1979).
[4] Cornelius J. Dyck, Foreword to *One Lord, One Church, One Hope, and One God:*

Mennonite Confessions of Faith, Text Reader, no. 2, ed. Howard John Loewen (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1985), 17.

[5] Michael D. Driedger, *Obedient Heretics: Mennonite Identities in Lutheran Hamburg and Altona during the Confessional Age,* St Andrews Studies in Reformation History (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2002), 51.

[6] See "Confessions of Faith," *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* (Hillsboro: Mennonite Brethren Publishing Hse.; Newton: Mennonite Publication Office; Scottdale: Mennonite Publishing Hse., 1955), 1:679–86.

[7] See Dieter Goetz Lichdi, ed., *Mennonite World Handbook: Mennonites in Global Witness* (Carol Stream: Mennonite World Conference, 1990), 324.

[8] Nanne van der Zijpp, "The Confessions of Faith of the Dutch Mennonites," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 29 (July 1955): 175–6.

[9] See "Confessions of Faith," *The Mennonite Encyclopedia,* 1:679.

[10] Cornelius J. Dyck, "Hans de Ries, Theologian and Churchman: A Study in Second Generation Dutch Anabaptism" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1962), 182–3.

[11] Piet Visser, *Broeders in de geest: De doopsgezinde bijdragen van Dierick en Jan Philipsz. Schabaelje tot de Nederlandse stichtelijke literatuur in de zeventiende eeuw* (Deventer: Sub Rosa, 1988), 1:112.

[12] James R. Coggins, *John Smyth's Congregation: English Separatism, Mennonite Influence, and the Elect Nation* (Waterloo: Herald Pr., 1991), 83.

[13] W. J. Kühler, *Geschiedenis van de Doopsgezinden in Nederland, 1600–1735* (Haarlem: H. D. Tjeenk Willink & Zoon, 1940), 202–3, quoted in Driedger, *Obedient Heretics,* 52.

[14] Driedger, *Obedient Heretics,* 54.

[15] See "Galenus Abrahamsz de Haan," *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* (1956), 2:431–4.

[16] Driedger, *Obedient Heretics,* 55.

[17] Thieleman Jansz. van Braght, *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror,* 5th ed., trans. Joseph F. Sohm (Scottdale, Kitchener: Herald Pr., 1950).

[18] For a succinct history of the Anabaptist-Mennonite martyr tradition, see Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Pr., 1999), 197–249.

[19] Driedger, *Obedient Heretics*, 56.

[20] Ibid., 60.

[21] A helpful summary of the history of this development may be found in some of the writings of Sjouke Voolstra. See, e.g., his "Mennonite Faith in the Netherlands: A Mirror of Assimilation," *Conrad Grebel Review* 9 (fall 1991): 277–92.

About the author

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On racism, Mennonite politics, and liberation
(Words we don't like to hear)

Malinda E. Berry

The truth is that the church has spoken to us about our racism, and we act as though we think we have listened. But we need to confess that the content of that speaking and the quality of our listening have not brought us to the corporate transformation toward racial justice Mennonites need. I believe two major factors contribute to our failure to complete this transformation. One is our unwillingness to recognize and then reform the politics of the church, and a second is our failure to embrace theological categories that are adequate to the task.

Two factors contribute to the church's failure to complete the transformation toward racial justice we need: our unwillingness to recognize and reform the politics of the church, and our failure to embrace adequate theological categories.

Mennonite politics

My father, a political scientist, taught me a valuable lesson about power and the church. Though Mennonites don't want to admit it, everything in our church life is political, from how we choose and appoint our leaders, to the words we use to describe what we believe, to where we send our children to school, to how we worship at our conventions.

We like to think we are not like other people. With our faith comes an impulse to be different, a need to feel distinct not only from the world but even from other Christians. One aspect of this sense of distinctiveness is a resistance to facing the political nature of church life. We resist thinking of the church politically because we associate politics with the world and the state, two things we believe the church is not! But if we are to deal with the reality of racism in the church, we will need to admit that we are political.

Kay Lawson, also a political scientist, has written, "One common definition of politics is simply the allocation of scarce

resources, using the word *scarce* to mean 'not unlimited.'" She adds that politics is also "a means of organizing collective human activity" that affects "almost any collective decision-making process, especially if there is a hint of struggle and controversy over 'who gets what, when, how.'"[1] "Politics means seeking and using…power…to make allocations of scarce resources throughout a given polity."[2] In Lawson's sense of the word, the Mennonite Church is a political reality. Unless we confront our penchant for being in denial about our politics in general, we will lack the tools we need to change our race politics in particular.

In the early 1990s, Mennonites concerned about the church's attitudes about racism and our lack of racial consciousness organized a gathering called "Restoring Our Sight." Attendance surpassed the planning group's expectations, indicating significant energy for talking about racism, and a significant legacy of pain because white Mennonite lay people and leaders have done a poor job of self-examination.

One outcome of the gathering was that Mennonites joined the anti-racism movement and established the Damascus Road Anti-Racism Process, a program of Mennonite Central Committee U.S. The anti-racism movement is a larger, global phenomenon with an accompanying body of literature.[3] Damascus Road has helped Mennonites begin to change the race politics of the church by giving us a way of understanding racism in sociological terms.[4] In the Damascus Road process, denominational institutions—congregations, colleges, seminaries, and other agencies—recruit teams of people from their staff and/or membership to receive training. Each team returns to its sending institution with a plan for dismantling institutionalized racism found in the systems of operation and organizational culture of their institution. The success of this work requires that participants come to an understanding of what racism is and why Christians must understand their vocation as standing against racism. Damascus Road invites us to understand racism in a specific way:

> *Racism is not the same thing as individual race prejudice and bigotry. All people are racially prejudiced (regardless of racial/ethnic identity). It is part of the air we breathe. It is socialized into every person. But this does not mean*

> *that everyone is racist. Racism is more than race prejudice. It is more than individual attitudes and actions. Racism is the collective actions of a dominant racial group. Power turns race prejudice into racism. Racial prejudice becomes racism when one group's racial prejudices are enforced by the systems and institutions of a society, giving power and privilege based on skin color to the group in power and limiting the power and privilege of the racial groups that are not in power.*[5]

So the Damascus Road definition of racism looks like this: race prejudice + the misuse of power by and within systems = racism. Racism is created by three abuses of power throughout societal systems that organize our common life. Systemic power is "the legitimate/legal ability to access and/or control those institutions sanctioned by the state." The analysis identifies the three abuses of systemic power as Power^1, Power^2, and Power^3. An example of Power^1 is the way we usually try to fix racism by dealing with the feelings and actions of individuals instead of looking at the ways systems affect people personally. Power^2 is "white privilege," the benefits of racism often unintentionally extended to and accepted by white people. Consider the following: "As a white person, I can find positive white role models depicted on TV"; "I can attend college and find that most professors look like me and talk like me and that most of the curriculum reflects my culture, history, and background"; "No one thinks I got my job just because of my skin color." Power^3 is the power racism has to control and destroy everyone. In other words, it is racism's goal to make all people of color victims, and all white people racist. This kind of power affects self-identity, especially in groups that are racially defined.[6]

Changing our theological categories

Our involvement in the anti-racism movement has helped us begin to act against racism by giving us more language and a way of understanding racism in sociological terms, but Damascus Road has not yet effectively challenged and changed the church's theological categories.

In February 2000, Damascus Road staff articulated a new training philosophy.

1. *As followers of Jesus, we understand the call of God to work against all forms of oppression.*
2. *Crisis is necessary for both personal and systemic change.*
3. *While both people and institutions need to change, Damascus Road's primary organizing work is, through anti-racist education, to prepare teams to act as change agents in their institutions.*[7]

We could undertake a critique of this training philosophy from an ideological perspective, but that would be too easy and we would miss the real issue. What we need to do, what would take courage and confession, would be to embrace the first statement—"As followers of Jesus, we understand the call of God to work against all forms of oppression"—realizing that a theological claim is being made: the God being talked about here is a God of liberation. Does Mennonite theology give us a framework for worshiping, teaching and preaching about, and confessing faith in such a God? Although the new Mennonite confession of faith often mentions justice, it does not name oppression adequately.

We often fail to understand that racial minorities in the U.S. and Canada need God and talk about God for reasons that most white people do not share. These reasons are easily found in daily news reports as well as episodes in our national histories that are not far in the past. Instead of trying to discern if Mennonites use God-talk that keeps racism alive, instead of coming to see when we have felt theologically justified in being racist, we act as though our peacemaking God-talk means we cannot be racist. Confession that moves us through awareness into action necessitates this additional theological reflection.

The Civil Rights Movement was all about struggling for Black liberation. All that organizing and agitating was about more than getting the right to vote or sit down at a lunch counter in the South. It was about redeeming the soul of a nation. As Mennonites, we tend to think it is folly to presume that our nation has a soul and that it can experience God's redemption. But when you are an African American or other disenfranchised member of society, you have to believe such a thing is possible if you are going to live fully.[8] The alternative to this view of the state is nationalism, and its limitations are obvious.[9]

We need to begin confessing that our predicament with racism is tied up with the fact that we are not accustomed to talking about the three persons of the Trinity in liberation terms. We tend to think about the Godhead primarily through the lenses of a prophetic but suffering Jesus and of Paul's exalted Christ. Communities formed to worship, obey, and witness to God's great liberating acts and power articulate a gospel that challenges Mennonite assumptions about what Jesus came to do. We need to confess that we lack an adequate understanding of Jesus as one who came to liberate the oppressed from their suffering at the hands of the powerful.

White Mennonites do not think of themselves as sitting on top of the food chain. They think of themselves as the quiet in the land, as displaced refugees, conscientious objectors ridiculed by non-pacifist neighbors, war-tax resisters. However true these identities have been, they should not mask the fact that European Mennonites are white, and being white has political relevance, just as being African American, Asian, Hispanic, and Native American does. This is the case whether one is from the U.S. melting pot that has boiled over or the Canadian multicultural mosaic that tries to be open to and welcome difference.

If we are to be true to our peace church heritage, we have to come to terms with the ways we have participated in white power. To do so, we will need to be in conversation with Christians who are not white.

We are a historic peace church, and we have struggled to comprehend what racism is and means to us because we understand peace to be linked with justice, a sense of right relationship with others, and the deep desire to act in accordance with God's will for the human polity. But if we are to be true to our peace church heritage, we have to come to terms with the ways we have participated in white power. To do so, we will need to be in conversation with Christians who are not white. We use ecumenical conversations as a way to offer our peculiar theological and biblical perspectives on militarism, violence, and Jesus' call to peacemaking. But the conversation partners we seek out are denominations that are predominantly white. Why don't we look for opportunities to converse with Hispanic denominations and with those of the Historical Black Church? I

believe we need to think about the politics of this kind of conversation. To do so means posing tough questions—and engaging in a different kind of listening, a different kind of confession—that I see most Mennonite academics, pastors, and lay people avoiding, especially if they are white.

We need to ask ourselves if our understanding of God has anything to do with racism, and if so, how. Damascus Road and the anti-racism movement seem to suggest that God has everything to so with our concern for confronting racism, yet the idea that Jesus Christ breaks down all the dividing walls was not enough to pass anti-lynching laws or end school desegregation. Many Mennonites know this from firsthand experience. So where is it in our theology? We must confess that very little of the experience of racist violence has shaped how we talk about God in our academic theology and preaching. We must also confess that when the church has done theological reflection on the nature of racism, we have failed to engage those reflections in transforming ways. Our Damascus Road project is a form of engagement that has stuck, but people in the pews have not adopted the theological language of liberation.

Beyond denominational statements

From the mid-1970s into the '90s, the church used its voice to begin naming the evil of racism. The denominational statements summarized below show that the impulse to confront and rebuke the power of racism in our church body has been acted on. These statements make the case for understanding racism as sin that is corporate. In the earlier statements summarized below, church members are called to distance themselves from racism, but in the more recent statements, we can see the emphasis shift. Instead of understanding racism as something that characterizes un-Christian "bad" people, the church has adopted the view that it is folly to think we can distance ourselves from racism: the systems we participate in every day are propped up by racist practices. Along with this shift comes strongly confessional language calling white Mennonites to repent of their complicity in these systems. But in spite of our efforts, we continue to falter because we do not yet know how to articulate theological commitments that are essential to speaking God's truth to the lies of racism.

Estes Park, Colorado, 1968: Urban Crisis Education. When the General Conference Mennonite Church met in Estes Park, Colorado, delegates passed a resolution calling for hiring personnel "to educate the Mennonite community on problems of minority groups and urban crisis," and recommended that these staff people, who would serve as part of the Commission on Home Ministries, be "members of the white, black and Indian communities."[10]

Harrisonburg, Virginia, 1973: Cross-Cultural Consultation. Delegates to the 1973 Mennonite Church General Assembly in Harrisonburg, Virginia, received a report from participants in the Cross-Cultural Theological Consultation. The findings of this consultation articulated by the steering committee included the following: "This consultation highlights the increasingly multi-ethnic character of the Mennonite Church in North America with seven different categories of congregations based on cultural lines.... There are also observable differences based on economic and social factors which cut across ethnic lines."

Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, 1986: Building a Rainbow of Churches. At Saskatoon '86, General Conference delegates affirmed a plan to build up the General Conference "as a rainbow of churches" under the auspices of the biblical vision of "many people becoming God's people." This biblical vision became the convention theme for the joint MC/GC gathering at Normal '89.

Normal, Illinois, 1989: Many Peoples Becoming God's People. During the joint-convention in Illinois, the two delegate bodies adopted an important statement titled "A Church of Many Peoples Confronts Racism." It reads, "We confess that our church institutions…have not always escaped our society's pattern of institutional racism. We are called by the gospel to review our practices in employment, promotion, purchasing of materials, and inclusion of minorities on boards and committees. Where inequity is found, we need to repent, be reconciled, and take affirmative action to correct it." The statement called on congregations to celebrate ethnic and racial diversity by, among other things, observing the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., in the United States and remembering Louis Riel in Canada.[11]

Eugene, Oregon, 1991: On Observing 1992. At the Oregon '91 Mennonite Church General Assembly, delegates adopted "On

Observing 1992," which expressed the church's resolve to "recognize the greed and devastation that characterized the coming of the Europeans, and repent of [its] participation in the unjust exploitation of native peoples."

Wichita, Kansas, 1995: Statement on Racism. And finally, Wichita '95 was another joint assembly where the church again affirmed the biblical vision for unity among all peoples. Leaders from Hispanic Mennonite churches in the U.S. and Canada called all North American Mennonites "to transform our church structures, policies, and procedures to eliminate all vestiges of racism."

Atlanta, Georgia, 2003: ? My deep hope is that American Mennonites will take the months leading up to our next general assembly in Atlanta in 2003 to take another look at our race politics. Perhaps our congregations can spend time in study and reflection on how we have been shaped by racism and at times by resisting it.

Conclusion

As Damascus Road has gained momentum and church-wide recognition, skepticism about the politics of anti-racism and its rhetoric has also increased. I think some caution is warranted because we can easily speak liberation language in an uncritical voice. However, we must reflect on a difficult question: Does the skeptical response to anti-racism reveal anxiety about seeing ourselves, no matter what our color, as racially prejudiced people?

Confession is good for the soul. Consider what we might gain theologically by confessing that race politics creates feelings of doubt and discomfort. And consider what we might gain theologically by confessing faith in a God who urges us to listen with open hearts to voices that speak of liberation. When we proclaim that God is our liberator, we must discuss and argue about how we humans are to participate in that liberating activity as particular political communities. Mennonite theology can and does make space for this work as we journey together toward greater faithfulness in our living and listening.

Notes

[1] Kay Lawson, *The Human Polity: A Comparative Introduction to Political Science*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1993), 11 (Lawson's italics).

[2] Ibid.
[3] Alastair Bonnett's *Anti-Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2000) gives readers historical background on the global anti-racism movement as well as a good discussion of anti-racism's impact, its practices, its relationship to nationalism and capitalism, the backlash against it. The book includes a comprehensive bibliography.
[4] I am using Mennonite Church without the national qualifiers because while Damascus Road is a program of Mennonite Central Committee U.S., members of Mennonite Church Canada have also received the training and/or are working to adapt some of the basic tenets of anti-racism work to reflect race politics affecting Canadian churches and institutions. While I was a student at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary from 1998 to 2001, I was part of AMBS's Damascus Road team, so my observations come from firsthand experience as well as from reading and research.
[5] "The Damascus Road Anti-Racism Process: Part One, Anti-Racism Analysis" (9–12 April 1999), 1.4. From the Damascus Road training manual provided to each participant, available through Mennonite Central Committee's Peace & Justice Ministries Department, Akron, Pennsylvania.
[6] Ibid.
[7] *Damascus Road Newsletter* 3 (June 2000): 3.
[8] Reading anything by Martin Luther King, Jr., will quickly reveal this point in theological terms. A good place to begin is with this collection of his writings: James M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther, King, Jr.* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).
[9] These limits have been seen in situations of intense political conflict in many places around the world. But nationalism has also had an impact on Mennonite communities. Kay Lawson describes the nation as "a relatively large group of people who feel they belong together by virtue of sharing one or more of such traits as a common race, language, culture, history, or set of customs and traditions." Nationalism is the belief that what is in the best interest of the nation is more important than the interests of other nations or the international community as a whole (Lawson, *The Human Polity,* 584). I am sure these simple definitions evoke stories from heavily Eurocentric Mennonite communities that you might know.
[10] All of these citations can be found in the minutes and proceedings of the respective triennial sessions of the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church general assemblies.
[11] AMBS did not observe MLK Day until 2000, the impetus being the work of the AMBS Damascus Road Team, not the voice of the church. Goshen College began holding its annual MLK Study Day in the mid-'90s, through the work of the multicultural affairs office. The event was funded by a grant from the Lily Endowment, not by contributions from the church.

About the author

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Confession
The way of transformation

Marcus Smucker

"Now, 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. 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).

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.

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).[1] 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.

Underlying all genuine Christian confession is confidence in God. We confess because we trust God will forgive and cleanse us from all sin. Therefore, in worship both heartfelt confession of sin 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).[2] Confession opens us to God's liberation in life.

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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.[3] 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.[4] 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).

Confession facilitates reconciliation and communion. 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 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!

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).

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."[5]

Even in the confessional, Catholic priests report, most people do not admit "to having committed any sin whatsoever."[6] 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."[7] 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."[8]

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."[9] 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.[10] 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

[1] See Jim Forest, "Basic Stories," in *Confession: Doorway to Forgiveness* (Maryknoll: Orbis Bks., 2001).
[2] For more on this theme, see Theodore W. Jennings, *The Liturgy of Liberation: The Confession and Forgiveness of Sins* (Nashville: Abingdon Pr., 1988).
[3] Forest, *Confession,* 92.
[4] Ibid., 91.
[5] *Garrison Keillor and the Hopeful Gospel Quartet* (Sony Music, Epic label, EK52901, 1992).
[6] Forest, *Confession,* 4.
[7] Phyllis McGinley, "In Defense of Sin," in *The Province of the Heart* (New York: Viking Pr., 1959), quoted in Forest, *Confession,* 1.
[8] Jennings, *The Liturgy of Liberation,* 22.
[9] Ibid.
[10] 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).

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The two edges of confession

Alan Kreider

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 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.

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.

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 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.

We confess God by telling the story of the Bible and by telling stories from our world today in which that story goes on. 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.

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 "propers" 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 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.

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?

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; Scottdale: Mennonite Publishing Hse., 1992).
[2] Eleanor Kreider, *Enter His Gates: Fitting Worship Together* (Scottdale: 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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Transforming the difficult sinner

Rachel Miller Jacobs

This spring, I attended a one-day conference called "Transforming the Difficult Child."[1] With his workshop title, Howard Glasser lures in all kinds of well-meaning folks who are intent on changing their children, their students, or their clients, and then, surreptitiously, he changes *them*. The transformers become the transformed. And, miraculously, the shift in their behavior and thinking creates the space the "difficult children" need to find new ways of being. At least that's what happened to me.

The ways we've understood both ourselves and God in relation to what's gone wrong have made confession almost impossible for us. When it comes right down to it, we're not confident that anything good can come from confession.

The gist of Glasser's approach is to energize positive interactions with children, to have absolutely clear expectations for them, to stop being an enforcer, and to become a coach. On the surface, this doesn't sound like anything special, but it turns out to be nothing short of revolutionary. When I came home from the conference, I started upping the positives, cheering my kids on, commenting specifically about the things they were doing well, noticing them before they asked for my attention. I had thought that I was an encouraging parent, but I discovered (as did my children) the depth of my critical spirit, and how entrenched I was in my conviction that a temper tantrum or a refusal to obey could ruin an entire day.

After a week or so of looking for the good, I sat my kids down and told them I had noticed they were being exceptional in many ways, and that I thought they deserved some credit for all their hard work. I wasn't making this up. My new disciplines were changing both what I noticed and their desire to be cooperative, considerate, and compassionate. With their help, I devised a list of ways to earn credit: rules, positive behaviors that would earn bonuses, and chores and responsibilities. This list included a

bunch of "gimmes," things I knew the kids would do without fail, so that even on our most conflict-ridden days, I could give them credit for something going well. Beside each item was the credit they could earn by doing it. We also came up with a list of ways they could spend their credit: extra dessert, time with friends, staying up late, play time with a parent, maid service, TV and computer time. The list included the cost of each of these items (maid service is expensive, time with friends isn't). I gave them a signing bonus for saying yes to the credit system and doubled it for signing on right away. My boys went to bed delighted with the stack of credits they'd received, about 500 apiece.

Everything was rosy until the next day, when they realized they had to pay with credits for privileges they had considered their right. All hell broke loose. For two hours, they yelled and cried and slammed doors and accused me of being a dictator. I sent them to time-out after time-out, all the while congratulating them on doing their time-outs well, commenting on how difficult this shift in perspective was, and telling them I could see they were really struggling to control their strong feelings. It wasn't a pleasant afternoon for any of us.

But something remarkable happened when it came time to award credits at bedtime. I went down through the list, and as I got to "no yelling," "no slamming doors," "no arguing," and "no calling people names," I gave them half credit, as per the workshop leader's instruction. They turned to me, aghast. "But Mom," they said, "you can't pay us for not yelling. We yelled a lot!" "That's true," I said. "But you were awake about thirteen hours, right? And you only yelled about two. So most of the day, eleven hours in fact, you weren't yelling, and I want to make sure to give you credit for that."

What struck me at the time, and what I've continued to think about, is the transforming effect of a context of abundance. In most credit schemes, you only get credit for the things you do perfectly. Teachers, parents, churches set it up like this because they really care about their students, children, and congregational members, and they're committed to teaching them important values. What these well-meaning folks end up teaching, however, is that you'll get noticed for the gradations of your failure. Focusing on failure doesn't encourage most of us to learn from our

mistakes. Instead we learn to deny them, or blame them on someone else, or hold them at arm's length. And, sometimes, we get stuck in them.

Because I wanted to give my boys as much credit as I could rather than make sure I didn't give them too much credit, because I was seeing and naming what went well rather than dwelling on what went badly, because I had committed myself to making sure they got all they needed rather than only what they deserved, they were able to take ownership for their behavior in a realistic way. Lest you fail to appreciate the import of their comments, I must point out that their "confession" was virtually unprecedented in our family life.

We're tempted either to deny our sins or to wallow in them. We're tempted either to smugness or a kind of free-floating guilt, to the feeling that we do it all right or that we can never do enough.

Did they learn that owning up to yelling brought an end to our relationship or provided an occasion for shame and blame? No. Their yelling was unpleasant, surely, and something not to turn into a habit. But who we were, and our relationship with each other, was about lots more than a yelling interlude, and this new approach gave us a way of living into that reality.

Which brings me to confession. It seems to me that the contexts in which we've thought about confession, the ways we've understood both ourselves and God in relation to what's gone wrong, have made confession almost impossible for us. When it comes right down to it, we're not confident that anything good can come from confession. We're convinced that admitting our failures is likely both to put others one up on us and to call down God's wrath—even if we don't quite believe in God's wrath. So we're tempted either to deny our sins or to wallow in them. We're tempted either to smugness or a kind of free-floating guilt, to the feeling that we do it all right or that we can never do enough.

And here's the odd thing. Whether we succumb to one of these temptations or to the other, the result is the same: we keep both ourselves and God at a distance. You wouldn't think so at first glance. But either way, it's pretty much all about us, pretty much about being at the center of our own perverse and twisted little universe.

What it takes for us to move from center stage is a sense of God's mercy. We can admit where we've gone wrong when we're confident that our sins are only a part of who we are, and that they don't really change the way God, or the people we love, see and value us. Unfortunately, however, most of us have understood Jesus' call to discipleship as a particularly deadly perfectionism. Nursed on the mother's milk of the Sermon on the Mount, we've passed over verses like "If you, with all your faults, know how to give your children what is good, how much more will your Abba God in heaven give good things to those who ask!" (Matt. 6:11).[2] Instead, we've taken as our motto a woodenly literal interpretation of an earlier passage: "Therefore be perfect, as Abba God in heaven is perfect" (5:48).[3] To give us some credit, we haven't done this kind of selective reading with the Gospels only, but have applied it indiscriminately to the Law and the Prophets, the epistles and wisdom literature.

Let me be clear that I'm not arguing for skipping over all the judgment passages in Scripture. On the contrary, I want us to make sure to read them, but to do so side by side with the mercy texts, which is how the Bible usually brings them to us. It's just that so many of us have either fixated on judgment, or in reaction, we've made it a point not to be "into" judgment. As it turns out, not being into judgment doesn't help us out much, because we know in our very bones that things aren't always as they should be between God and us and in our relationships with others. Whether we get stuck in judgment or ignore it, we're in big trouble. The only way out is to struggle with how grace and terror can be, and are, neighbors, and thereby to come to a more nuanced understanding of who God is, an understanding that makes confession not only possible but desirable.

To create an environment where confession is possible, we must become convinced that it is our job as pastors, mentors, spiritual directors, teachers, and fellow believers to see what is good, to encourage its growth, and to speak of judgment and grace from the foundation of God's unconditional love. This love goes right to the heart of Jesus' ministry and mission, to his choice to suffer rather than condemn. This love affirms that God created us in God's own image, and that God isn't only trying to catch us being good (to borrow a phrase from educational psychology) but

is relentlessly committed to using every opportunity for moving us toward faith, love, and hope.

But what's to prevent us from continuing down the road to perdition if we haven't had our noses rubbed in our failure? Isn't highlighting mercy just another form of liberal namby-pamby, a particularly insidious form of "I'm O.K., you're O.K."? Though we sometimes find it difficult to believe, focusing on the good doesn't pretend that what's bad hasn't happened. It just means that we choose to give our energy, our attention, and our discernment to every baby step that leads toward, rather than away from, God. In the process, we learn to trust the one who created us in love and has no intention of abandoning us to our sins.

To create an environment where confession is possible, we must become convinced that it is our job to see what is good, to encourage its growth, and to speak of judgment and grace from the foundation of God's unconditional love.

So the first thing we need to do in order for confession to take place is to create a context where it makes sense. We can do this through teaching, Bible study, and spiritual formation, both for ourselves and for others.[4] We can invite people to think about their God images, and to listen for the ways God might be nudging them to a truer apprehension of the divine. One of the best ways to do God-image work is through guided meditations, which we can suggest to our families (including our children), our Sunday School students, our small group members, our spiritual friends, or our directees. And we can lead them in doing this work.[5] We can make it a point to ask people what face God is showing them in the particular situations in which they find themselves. This is easier than it sounds. Many people are hungry for God-talk and have few opportunities to pursue it. With some sensitivity on our part, they will be happy to do their theological spadework. Sound theological work will inevitably have consequences for our behavior. From the Ten Commandments on down, the Scriptures clearly link who God is with what is called forth in the behavior, attitude, and allegiance of God's people.

But we dare not stop with context. We need to keep going and actually do the work of confession. Many Mennonite congregations already practice confession in Sunday morning

worship. This practice is a good beginning. But because not all kinds of confession are appropriate for public worship, and because so many of us are so out of practice in confessing our sins, we need to be imaginative in finding and encouraging ways to "just do it" in a wider variety of contexts.

The first place to begin is to practice and teach private prayer practices of confession. As a teenager, I was given a formula for private prayer which I used into my thirties: ACTS (adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication or intercession). I doubt if private confession would have become part of my repertoire without this acronym. Another prayer practice is the consciousness examen, which provides a regular way to review our lives and make our confession to God.[6]

We can commit ourselves to practicing and modeling confession in our daily relationships with others: taking ownership promptly where we've gone wrong, asking for forgiveness, and, when necessary, making restitution. This kind of confession need not have a religious overtone and can include confession of our self-centeredness (manifested in our pattern of interrupting people or neglecting to listen to them) or of our lack of faithfulness (shown in breaking promises or forgetting responsibilities), to name just a few examples. While these are minor offenses, we do well not to overlook them. When you try something new, or scary, it helps to start small. And, for these occasions to help us with the work of confession, we need to be clear that confession is not merely apologizing. An apology is a social nicety that smoothes out relationships, but confession's aim is more profound: transformation.

In addition to private confession to God and to each other in our daily lives, we also need to offer and enlarge the possibilities for private mediated confession. Partly because of disagreements about and changing perceptions of sin, even the congregations most stressing responsible church membership have generally avoided the practice of confession in congregational life. In addition, church discipline in the Anabaptist tradition has normally focused on shame (shunning) rather than guilt, and the shaming inherent in our tradition continues even in congregations that no longer practice the ban or its traditional antidote, a confession before the group which expresses appropriate humility,

followed by reconciliation and restoration to the community. Without intervention from spiritually mature people in representational roles (pastors, spiritual directors, pastoral counselors, elders, etc.), without a place for confession to take place and a movement toward reconciliation to be marked, it's unclear how people can find release from their shame.[7]

Mediated private confession can therefore become a useful part of pastoral counseling appointments, spiritual direction sessions, conversations with pastors or elders, meetings among spiritual friends, and the relationships of mature Christians (pastors, parents, Sunday school teachers) to children. Obviously the shape of confession will vary depending on the circumstances and people involved. We may need to suggest confession as an option for people who have never considered it, and encourage them to shape confession in a way that is useful to them.

Without intervention from spiritually mature people in representational roles, without a place for confession to take place and a movement toward reconciliation to be marked, it's unclear how people can find release from their shame.

When healing prayer has been requested, we can ask if there is anything in the person's life that might block their healing. In the case of people working with addictions in a Twelve Step program, we can provide a setting for initial confession, and discernment about how and when to extend that confession into the penitent's life with others. In cases where we're called in for conflict mediation, we can encourage those involved to consider confession to each other and to God as an important part of their work together. When we sense others are burdened, we can ask if they need to make a confession and receive forgiveness, and if it would help to do it with someone who can be God's presence to them.

We can also encourage people to call together groups focusing on particular confessional needs. Support groups of various kinds often provide excellent places for confession to take place. Parents' groups, Twelve Step groups, men's and women's groups, youth groups, and Sunday school classes can all be places where we can confess our sins and struggles in relation to parenting, sexuality, addictions, or our misuse of money. People may also want to gather a specific group to confess particular sins and

receive forgiveness for them. These meetings may involve worship or new rituals crafted for the occasion, which could include Scripture reading, singing, anointing, laying on of hands, hand- or foot-washing, communion, and prayer, to name just a few possibilities. Those providing leadership in these contexts will establish clarity about the group's task, and create a setting that enables people to confess and receive forgiveness. When with false humility we wonder, "Who am I to forgive sins?" we risk missing important opportunities for God to be incarnate in our midst and for all us sinners to taste and see that God is good.

My own spiritual life and the lives of people I meet in a variety of contexts convince me that many of us are literally dying to know God's presence, love, and forgiveness in the midst of the pain, failure, and sin of our lives. We need many opportunities for confessing both the truth of our human need and the truth of God's forgiveness and desire for our wholeness. Pastors, congregational leaders, and spiritual directors are in an ideal position to help make confession a lively part of the spiritual practice of people of all ages and stages of spiritual maturity.

Notes

[1] See Howard Glasser and Jennifer Easley, *Transforming the Difficult Child: The Nurtured Heart Approach* (Nashville: Vaughan Printing, 1998).
[2] *The Inclusive New Testament* (Brentwood, Md.: Priests for Equality, 1996).
[3] Ibid.
[4] See Walter Wink's *Transforming Bible Study*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Pr., 1989), and Patricia W. Van Ness, *Transforming Bible Study with Children: A Guide for Learning Together* (Nashville: Abingdon Pr., 1991).
[5] Excellent resources for guided meditations include Marlene Halpin's *Puddles of Knowing: Engaging Children in Our Prayer Heritage* (Dubuque: Wm. C. Brown Pubs., 1984), and Flora Slosson Wuellner's *Release: Healing from Wounds of Family, Church and Community* (Nashville: Upper Room Bks., 1996).
[6] A lovely resource for daily guided prayer (including the examen), with helps for those new to these practices, can be found at www.jesuit.ie/prayer. A good resource for using the examen with children is Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn, and Matthew Linn, *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life* (New York: Paulist Pr., 1995).
[7] For this historical perspective on confession, I'm indebted to Teresa Dutchersmith's unpublished paper, "Mediating Private Confession of Sin: A Representational Pastoral Task in the Work of Reconciliation," 15.

About the author

Rachel Miller Jacobs is a preacher, worship leader, teacher, and spiritual director. She is married to Randall Jacobs and they are the parents of three lively, delightful sons. She believes that if chocolate were associated with confession, we'd all be happier people.

For those who want to change the world

Ann Hostetler

Give up perfection for just one day.
Feel yourself a creature of flesh and bone,
walk around in the cold, wind chafing
your face, joints jarring as your worn
soles pound concrete.

Keep walking till you face
your deepest failure—not
with clenched fists, not blinded
by shame, but with a detached
curiosity that opens
to compassion. Finger

the glazed wound tenderly
as you would caress the gash
in Christ's side. Wear it lightly
as God's fingerprints. You see
one doesn't have to travel far

to know suffering, though you
may carry it to the ends of the desert
before you discover it's yours.
Before you discover the light
failure lets into the darkness

of the private soul. Polished
by forgiveness our failures
are the only possible windows
through which to truly see
another human soul.

All else is mirrors
and an endless craving
for reflections of our own worthiness.
Remember Christ was wounded
so he could be like you.

About the author

Ann Hostetler teaches English and creative writing at Goshen College. She is the author of *Empty Room with Light*, a collection of poetry to be published this fall by Pandora Press, and the editor of an anthology, *A Cappella: Mennonite Voices in Poetry*, to be published by University of Iowa Press in the spring of 2003.

The place of confession in restorative justice

Janet P. Schmidt

Restorative justice views harm as a violation of people and relationships. Harm creates obligations to make things right. Restorative justice involves the victim, the offender, and the larger community in a search for solutions that promote responsibility, repair, reconciliation, and reassurance that things will change.[1] Confession is an integral part of restorative justice and is often viewed as the first step.

In the Bible, the word "confession" is used to describe a person's declaration of belief in God or Jesus (John 12:42, Rom. 10:9) or to name one's sin (Matt. 3:6), evil deeds (Acts 19:18), iniquity (Ps. 38:18), wickedness (Lev. 16:21), and transgressions (Ps. 32:5). In the context of restorative justice, confession is admitting that one's actions have harmed others.

Restorative justice seeks to heal broken relationships. Healing happens, in part, when we name (confess) our harmful actions and inactions. Confession includes taking full responsibility for the effects of our actions, intended and unintended.

Harm leads to broken relationships. Restorative justice seeks to heal broken relationships. Healing happens, in part, when we name (confess) our harmful actions and inactions. Confession includes taking full responsibility not only for our intentions but for the effects of our actions, intended and unintended. Confession includes apologising, expressing our heartfelt regret at what we have done. If harm is done in public, confession must be in public, to address the needs of the larger community. After we confess, we may request—not demand—forgiveness. In restorative justice, confession is often followed by a plan to deal with the problematic behaviour patterns and with restitution, in the form of symbols or tangible acts.

The clear acknowledgement of wrongdoing is good not only for others but for the one confessing. Confession helps others heal

from our hurtful actions; it also helps relieve our guilt for our hurtful actions. Confession repairs the damage we do to our own spirit when we hurt others. And ultimately, confession has the potential to re-establish and even strengthen broken relationships.

Intentional harm

Many view sin as intentional harm of another person, by our actions (commission) or by our refusal to act (omission). When we intentionally hurt another, confession is clearly needed. When our relationship with God is broken, it is clear who is responsible and therefore who needs to confess wrongdoing. When we direct our anger at an innocent bystander, it is obvious that we have inflicted harm and that we need to initiate the process of healing by way of a confession.

Well-integrated restorative justice practices in our churches and homes would make them beacons of light to the rest of the world where people are carrying the burden and scars of broken relationships.

Even when we recognise we are completely in the wrong, we are often tempted to side-step confession. Instead of naming and acknowledging our actions, we find it easier to hope they were not noticed, and to offer a gift or be extra pleasant to the other person. These Band-Aid responses rarely address the psychological needs of the person who has been hurt, and she will often see such actions as minimising what has happened. What is even more problematic, this solution does not address the reason we committed the harm, and as a result we are likely to repeat the behaviour.

Confession for intentional sin is a widely accepted teaching in the Christian church. We claim we practice it. The fruit of restorative justice is healthy, dynamic relationships, churches and homes where relationships are open and transparent, strong and supportive. Yet, few of us have experienced the fruits of the ongoing practice of restorative justice. Well-integrated restorative justice practices in our churches and homes would make them beacons of light to the rest of the world where people are carrying the burden and scars of broken relationships. Instead, the prevalence of broken relationships within our Christian communities suggests that a part of confession and restorative justice eludes us.

A story

Pat is the moderator of a church and Chris is the pastor. During a church council meeting Chris suggests, for the fourth time in a year, that the church should get involved in a rigorous community outreach initiative. Pat does not respond to the suggestion and moves on to the next agenda item. Everyone in the council hears Pat's sigh and notices that Pat's voice becomes louder and more abrupt. Pat's arms fold. Chris feels silenced and dismissed. The meeting proceeds uneventfully, although all present note that Chris is contributing little. When Pat arrives home, the phone rings. Chris is clearly angry and refers to Pat as "controlling," "abusing your power," and openly asks, "Pat, how am I to understand your commitment to Christ, given your unwillingness to discuss the outreach initiative?"

Where does confession fit in a messy situation like this? Pat and Chris are both hurt because of the other's actions and are experiencing the breaking of a relationship. Possible responses in this situation are: Chris confesses, Pat confesses, both Chris and Pat confess, neither confesses. Usually, our harmful actions or inactions happen in a context. Usually, the context involves our belief that we have been wronged first. We live in a world that characterises people as good and evil, right and wrong. Unfortunately, real life is rarely, if ever, that clear. Herein lies the challenge of confession and restorative justice.

Harm that is justified

Joseph Kuypers, in *Man's Will to Hurt,* explores causes of violence in our society and identifies a pervasive belief that if one person hurts another, some form of retaliation is required, is justified.[2] Retributive justice focuses on righting the situation with punishment to balance the harm caused. For many it follows that if a retaliatory action is justified, confession is not necessary.

Both Chris and Pat could justify their actions. Chris feels embarrassed because of the way Pat acted at the church council meeting and believes Pat needs to be confronted for that behaviour and for refusing to discuss an outreach program. Pat feels upset that Chris caused a difficult situation during the church council meeting when the agenda was not cleared ahead of time and should have come from the outreach committee. Pat could

easily call some members of the church council and tell them that Chris called in anger and questioned Pat's commitment to Christ.

Despite their self-justifications, both Chris and Pat have harmed each other, some of the harm happened in public, and their relationship is damaged.

In restorative justice all involved must take total responsibility for the harm they have perpetrated. For a Christian, nothing justifies harm done to another person (Rom. 12:17–21). Our need to confess is separate from another person's actions.

If Chris or Pat each focus on justifying their own behaviour, the situation is likely to escalate. They may not talk with each other at all. If either does initiate conversation, it will probably focus on the other person's wrong rather than on taking full responsibility for one's own actions. If one does confess, while nursing feelings of self-justification, the feeble apology may be "bait" for the other person's confession. Any of these strategies may well result in the situation deteriorating.

In restorative justice all involved must take total responsibility for the harm they have perpetrated. For a Christian, nothing justifies harm done to another person (Rom. 12:17–21). Our need to confess is separate from another person's actions. Harm is never justified, and if harm is the result of my actions, I am called to confess.

Unintentional harm

A common challenge in situations like the event at the church council meeting is the interaction between our words, tone, and body language. Communications researcher Albert Mehrabian identifies how these forms of communication are usually received: words, 7 percent; tone, 38 percent; body language, 55 percent.[3] The person giving the message is aware of his words and has varying degrees of awareness of his tone and body language. The person receiving the message will hear the words within the context of the tone and body language. Pat is probably unaware of the sigh, tone, and body language. Pat is responding to a stressful situation in which Pat experiences the pastor as trying to railroad an agenda item. Pat has no idea that Chris experiences Pat's unspoken communication as demeaning. Pat views Chris's subsequent silence in the meeting as mild embarrassment. Pat is unaware that Chris has been hurt by Pat's actions.

Harassment in the Workplace: Management Awareness, a video on establishing respectful workplaces, states that an employee's actions will be judged by the effect—not the intention—of those actions.[4] Harassment policies stipulate that if the person should have understood that her actions would result in discomfort, she is guilty of harassment. This insight is essential: the effect of our actions, not our intentions, defines our relationships.

The challenge is twofold. First, we are often unaware that our actions have hurt others. Second, many of us believe that if our actions were not intended to hurt, we have no responsibility to address the situation, because the problem lies in the other person's misunderstanding of our actions. While sometimes others do misunderstand our intentions, often we lack insight into how our behaviour needs transformation.

Jesus challenges us: "If you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way, first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering" (Matt. 5:23–24). Jesus urges us to take initiative when we feel something is wrong with a relationship. The new teaching is that we should take the initiative, whether or not we feel responsible for the breach.

Living restorative justice also means we are proactive in maintaining good relationships, sensitive to negative changes in relationships and open to hearing and confessing when we have unintentionally hurt others.

When Pat realises that the tone and body language hurt Chris, and that others noticed, Pat has something to confess. Pat should not only express regret to Chris but also at the next council meeting. If no one talks to Pat about the behaviour, Pat will inadvertently continue to harm others. Pat needs to learn how to deal with the stress of difficult situations so that others are not hurt.

Chris needs to take responsibility for the phone call, to realize that the words arose from anger and hurt, and that such challenges do not help build strong churches. Speaking to others about how their actions have had a negative impact is often helpful, but accusing people and and passing judgment on their intentions is wrong. To question another's commitment to Christ because of a disagreement is indefensible.

Months earlier, the council, including Chris, agreed to Pat's request that major agenda items be submitted before the meeting so Pat could integrate them into a realistic agenda. Yet Chris has proceeded to act as though pastors are exempt from this protocol. Chris should confess this presumption. Chris also needs to examine the impulse to side-step the outreach committee, and face the fact that bypassing the church's organizational structures undermines its health. Chris should ask that the church council address the structural problems so solutions can be found.

If Pat and Chris confess their unhelpful actions at the next meeting, and they and the council take steps to prevent a recurrence, the positive impact will strengthen relationships there and in the church as a whole. Confession can result in personal, relational, and structural transformation. The learning that occurs in these settings makes us more aware of how our lives intersect, and we move from an individualistic to an interconnected focus.

Restorative justice calls us to be in good relationship. When our actions, intentional or unintentional, result in harm and broken relationships, we are called to respond. Living restorative justice means we do not justify our actions that have caused harm to others. Instead we confess them without expecting anything in return. Living restorative justice also means we are proactive in maintaining good relationships, sensitive to negative changes in relationships and open to hearing and confessing when we have unintentionally hurt others.

Notes

[1] Howard Zehr, *Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice* (Scottdale: Herald Pr., 1990), 181.

[2] Joseph A. Kuypers, *Man's Will to Hurt: Investigating the Causes, Supports, and Varieties of His Violence* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 1992), 96–100.

[3] Albert Mehrabian, *Nonverbal Communication* (Chicago: Aldine Atherton, 1972), 182.

[4] Workplace Harassment Series, *Harassment in the Workplace: Management Awareness* ([Chatsworth, Calif.]: AIMS Multimedia, 1999).

About the author

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Paying for our sins
What Mennonites should confess in the wake of 9-11-01

Melanie Zuercher

No literate, educated adult in North America should have been caught off guard by what happened on September 11, 2001. I am not saying we should have been expecting religious extremists to carry out an action that would kill thousands of civilians. But ours were not the first civilians to die (never mind that it was not only the United States that lost people in the attacks), nor have they been the last. And no one in the United States is truly innocent (Canadians will have to decide their status for themselves), although that has nothing to do with whether people deserve to be victims of evil actions. If we believe that all human beings are created in the image of God, we also believe no one deserves that.

The sun came up and went down on September 11 all over the world, and the events in New York and Washington made global headlines. But those events did not mean the same thing outside North America, and that date does not hold the same significance elsewhere. And that is part of what we need to confess.

Should Mennonites, with a doctrinal foundation of following Jesus' way of peace and reconciling love, have even less excuse for their shock and stunned helplessness in the wake of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks and the crash of a jet in a western Pennsylvania field in what could be described as "Mennonite country"? Perhaps —but maybe not for the obvious reasons.

The sun came up and went down on September 11 all over the world, and the events in New York and Washington, D.C., made global headlines. But those events did not mean the same thing outside North America, and that date does not hold the same significance elsewhere. And that, I think, is part of what we need to confess.

To help flesh out what I was thinking regarding the events of September 11 and confession, I decided to talk to four

Mennonites who are directly involved in peace and justice work. It is probably not a coincidence that all of them either work for Mennonite Central Committee or have strong MCC ties, although I chose them based on geographical and gender balance.

Rachel Stutzman (a graduate student) spent nearly three years in North Newton, Kansas, as peace and justice resource education staff person for MCC Central States, a region that comprises 16 states, from Texas to North Dakota. Larry Leaman-Miller worked with Witness for Peace in Nicaragua and MCC in El Salvador and Denver, Colorado, and has directed the Colorado office of the American Friends Service Committee for the past four years. Since 1999, Lois Hess Nafziger, Goshen, Indiana, has worked in peace and justice resource education for MCC Great Lakes. John Rempel is currently the MCC liaison to the United Nations in New York, a position he has held for the last decade.

All four touched on similar themes, yet I was struck that each had a particular emphasis when asked what they thought we Mennonites should confess in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001.

Rachel Stutzman immediately pointed to what people of color within the MCC Central States region said about the profiling of Middle Easterners (or those who "looked" Middle Eastern) that occurred after the attacks. "Not much changed for [MCC constituents of color]," she says. "They were living in fear on account of profiling before [September 11] and they still are."

She also talked about her experiences meeting with high school–aged Mennonite youth. "They say, 'Yes, we're pacifists,' but few seem to have made a conscious choice," she says. "They are caught between who they have been taught they are, and embracing [a peace theology] as their own."

But it is not only the young people who seem unable to articulate clearly the how and why of the Mennonite peace position, she says. "We [as peace and justice advocates] can go out in the field and talk until we turn blue, but it's like seeds falling on parched ground without the theology. We have it, but we don't seem to know how to articulate it or make it practical."

The work of peacemaking and educating people on what it means to be peacemakers is certainly not new, she says. "But there

hasn't been this sense of urgency, until now when there's the possibility of a draft, or that we won't get home safely at night. For white, middle-class Mennonites, the urgency has been missing from the equation, even though we should have been feeling it because our neighbors [of color] do, every day.

"I haven't heard many of us addressing our privilege as white North Americans, or how we benefit from a system that oppresses people all over the world. I've heard a lot of speaking out against the government, but not much about how we benefit from that government. I'd like to hear more conscious effort to acknowledge that."

"I haven't heard many of us addressing our privilege as white North Americans, or how we benefit from a system that oppresses people all over the world. I've heard a lot of speaking out against the government, but not much about how we benefit from that government."

Larry Leaman-Miller has spent his whole working life with faith-based non-profit organizations in Central America and the United States. Over the past eleven years in Denver, as he has moved in the more activist circles, he has heard this question increasingly often: "Where are the Mennonites?" He recognizes from his own preference that "Mennonites dislike public expressions that border on being confrontive. We're always planning these kinds of actions at AFSC, and I admit I don't like them. I'm always racking my brain for some alternatives that are more inclusive [of the quieter folks]."

But, Larry says, there is one thing that Mennonites quietly do, along with most U.S. citizens, that makes them complicit in a global culture of violence that many perhaps have only recently recognized. "Draft resistance has been a major part of our history as Mennonites," he says. "But the draft is now pretty well irrelevant. The military doesn't need people for today's high-tech weapons. They need money. And we continue to pay, through our taxes.

"Before September 11, our military budget was six times more than that of the next highest nation. It represented almost half the world's spending, and then add on our allies," plus the Bush administration's requested increase as of spring 2002, he says. "We need to change our focus from draft resistance and nonregistra-

tion. It's difficult, because this means everyone and is not limited by gender or age. We need to face and confess that we have been contributing to military 'solutions,' and our whole country suffers in the long run. Education, job training, and all kinds of social services and community development take the cut [when military spending increases or demands a bigger percentage of the national budget]."

Lois Hess Nafziger notes that Mennonites have a variety of responses to conflict, violence, and war. Before September 11, she says, "I knew the reality, but since then I've become more aware of the spectrum along which we confess to being 'a peace church.' Amish, Beachy Amish, Mennonite Brethren, Brethren in Christ, Mennonite Church USA—all support MCC, but there are differences in how they speak to the state, or even if they do. It seems we do speak to government when it directly affects us, such as the Amish [in northern Indiana] when they were ordered to put reflective triangles on the backs of their buggies.

"We in MC USA are not driving buggies, but we are consuming huge amounts of petroleum and petroleum products, and then we wonder why there's so much chaos and violence in the world." Or, as Rachel Stutzman puts it, "I am not as disturbed by the [proliferation of] flags as by the push to buy, buy, buy and 'prop up the economy,' without looking at the roots of the problem."

As citizens of the richest country in the world, U.S. Mennonites need to confess their responsibility, Lois says. "We need to confess our dependency [on our economic system]. And we need to confess that in some ways we [Mennonites] have wronged people by being the providers to the world.... We have the money and resources, so we have the power to dole them out. And this is hard for me to say, because I work for MCC, and I don't know the answer to that."

In May 2001, Lois joined an MCC learning tour to South Africa. While she was in Durban, she met some refugees from the Congo. "These were men who had been in university, in pre-med and pre-law, and all they could find in Durban to do was to guard cars. When I got back, I had letters from two of them, one asking for money. I don't blame him. You look for whatever light and

hope you can find. But I didn't know what to do. The economic inequality in the world—in our churches—needs to be addressed. It's tough to talk about—it's our security."

John Rempel says there are three areas in which he as a Mennonite needs to confess in the wake of the events of September 11. One of these is "being a bystander." "I [see] the Anabaptist Vision as a way of living critically in relationship to our society," he says. "The danger is that this makes us into bystanders, as 'really not part of' the society whose actions around the world brought about this unleashing of vengeance."

"It's been hard to empathize with the desperation [of the hijackers], with the poverty [of their people], the fear of having their religion and culture obliterated by the West."

A second area for confession deals with "solidarity in suffering," he says. "I'm not cynical, at the basic human level, about the outpouring [from people all over the country] of solidarity with those who suffered in the attacks. No matter why people were in the World Trade Center, they didn't directly provoke or deserve what happened.

"The other side is that it's been hard to empathize with the desperation [of the hijackers], with the poverty [of their people], the fear of having their religion and culture obliterated by the West. I had to struggle with myself not to get caught up in the stereotypes of Islamic militants." To choose to be nationalistic, John says, is to choose with whom you are in solidarity, a thing he says is "not Mennonite."

Finally, he points to a need to confess "false claims of innocence." He heard of Mennonites both in New York City and elsewhere saying, along with most other Americans: "We are innocent. We did nothing to deserve this."

"For a while," he says, "I made myself read the [daily] obituaries in the *New York Times*," of those who had perished in the attacks. "Eventually, I couldn't take it any more. It evoked powerful and primal feelings and frequently the question: 'How could they do this to us?' But no American is innocent.... The United States is imperialistic. We derive unequal economic benefit from other countries. That doesn't undercut a basic

human empathy, but we're not innocent. We can't separate ourselves from our complicity with the institutions." And, he adds, we are not barred by law or threat of violence from expressing our dissent from or disagreement with our government's policies and actions, yet few of us do so.

For Mennonites, a confession of faith is a statement of our beliefs as Christian people. It helps us interpret Scripture and guides our practice of what we believe (discipleship), among other things. The *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* includes articles on "Sin" and "Salvation," the latter of which we receive when we "repent of sin, ...accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord...[and] are reconciled with God and brought into the reconciling community of God's people" (Article 8).

The events of September 11 have been used to justify everything from urging us to spend more money at the mall, to supporting having bombs dropped on Afghan people, to watching Israel and the West Bank incinerate as U.S. dollars keep flowing to the Israeli military.

But we do not do well at naming our sins, at least not in public. September 11, 2001, and what happened in three communities in the eastern United States on that day, has since been used to justify everything from urging us to buy a new Ford Explorer and spend more money at the mall, to supporting having bombs dropped on Afghan people who have already been violated for decades, to watching Israel and the West Bank incinerate as U.S. dollars keep flowing to the Israeli military. To Mennonites, whose foundation of faith is Jesus Christ who refused to choose sides and who spoke hard words to the powers and lost his life for it, let September 11 be a reminder of something we should never have forgotten. The majority of us in North America are white and middle class. We pay for, and we benefit directly from, social and economic systems that helped evil take root not only in the hearts of nineteen hijackers and those who supported them, but also in others around the world and in our own neighborhoods.

When asked what Mennonite pastors should be doing in these days, John Rempel, himself a pastor for nearly three decades, had this to say: "Pastors should help us face the places where we as individuals, churches, and a society falsely claim innocence and

claim not to be part of evil systems. The pastor should bear concrete truth about how we as Christians live in this society and are complicit, but should also distinguish facing responsibility from being guilt-tripped.

"At the same time, the pastor should also be the guardian of people's souls. We need to continue our Christ-centered worship. We need deep exposure to prayer and the Bible. These are our touchstones."

Another role for the pastor is to enable lament, which John found himself doing at the U.N. soon after the September 11 attacks. "One thing that struck me, working at the U.N., was the universal need for rituals of mourning," John says. "There were many public statements coming from the U.N.," he adds, "but a few people I work with said: 'All these statements have been political. They've been humane, but none has touched a religious vein or used religious language, even in the broadest sense.'" So John and some others at the U.N. organized an inter-religious memorial service for those who had died. "It was an interesting marriage of people from different religions who all wanted to find a common ground in lament and grief," he says. "The service included elements of confession and contrition for our complicity with the evil in the world, in helping to create a world where such evil could take place."

Luke 12:48b contains familiar words of Jesus: "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded" (NRSV). White, middle class, North American Mennonites need to confess that God has blessed us but we have not done with all our blessings what God requires. We need to confess that there are things we have left undone. We need to confess that we, too, have evil in our hearts, and to mourn its reality. We need to repent. Because we are Mennonites who believe in discipleship, we need to act. And because we live in free North American societies, we can.

About the author

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Confessing faith, confronting sin

Jacob W. Elias

In his letters to congregations, the apostle Paul frequently cites hymns, creeds, and confessions that seem to have been sung or recited in these communities.[1] When offering his pastoral counsel, Paul recalls these traditions to evoke memory of the gospel and to elicit conformity to the gospel. These articulations of the gospel for particular congregations have a communal faith-forming function. Each congregation has its own story and deals with particular concerns; the gospel speaks in specific ways to each group in its own circumstances. Paul actively persuades individuals to confess their faith, but beyond inviting individuals to make life-transforming initial decisions for Christ, Paul views corporate confessions of faith as significant for the formation of Christ-like character in the faith community.

Confessions of faith function in the epistle to Titus to form, reform, and transform a faith community in first-century Crete. Gospel summaries in this brief epistle and elsewhere serve both as critique of unfaithfulness and encouragement toward fidelity.

Whereas confessions of faith are relatively common in the Pauline corpus of letters, there are but few indications that Paul and his co-workers actively advocated a ritual practice of confessing sin or acknowledging sinfulness.[2] Instead of viewing sin primarily as individual acts of defiance or disobedience requiring repentance and divine forgiveness, Paul understands sin primarily as an oppressive power from which individuals and the faith community need divine rescue.[3] The gospel offers release from bondage; even the forgiveness of sin is interpreted as rescue from enslaving powers.[4]

My goal in this essay is to follow the pastoral argument in one of the letters within the Pauline corpus to illustrate how confessing faith relates to confronting sin. Specifically the focus is on the epistle to Titus, a short letter where the author cites several confessions of faith. We will examine how these confessions

function to form, reform, and transform a faith community in first-century Crete. Gospel summaries in this brief epistle and elsewhere serve both as critique of unfaithfulness and encouragement toward fidelity.[5]

Paul and the pastorals

Through an apocalypse of Jesus Christ, Paul came face to face with God's pre-emptive grace. He caught a vision of a glorious future, already realized, yet still unfolding. This vision drove Paul's evangelistic efforts and inspired his pastoral care for the congregations that emerged in the communities where he preached the gospel. Paul read the Scriptures with new eyes. The story of God's creating, calling, covenanting, correcting, and consummating activity took on new life and relevance in light of Jesus Christ. Paul also entered into the stories of varied congregations, from Thessalonica and Philippi in Macedonia to Corinth and Cenchreae in Achaia, from Galatia and Ephesus and Colossae in the east to Rome in the west. In his pastoral letters to these churches, Paul drew on Scriptures and revelation in ways that intersected with their local stories, and he employed metaphors and images from their worlds.

When we read the epistle to Titus, we get in touch with a later generation in the church, with an older Paul, and with co-workers carrying his missionary and theological enterprise into the next generation. Many scholars consider the epistles addressed to Titus and Timothy to have come not from Paul but from others writing on Paul's behalf during his lifetime or in Paul's name following his death.[6] We call the author "Paul" in recognition that, whether or not he actually wrote these pastoral writings, they speak solidly from within the trajectory of Paul's apostolic tradition.

Some scholars suggest that Paul's earlier dramatic vision for the future has become blurred, or that his successors have domesticated the prophetic message of the apostle. According to these interpretations of the pastoral Epistles, worship has shifted away from dynamic doxology to a concern to articulate static propositions and to root out heresies. Relationships have evolved from egalitarian understandings to the hierarchical patterns reflected in guidelines for life in the household, which call for the strict subordination of women and slaves. And the sense of the

church's urgent mission has dissipated into a quest for respectability. In a word, the church has moved from subverting the status quo to accommodating to it. According to this reconstruction of the setting within which the pastoral Epistles need to be interpreted, by the beginning of the second century a bourgeois ethic has taken over within that movement rooted in the ministry of Jesus, who identified with the poor and the marginalized.[7]

An examination of the gospel confessions in Titus sharply raises the question whether they move the church to conform to the dominant culture or to confront that culture.

An examination of the gospel confessions in Titus sharply raises the question whether they move the church to conform to the dominant culture or to confront that culture. Has the foundation been laid for the emerging "church catholic" seeking accommodation with the empire? Or does the restless vision of God's still unfolding peace- and justice-creating reign continue to inspire and empower communities of faith situated within the empire?

The story in Crete

An imaginative narrative of life among people being addressed by this letter might provide insight into that culture. We imagine a person named Jason, a member of one of the Jewish communities in Crete who has recently become a believer in Christ. The following "story" is loosely based on texts in the epistle to Titus (especially 1:5, 10–16; 2:1–10; 3:1–3, 9) and on Acts 27:1–12.

Travelers making their way along the coast of the island are treated to breathtaking views of the Great Sea. To the north lies the Aegean, whose waters bear cargo and passenger ships from distant harbors like Cenchreae in Achaia or Ephesus in Asia. Jason recalls that one of these ships delivered the Jewish missionary Paul to Crete. Paul had also made an earlier stopover on the island as a prisoner on his way to Rome. Jason speculates that something about that rest stop at Fair Havens might have sparked Paul's desire to return. On his release from prison some time later, Paul chose to revisit Crete on a preaching mission. Paul's testimony concerning Christ had moved Jason to join other Jews as well as native Cretans in confessing Jesus Christ as Lord.

By the time Paul departed, there was a congregation in Crete, and Paul's co-worker Titus was left behind to take care of things. It won't be easy for Titus, Jason muses. Cretans have a reputation as an independent and stubborn bunch. They quote a memorable line from Epimenides, one of their own poets of a bygone era: "Cretans are always liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons." Such characterization would smart if spoken by an outsider, but the people of Crete seem to get a cynical pleasure from perpetuating this self-deprecating caricature among themselves. Jason wonders whether isolation, especially during the winter when travel is risky at best, has led to their rough-and-tumble attitude toward life. Cretans are notorious for raucous oratory, too much wine, and the pursuit of sexual pleasure.

Some of these Cretan qualities even seem to have rubbed off on people in the Jewish colonies. Having traveled on occasion to Jewish communities elsewhere, Jason senses a distinctive level of contentiousness among his own people in Crete, especially in arguments about some of their founding myths and the interpretation of their traditional laws. And now with the emergence of a few messianic groups of Jews and Gentiles acknowledging Jesus as the Messiah, the arguments and debate have intensified. Jason wonders how long it will be until the Roman authorities on the island take note and begin to investigate and take action against the Christians. What will Titus need to do to bring stability among these converts who have accepted Paul's gospel on the wild island province of Crete?

The gospel, the culture, and the church's mission

What vision sustains a faith community when the founder leaves the scene? We have visited a young Christian community in Crete. Now we imagine Titus as he hears encouragement and instructions from the apostle Paul about how to lead the church.

Even the salutation of the epistle to Titus seems to bear in mind the trademark incivility of the people of Crete among whom the church struggles for a clear sense of its identity in Christ. Paul cites as the goal of this apostolic letter not only the faith of God's elect (Titus 1:1) and the hope of eternal life (1:2) but also the knowledge of the truth that is in accordance with godliness (1:1). The gospel is truth lived out by people of faith within godly

relationships sustained by reassurances of their everlasting hope. Such godliness derives from the nature and the redemptive activity of God: God our Savior (1:3) who is made known through Christ Jesus our Savior (1:4). The promises of God as one who never lies (1:2) are trustworthy and sure.

The letter outlines the desired character qualities of elders and overseers (1:5–9), warns about the corrupting influence of deceptive speech (1:10–16), and exhorts members of the households about appropriate behavior and relationships (2:1–10). The Cretans' rough-and-tumble moral ethos apparently necessitates firm directives and even harsh correctives. In the history of the church these texts have regrettably been used to justify slavery and the suppression of women. However, we should note the redemptive and missional intention of these directives.

The overseers need to be rooted in the trustworthy word, so they preach in accord with truth and also correct those who contradict the truth of the gospel (1:9). Deceivers need to be rebuked sharply, so they may become sound in the faith (1:13). Older women are to model reverent behavior and teach young women to show love to their husbands and children, so the word of God may not be discredited (2:5). The urgency for young men to exercise self-control calls for Titus to show himself to be a model of good works and integrity of speech; "then any opponent will be put to shame, having nothing evil to say of us" (2:8). Even the submission and fidelity of slaves to their masters (2:9–10) is advocated "so that in everything they may be an ornament to the doctrine of God our Savior" (2:10). In a situation beset by chaos, the witness of the church must include attention to orderly relationships, a commitment to the basic values of hard work and love within the family, and an eagerness to do good. The life style of believers in their relationship to each other and the world confronts the culture and gives witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In 2:11–14 and 3:4–7, Paul supplies the narrative framework that informs and motivates the living of the gospel for the sake of the mission of the church. The gospel's implications for the church coming of age within the disarray of first-century Crete may not be the same as in other situations. But the big story, the gospel of Jesus Christ, remains dynamically the same.

As a pastor drawing on the living gospel tradition in order to address these local circumstances, Paul recounts the story of salvation. This telling of the story features the imagery of epiphany. In fact, the gospel's narrative plot involves two manifestations of divine mystery, one past, the other still future. During the period between these two revelatory moments the church is summoned to live within its current social and political reality both in light of what has already been unveiled and in the hope of its future consummation. The following table depicts how 2:11–14 portrays these past and future epiphanies and the life and witness of the community that finds itself in between.

The past epiphany	Life and witness in the interim	The future epiphany
The grace of God has appeared bringing salvation to all	*training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly*	*while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.*
He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity	*and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.*	

This confession lifts up both the formational and educational functions of God's gracious salvation, which is potentially available to all people through Christ's self-sacrificing redemptive love. Given the prevailing ethos in the surrounding culture, it is noteworthy that Paul fixes first on the corrective training required among people who need to renounce impiety and worldly passions (2:12a). Such training also entails the formation of virtuous character in individuals who live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly (2:12b). Character formation also has a communal dimension. God's salvation liberates the faith community from lawlessness ("from all iniquity") and cleanses a people as God's own possession (an echo of Exodus 19:5), a people who express their covenant faithfulness through their zeal for doing good ("zealous for good deeds") (2:14).

The rhetoric of epiphany would likely have been familiar to the hearers of this letter, because this language was used by the imperial cult in its veneration of the emperor. In Titus the language of epiphany is applied to the redeemer God who has appeared in Jesus Christ. God's people anticipate the glorious future manifestation not of Caesar as liberator and benefactor but of "our great God and Savior Jesus Christ" (3:13). This confession of God in Jesus Christ as the Savior flies in the face of claims about the emperor as savior.[8]

When Paul echoes a confession that pre-empts imperial claims, the question about the relationship between the church's confession of the gospel and its life within the empire is posed sharply. What obligations do the people of God have toward the imperial authorities? A group of people who confess God as the Savior through Jesus Christ might have seemed subversive to Roman officials. Strikingly, however, Paul continues his instructions to Titus by counseling submission and obedience toward ruling authorities: "Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show courtesy to everyone" (3:1–2). How should these instructions be understood? Once again, we need to follow the grand story whose plot helps the reader make sense of this pastoral counsel.

Again Paul develops the narrative framework that undergirds faithfulness. He does so first with a graphic sketch of their former life (3:3), followed by another poetic litany of what God has done (3:4–6), climaxed by reference to their future hope (3:7).

Former life (3:3)	What God has done (3:4–6)	The future (3:7)
For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another.	*But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior*	*so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.*

Here is another marvelous version of the big story within which the church is invited to view its existence. The depiction of their past in 3:3 appears in a generic sense rather than specifically with reference to the situation in Crete. Paul includes himself representatively in this chronicle concerning sinful humanity. Attention is drawn to the experience of enslavement through having been led astray by deceitful powers. The emphasis in 3:4–6 lies on the saving and renewing power of "God our Savior," whose philanthropy has become manifest in divine rescue, not because anyone deserves it or has earned it but because of God's mercy. Again the language of the ruler-cult has been co-opted, not only in the vocabulary of epiphany but in the reference to God's loving kindness (Gk.: *philanthropy*). Reference to the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit surely alludes to the ritual of water baptism, which symbolizes the believers' conversion and inner renewal. In 3:7, Paul notes the future orientation of God's justifying grace. Members of the family remember their future "as heirs according to the hope of eternal life."

How then does this telling of the gospel story inform the ethical counsel about submission and obedience to the authorities? To those who have experienced rebirth, renewal, and incorporation as heirs into God's family, it goes without saying that their ultimate allegiance belongs to God. Their primary loyalty to God is conveyed in their confession of God our Savior (3:4) and Jesus Christ our Savior (3:6). God's heirs will therefore not submit to rulers in ways that violate their primary loyalty. Through exemplary character and behavior, including the kind of submission that makes clear that rulers too are accountable to God, the members of God's household give testimony to God. As with the household instructions in 2:1–10, so here with reference to their relationships to the state, their compliance with these guidelines has a missional goal: "I desire that you insist on these things, so that those who have come to believe in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works; these things are excellent and profitable to everyone" (3:8).

Attention to good works does not however imply conformity with the status quo in ways that contravene their Christian confession. A congregation formed through God's redeeming initiative in Jesus Christ lives within its culture in ways that

conform to values that are in harmony with the gospel. However, actions and attitudes that do not echo the way made known in Jesus Christ need to be confronted, first of all within the church: "Avoid stupid controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless" (3:9). As a people of God's own, a people eager to reflect God's loving kindness within their culture (cf. 2:14; 3:4), the church therefore needs both to discipline sinners (3:10–11) and to demonstrate a commitment to mutual aid (3:14). A missional stance toward the surrounding culture invites the church both to confess faith and to maintain a life style that confronts sin.[9]

Confessing faith: Conforming and confronting

The gospel narrated in the hymns and other recitals of faith chronicles the formation of the people whom God calls and rescues through Jesus Christ. This community is summoned to appropriate God's grace for living in harmony with the gospel. This life style may conform to some of the values of the surrounding culture, and may confront that culture at other points. The impulse toward stability can lead the church to over-emphasize its conformity to the dominant culture, in a quest for respectability; the household instructions and the counsel to slaves seem to later readers an unfortunate endorsement of an oppressive hierarchy. On the other hand, a zealous impulse for change can upset relationships to the dominant culture, leading to an unhealthy disconnect between the church and its context. The congregation's confession of the formative and transforming dynamic of God's grace manifest in Jesus Christ elicits a communal character somewhere between a compromising conformity and a destabilizing confrontation. The invasive power of sin from which God in Christ has brought redemption needs to be confronted within the redeemed community, so that God's saving intent through Jesus Christ can be made known to all.

Notes

[1] The phenomenon of hymns in Paul's letters is analyzed by Stephen E. Fowl, *The Story of Christ in the Ethics of Paul: An Analysis of the Function of the Hymnic Material in the Pauline Corpus* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Pr., 1990). Fowl focuses specifically on hymns and deals primarily with three hymns to Christ: Phil. 2:6–11; Col. 1:15–20; 1 Tim. 3:16b. A broader study which deals with Paul's appropriation and

expansion of the early church's faith confessions is Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).
[2] An article entitled "Sin, Guilt" in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Pr., 1993), 877–81, illustrates a tendency to read Paul's letters through a "guilt/forgiveness" grid rather than "shame/honor" or "bondage/release" scenarios. Author Leon Morris admits that Paul "makes very little use of the 'guilt' terminology in the psychological sense, but it may fairly be said that many of the things he says about sin include the thought that sinners are guilty people" (877).
[3] The differences between these two assessments of the nature of sin are outlined succinctly in Martinus C. de Boer, "Paul and Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology," in *Apocalyptic and the New Testament,* ed. Joel Marcus and Marion L. Soards (Sheffield, England: JSOT Pr., 1989), 169–90.
[4] Colossians 1:13–14 is the only place in the Pauline corpus where the words *forgiveness* and *sin* occur together. Even here, forgiveness of sin is connected with redemption, being rescued from the power of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of his beloved Son.
[5] This article draws on part of a larger manuscript, still in process, tentatively entitled "Remember the Future," which takes a narrative approach to Paul's pastoral theology.
[6] Recent commentaries reflect a widely held consensus that the pastoral Epistles are pseudonymous: Jerome D. Quinn, *The Letter to Titus,* The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1990). There are exceptions, e.g., Luke Timothy Johnson, *Letters to Paul's Delegates: 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus* (Valley Forge: Trinity Pr. International, 1996).
[7] The present study has interacted significantly with Philip H. Towner, *The Goal of Our Instruction: The Structure of Theology and Ethics in the Pastoral Epistles* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Pr., 1989). See his introduction (9–18) for a survey and analysis of how scholars have interpreted the theology and ethics of the pastoral Epistles.
[8] The nature of the Roman imperial cult during the first century is portrayed in Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg: Trinity Pr. International, 1997). See especially S. R. F. Price, "Rituals and Power" (47–71), for some of the proclamations regarding Caesar Augustus as "savior who put an end to war" (53). See also Towner, *The Goal of Our Instruction,* 66–71.
[9] For reflections on the theology and communal ethic as reflected in the epistle to Titus, see James D. G. Dunn, "The First and Second Letters to Timothy and the Letter to Titus," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 11 (Nashville: Abingdon Pr., 2000), 873–4.

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Confession
Restoring trust, repairing the breach

Muriel Bechtel

The word *confession*, for some Mennonites, conjures up memories of friends who had to admit contritely that they were pregnant before their marriage could be blessed by the church. Others associate confession with standing before the leaders of the church and answering questions to determine whether one was worthy to receive the Lord's Supper. Still others remember members being excommunicated for beliefs or behaviour judged to be outside the boundaries of their particular faith community.

Too often our rituals of confession focus only on individual responsibility for sin. We seldom acknowledge that the church is also "imperfect and thus in constant need of repentance."[1]

Rituals of confession can begin the process of repairing the breach and opening the way for people to be reconciled to God and to each other.

Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective affirms that "the enslaving nature of sin is apparent in the powers of evil, which work through both individuals and groups and in the entire created order. These powers, principalities, and elemental spirits of the universe work through political, economic, social and even religious systems to turn people away from justice and righteousness."[2] The commentary develops that concept further by explaining that "organizations have a 'spirit' that can incite persons to do evil they would not have chosen on their own.... Human violence toward each other, enmity between peoples, the domination of men over women, and the adverse conditions of life and work in the world—these are all signs of sin in humanity and in all creation."

In my work with congregations and pastors, I have discovered that in times of conflict, when sin is not acknowledged in our worship, a hypocritical gap develops between the community's conduct and what it knows God desires. As we read in Isaiah 58, worship that merely makes us feel good while being untouched by

God's concerns and character violates God's intentions.[3] Instead of reconciling worshipers with God and each other, such false worship widens the gap. Singing that "God's love is for everybody…from across the street to around the world"[4] without confessing our failures to welcome "all who join themselves to Christ to become part of the family of God"[5] leaves us with a sense of incongruence between our life and our confession of faith.

Efforts at mediation and reconciliation and changes in behaviour may bring a measure of healing and hope. But something more is needed among those who have been entrusted with the message of reconciliation. When our efforts to exercise discipline and be mutually accountable become barriers instead of "signs of God's offer of forgiveness and transforming grace to believers,"[6] we need to confess our failures to be the just, loving, and forgiving people we know God intends us to be. When conflicts divide us, we need to confess our regrets and grief over all we have lost. When we are in positions of authority and hurt those entrusted to our care, we need to confess our responsibility for abusing our power. When we have been sinned against, we find it hard to let go of past hurts and work toward reconciliation if we do not see or hear signs of confession.

In times of conflict, when sin is not acknowledged in our worship, a hypocritical gap develops between the community's conduct and what it knows God desires.

According to Frederick Buechner, "To confess your sins to God is not to tell him anything he doesn't already know. Until you confess them, however, they are the abyss between you [and God]. When you confess them, they become the Golden Gate bridge."[7] Likewise, confessing my failures to another may not tell her anything she doesn't already know, but it starts to rebuild the trust needed to mend the rifts between us.

For our worship to be true, we need to confess the brokenness sin causes among us, as well as our faith in Jesus Christ who reconciles us to God, to ourselves, and to each other. The following rituals of confession began the process of repairing the breach and asking God's Spirit to open the way for people to be reconciled.[8] Through them the hypocritical gap narrowed, and the worship of those involved became more true.

A congregational liturgy of confession

A congregation decided to have joint summer worship services with another congregation that included some people who had left the first congregation during a conflict. The decision to worship together precipitated the idea of planning a ritual of confession. Some were convinced that honest worship required acknowledging the alienation of past hurts and affirming their longings for a different future. Others were determined not to let their children's teeth be set on edge because of the sour grapes their parents ate (cf. Jer. 31:29, Ezek. 18:2).

All who had been involved in the original events were invited to a special service preceding the first joint worship service. The opening words gave the purpose of the gathering and expressed the hope that God would use the occasion to open doors to further healing and reconciliation. Scripted prayers of confession expressed feelings that were still too tender to name, and songs spoke to wounded hearts about God's healing and forgiveness. Isaiah 58 provided rich images of a restored community with a renewed purpose:

> *Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;*
> *you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.*
> *If you remove the yoke from among you,*
> *the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,*
> *if you offer your food to the hungry*
> *and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,*
> *then your light shall rise in the darkness*
> *and your gloom be like the noonday.*
> *The LORD will guide you continually,*
> *and satisfy your needs in parched places,*
> *and make your bones strong;*
> *and you shall be like a watered garden,*
> *like a spring of water,*
> *whose waters never fail.*
> *Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;*
> *you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;*
> *you shall be called the repairer of the breach,*
> *the restorer of streets to live in. (Isa. 58:9–12)*

As every participant took a piece of lemon, he was invited to name silently the bitterness and hurts he had caused and suffered, and to offer them to God for healing and forgiveness. Likewise, as each person took a small cup of honey, she was encouraged to taste it and remember the gifts of grace and kindness she had given and received, even in the midst of pain, and to honour them as gifts from God to the community.

At the front of the room, a large bowl of water reminded participants of their baptismal commitments and of the Spirit's power to restore the church so that it would be like a watered garden. One by one, people dropped the lemon and honey into the water as the group sang "Jesus, remember me,"[9] acknowledging their dependence on Christ's love to forgive and reconcile them to God and each other. The worship concluded with the prayer of St. Francis and a prayer of blessing:

> *Gracious God, we go on from here*
> *as witnesses to new life through your grace.*
> *We face the future with renewed confidence*
> *and deeper humility,*
> *a stronger sense of the sacredness of all life*
> *and the dignity of all people.*
> *Fill us with your grace and peace,*
> *so that through us others may come to know of your love*
> *and life everlasting. Amen.*

Ritual of confession and closure for estranged colleagues

Liturgies for larger gatherings are often best planned with scripted prayers, hymns, and Scripture rather than with personal sharing. However, smaller, more intimate circles can provide important opportunities for personal confession between aggrieved parties, as in the following ritual of confession and closure developed by colleagues whose conflict led to the end of their working relationship.

A Scripture reading set the stage for the small gathering of estranged colleagues and their supportive friends: "Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it

many become defiled" (Heb. 12:14–15). An opening prayer acknowledged their need for Christ's presence among these "two or three" gathered in his name (Matt. 18:20):

God of numberless blessings,
we ask for a special blessing in these moments.
Bless us with a keen awareness of your presence.
Be with us as we gather in the name and spirit of Christ,
the great physician.
Be with us to hear the thoughts expressed in words
and the longings too deep for words.
Be with us to calm anxiety, to forgive sin, to ease pain.
Amen.[10]

After the prayer, participants shared statements of confession they had prepared, naming their regrets and sorrow. They acknowledged disappointments and hurts, and they honoured the sincere efforts they had made to serve together and to resolve their differences. The prayer that followed focused on God's mercy and reconciling power:

Holy God, we thank you that you deal with us
  not according to our sins
  nor punish us as we deserve,
but receive us according to your overflowing grace
  and your unmeasurable mercy.
You receive us as we are;
  you show us what we can be.
You have come to us in Jesus Christ
  to share our common lot
  and to reconcile us to yourself.
Sweep over us with your Spirit,
  change us by your love,
  resolve our alienation.
Let us be made whole to sing with joy before you
  and to live to your glory in the world. Amen.[11]

In preparation for anointing with oil, the leader asked God to grant to each participant release from attitudes and actions that

had brought pain and fracture in their working relationship, closure to the team relationship, courage to regain trust in social contexts, and the gift of a restored self-confidence grounded in God's love and call. With the anointing, the colleagues were invited to receive, "in faith and reality, an opening to the gifts of reconciliation, healing, restoration and peace."

A statement of agreement on how to proceed professionally and socially and a covenant to pray for one another followed the anointing. The service ended with the singing of "Gentle Shepherd"[12] and a closing prayer:

> *May the God who brings light out of darkness,*
> *order out of chaos,*
> *wholeness out of brokenness,*
> *life out of death,*
> *bless us with transforming love*
> *now and through all life's endings.*

Endings are especially difficult in significant relationships where trust has been broken. Restoring trust takes time, but genuine confession creates an opening for Christ's Spirit to enter and begin its healing work in the hearts of those involved.

The healing power of Scripture in our confession

A few years ago, as my husband and I were leaving the congregation I had served as pastor through several difficult years, one of the members was inspired to write a song. The hymn brought together two texts that became more poignant and powerful when placed side by side: Psalm 51, in which the psalmist begs for God's mercy for the evil he had done, and Ezekiel 36:26, in which God promises: "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you."

The hymn, "A new heart" became a focal point for the farewell service. As Tim Bergen, the composer, observed, "The words expressed what our congregation has been experiencing over the last few years, after a long and difficult period. We have been receiving a new heart and spirit, at first imperceptibly, then with greater sureness and power."[13] Through the words of Scripture, Tim helped us express our regrets for past actions and lost

opportunities, our thanks for the renewal God had begun, and our faith that God would continue to work in our lives as we went our separate ways.

Confession is not a magical solution to the problem of sin in our personal and corporate life. We need to guard diligently against the temptation to use confession to cover over the deep scars left by sin and evil. But we also need to attend to the gap that false worship creates between us and God, within ourselves, and between us and our neighbours. Genuine confession affirms our faith in a God of grace and truth, in Jesus Christ who came to reconcile the world to God, and in the Spirit who is at work in us to bring about a new creation where restored relationships and true communion are possible.

Notes

[1] *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottdale and Waterloo: Herald Pr., 1995), 31, 39.
[2] Ibid., 31–2.
[3] Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40–66*, vol. 2 of *Isaiah*, Westminster Bible Companion Series (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Pr., 1998), 186.
[4] Bryan Moyer Suderman, *God's Love Is for Everybody: New Children's Songs for the Missional Church* (Winnipeg: Ministries Commission of Mennonite Church Canada, 2001), no. 1.
[5] *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, 40.
[6] Ibid., 55.
[7] Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993), 18.
[8] My thanks to those who gave permission to use their materials and experiences.
[9] *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (Elgin: Brethren Pr.; Newton: Faith & Life; Scottdale: Mennonite Publishing Hse., 1992), no. 247.
[10] *For All Who Minister: A Worship Manual for the Church of the Brethren* (Elgin: Brethren Pr., 1993), 261.
[11] Arlene M. Mark, *Words for Worship* (Scottdale: Herald Pr., 1996), no. 296; adapted from United Church of Christ Statement of Faith, in Ruth C. Duck and Maren C. Tirrabassi, eds., *Touch Holiness: Resources for Worship* (Cleveland: United Church Pr., 1990), no. 105.
[12] *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, no. 352.
[13] Timothy L. Bergen, quoted by Mary Groh in "Pastor leaves with a new song," *Canadian Mennonite*, 10 July 2000, 26.

About the author

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The place of absolution in the service of the Lord's day

Charles Hohenstein and David Tripp

An evening service of a Hispanic Assembly of God ended with the public repentance and restoration of a man who had wounded some members of the church. They were embodying Christ's mission of forgiveness, the power of the keys: "*Reciban el Espíritu Santo. A quienes les perdonen sus pecados, les serán perdonados*" (John 20:22–23). This scene, reminiscent of the early church (see Gal. 6:1–3, 2 Cor. 5:18, Luke 15:7, 1 Tim. 5: 22), raises the question of confession and absolution in Sunday worship.

Is confession a necessary element in the liturgy?

One could argue that confession of sin has no place in the public liturgy of the redeemed, because they are the redeemed. In the early church, after all, the service of the Lord's day had neither confession nor absolution. The pattern changed, in the West, about the turn of the first millennium A.D., with the addition of the *Confiteor* (the form of confession of sins, so named from its first word) and its response.

Ministry is always, though not exclusively, addressed to the forgiveness of sins. For health, we need the constantly reinforced assurance of pardoning grace; liturgical absolution is a healing ministry.

Has the tone of the service of the Lord's day become too dominantly penitential in the West? Ministry is always, though not exclusively, addressed to the forgiveness of sins. For health, we need the constantly reinforced assurance of pardoning grace; liturgical absolution is a healing ministry. Absolution looks to the future, to spiritual maturation, to the glory of the triune giver of holiness. This need and this gift are the concern of the church, and the church, as the body of the world's maker and redeemer, confesses for the world at large.

The Eucharist itself is, under one aspect, an absolving sacrament. It has therefore been argued that, however necessary absolution is in a liturgy of the Word, specific absolution has no place in a eucharistic order. On the other hand, Christ's absolving word and his real presence in the sacrament of the altar are indissolubly linked acts of the one Christ.

Where in the service? And by which form?

At the opening of the pre-Vatican II Roman mass, both priest and people confessed and absolved one another. First the priest: "I confess to God almighty, to blessed Mary ever virgin…, to all the saints, and to you, brothers and sisters [*fratres*], that I have sinned greatly.… Therefore I pray blessed Mary ever virgin…and all the saints and you, brothers-and-sisters, to pray for me to the Lord our God." And the people prayed: "May almighty God have mercy upon you [singular], and, forgiving all your sins, lead you to life eternal." Then the people confessed likewise, but saying, "Father," instead of "brothers and sisters," and the priest followed with the same prayer, with "you" in the plural, and added the prayer, "May the almighty and merciful Lord grant us the pardon, absolution and remission of all our sins."

Cranmer's Anglican rite also prescribes a general confession at the entry to worship (in this case, daily morning and evening prayer). Then the priest says, "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; and 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 them that truly repent, and unfeignedly believe his 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."

Also at the opening of worship, the proposed communion order for the covenanting churches of Wales offers: "Receive this assurance: 'There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.' Our sins are forgiven in Christ." The people

respond: “Amen. Thanks be to God.”[1] Another example of the assurance being given near the start of the service in scriptural language—words of Jesus, in this case—is in the 1975 British *Methodist Service Book*: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Hear then his word of grace [the Uniting Church of Australia adds: ‘to us’]: Your sins are forgiven.”

The advantage of placing absolution early in the liturgy is that we are assured at once that we are approaching the throne of grace. To begin corporate worship with absolution is especially helpful in a tradition that is replacing private confession with a corporate act.

Confession and absolution are also a fitting response to the proclamation of the Word, which itself offers reconciliation. One example is from the Church Order of the Electoral Palatinate of 1556: “The almighty and merciful God forgives you your sins, and I, upon the command of our Lord Jesus Christ, on behalf of the Holy Christian Church, declare you free, clear and unbound from all your sin, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Go forth and sin no more, but improve yourselves without cease. God help you in this through his Son Jesus Christ.”[2] In Baden 400 years later, we find this: “Upon this your confession, I procaim to all who heartily lament their sin, have a sincere faith in Jesus Christ, and have a serious intent to change their lives for the better, the grace of God and the forgiveness of their sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Go forth in peace; may it be for you according to your faith.”[3]

The advantage of placing absolution early in the liturgy is that we are assured at once that we are approaching the throne of grace. Confession and absolution are also a fitting response to the proclamation of the Word, which itself offers reconciliation.

The choice of wording in absolution is theologically sensitive. The need for authoritative assurance argues for absolution as promise, either absolute (that sins are forgiven through Christ, the condition of repentance and faith being implicit) or conditional. Such promise is perhaps most cogent if put in Scripture language, particularly in words of Christ. Instead of a promise, the absolution may be a petition, asking for forgiveness as promised

and effected in atonement by Christ, and for divine aid in meeting its conditions. Petition or promise may be "for us," which asserts the minister's need for the same forgiveness as everyone else, or "for you," which Protestants often deprecate as wrongly sacerdotal, but which is properly spoken not as by a human individual but in the name of the Lord. It may also be "for you," by minister and people in turn: "Hear the good news: 'Christ died for us while we were yet sinners, that is God's proof of his love toward us.' In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven!" "In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven! Glory to God. Amen."[4]

Experience suggests that the vigorous use of emphatic general absolution encourages individual confession, precisely because it brings home the reality of salvation.

If a recommendation is asked for, we offer this twofold proposal: to place the confession and absolution at varying positions according to the season—say, at the opening during the penitential seasons of Advent and Lent, after the preaching at Christmas/Epiphany and Eastertide, before the intercessions during ordinary time. Where there is serious disquiet about absolution in the "you" form, we suggest incorporating the absolving words of Christ within a prayer, thus: "We confess…, and we ask for your forgiveness for the sake of your Son, and that we may hear in our hearts his gracious word: 'Your sins are forgiven.'"

Some risks and costs of absolution

Roman Catholic debate on general absolution is much concerned with the danger of offering forgiveness on the cheap, not least by discouraging individual auricular ("to the ear") confession (confession of sins to God in the presence of a priest). Experience suggests, however, that the vigorous use of emphatic general absolution encourages individual confession, precisely because it brings home the reality of salvation.[5]

More urgent is the consideration that the liturgical ministry of reconciliation commits the church to a full-orbed and growing ministry of reconciliation. The congregation is called to grow into a true "forgiving community,"[6] which takes responsibility for the guidance and healing and maturation of its members. To be

consistent, our churches will be obligated to follow the example of, for instance, Mennonites and Anabaptists in witness to peace and justice, forgiveness and reconciliation. What that might lead us into is beyond imagining.

Notes

[1] The Commission of the Covenanted Churches, *Y Cymun Sanctaidd* (Swansea: The Commission of the Covenanted Churches in Wales, 1981), 15.
[2] Fritz Hauss and Hans Georg Zier, eds., *Die Kirchenordungen von 1556 in der Kurpfalz und der Markgrafschaft Baden-Durlach,* Veröffentlichungen des Vereins für Kirchengeschichte in der Evangelischen Landeskirche Badens, no. 16 (Karlsruhe: Verlag Evang. Presseverband, 1956), 53–4.
[3] *Evangelisches Kirchengesangbuch: Ausgabe für die Evangelisch-protestantische Landeskirche Badens* ([Karlsruhe]: n.p., 1953).
[4] Commission on Worship of the United Methodist Church, *The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper: An Alternate Text, 1972* (Nashville: United Methodist Pub. Hse., 1972), 3.
[5] Aelred Tegels, "Reconciliation in Memphis," *Worship* 51 (January 1977): 70; and "Confession in Memphis," *Worship* 51 (May 1977): 260.
[6] See William Klassen, *The Forgiving Community* (Philadelphia: Westminster Pr., 1966); also Theodore W. Jennings, *The Liturgy of Liberation: The Confession and Forgiveness of Sins* (Nashville: Abingdon Pr., 1988).

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Smoked out into confession's healing lightness

Michael A. King

During 2002 the world recoiled as the Roman Catholic church found itself drawn into a scandal so widespread it almost seemed that with another twist or two the pope himself would be implicated. My point is not to show disrespect for the pope, or to hit the Catholic church when it's down, but rather to allow its trauma to help us think through how we, sinners all, of whom I am chief, engage our wrong behaviors. That is a far larger question than one sermon can address, so I want to focus on confession. But even confession is a big topic, so I'll simply explore three phases it can include: being smoked out, claiming our wrong behavior, and experiencing the lightness of healing within community.

Being smoked out is what the Catholic church has faced. And in its travails we hear echoes of what might be seen as the first confession, recorded in Genesis 3:8–10. Adam and Eve have just done their wrong thing. They have eaten the forbidden fruit, in anticipation of something fine. Now they are uneasy indeed; the aftermath doesn't feel so good after all.

> **Confession can include three phases: being smoked out, claiming our wrong behavior, and experiencing the lightness of healing within community.**

God comes looking for them, at the time of the evening breeze, according to Genesis 3:8. What a striking detail: the evening breeze. Day is dying in the west, to echo the old song; the heat of day is over, the fireflies are starting to flicker, and the cool breezes to stir. A quiet time, a magic time, a time when world and we in it feel once more childlike and innocent.

But not this time. This time, for the first time, innocence is gone. So when God calls for them, Adam and Eve hide, there in the bushes where the evening breeze, instead of caressing them, makes their guilty naked bodies shiver. But when God says, "Where are you?" they have no choice but to respond. The man

explains to God, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.”

Phase one of confession is not pretty. It does us little credit. We are confessing not because we want to but because we’ve been found out. We have done the wrong thing and then have tried to get on with our lives, as we in North America like to say, but God has come in with the evening breeze to smoke us out. And we explain that we were afraid, because we were naked, which is how it feels when we’ve done wrong, so we hid.

We feel most naked when we sin most. Although the sin was minor compared to my worst adult choices, I felt naked indeed when, after month upon month of stealing my mom’s grocery money to buy comics, my conscience could bear the weight no longer, smoked me out, and forced my confession. Though I had not hidden in a garden, I had hidden hundreds of ill-bought comics on top of the hall wardrobe.

God keeps after us, and, often enough, smokes us out. As bad as the experience is likely to be, however, it can be a severe mercy, because once forced to respond to God we can move beyond merely hiding, whether from God or our own judging gaze.

Adam and Eve feel so naked because they have violated the very core of God’s commandments, trying out an aspect of God’s creation God has said is off-limits, with hopes that it would turn out well. Something like this is what one accused priest seems to have done, as decades ago, at the founding of the Man-Boy Love Association, he proclaimed that this type of love was a good thing and society needlessly restrictive.

When we commit sins like this, we can’t help but hide. We can see no easy way forward, no solution without heavy consequences, so we flinch from facing what we have done. But God keeps after us, and, often enough, whether through external consequences or internal shame, smokes us out. As bad as the experience is likely to be, however, it can be a severe mercy, because once forced to respond to God we can move beyond merely hiding, whether from God or our own judging gaze.

Then we may be able to take a second step. At their June 2002 deliberations, the Catholic bishops began to take this step. They not only admitted they were hiding from God, they claimed

their sin. They actively and penitently said they and their church and its priests had done wrong. They took sin on themselves rather than hiding any longer from it and from God's finger pointing at them. Here the first glimmers of something new emerged—not the end of the story, because consequences of sin like this can unfold across lifetimes, but the beginning of a different chapter in which God could again be a partner in their journey and not the one from whom they hid.

The bishops were doing something powerful and ancient. For generations, according to the story told in the Old Testament, the people of Israel had lived against God in basic ways. So God sent them into exile from their Promised Land, much as he had sent Adam and Eve into exile from the Garden of Eden or as he sends the Catholic hierarchy into exile from its sense of unquestioned power.

Now the people have gathered to confront their sins. This is how Nehemiah 9:1–2 describes it: "Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth, and with earth on their heads. Then those of Israelite descent separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their ancestors."

The specifics of what the Israelites had to do to atone for their sin are not what interest me here, though specifics always matter to people beginning to move past what they have done wrong. Rather, what catches my attention is how clearly they confronted the weight of what they had done wrong, as the Catholic bishops did at long last, and as I did after stealing so much grocery money. They stopped eating. They put on sackcloth, much as if we were to wear rough clothes made from old feed bags, and even placed dirt on their heads. They let themselves experience the depth of their wrongdoing. They confessed it. They said what they had done wrong. They even said what their ancestors had done wrong.

As heavy as this experience of claiming their sin must have been, right at that point we glimpse a third phase of confession: the healing lightness within community that happens when the burden drops away. As heavy as its early phases can be, when confession has been truly accomplished, what a shift in mood can ensue. Plenty of scriptural texts tell of celebration after heaviness. And it resonates in my experience of confronting my own worst

sins. Precisely at the point of confession, the mood begins to shift and lift and the evening breeze to feel again like a caress rather than like the first whiff of God's threatening presence.

I take that sense of a lightening of mood into my experience of James 5:16. This verse is part of a cluster of verses in which James speaks to Christians in a congregational setting of the power of their caring for each other, singing with each other, and above all praying for each other, because "the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven."

In view here are several insights related to confession. One is just how routine James makes it. Confession is a natural part of the ordinary life of God's community, to be practiced as regularly as praying and singing. Also in view, as in the Nehemiah story, is how much confession can and probably often should be not the act of an individual or a few people but an exchange unfolding among all in the community. "Therefore confess your sins to one another…."

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But James doesn't stop there. Through prayer those who have sinned will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins "so that you may be healed," he writes, and adds, "The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective." Wrong behavior, as we have seen, has consequences, often terrible ones. Confession, however, has consequences too: healing. We are to confess not only because God has smoked us out, not only to show, at last, our readiness to see ourselves as we really are, but also to be healed. My mom made me pay it off, and it took much more time than it had taken to steal it, but I'll never forget how loved I felt after I confessed. To this day I feel the healing lightness of being I sailed on that day.

Recently, at a Maundy Thursday church meal, I saw what the healing that begins in and follows confession can feel like—especially if done routinely enough to enable some lightheartedness. We started telling stories of unacceptable things we had done. My story was of the night when, as a pastor in a rush to get

to a church meeting, I tailed somebody mercilessly through turn after turn. At the very last turn, the driver I was tailing went into the church parking lot. I was so ashamed I drove around the block. To this day I don't know whom, of those who called me to minister among them, I sinned against.

Another person told of stealing hot chocolate late one night from a church camp kitchen, getting caught by a stern camp director, and lying about what was underway. We heard about a member of another congregation who in a convenience store observed a woman impatiently waiting in a coffee line. She had on a WWJD ("What would Jesus do?") bracelet. The member, here nearly in the role of God smoking out the errant one, but with the mercy laughter always includes, leaned over and politely observed, "I think he'd have hot chocolate."

The storytelling went on and on. By the end of the meal we were laughing so hard we were crying. Amid the laughter there was healing. Why? Because as that group of committed Christians laughed at each other's foibles, we were also working implicitly on that age-old project of figuring out what is right and wrong and what must be done when we cross the line. Here the sins were smaller, so they only started us on a process that needs to go deeper for larger sins. But sometimes we learn from the small about the big. Even if in tiny ways, what we were doing was confessing to each other. And what made the laughter so deep was not only that the stories were funny but that we could feel in the act of telling them the healing lightness that comes when we not only flee our misbehaviors but together look at them and, by the very decision to tell them to each other, begin to say we know we should live differently from now on.

Confession is good for the soul, the old proverb says. So it is. We can thank God that Scripture, our own experience, and even the woes of the Catholic church teach us God has put the world together in such a way that often when we do wrong we are led, even if kicking and screaming, toward confession.

First God looks for us as the breeze blows and wrings out our confession that we were hiding for a reason. Then over time, as consequences pile up, we may find ourselves able at last to say, under our own steam and truly meaning it, that we have blown it. Next, if fortunate, we will find ourselves in a community of

people each aware enough of their own sin to treat confession, as James calls us to, as a natural part of life's ebb and flow. When that happens, we will find redemption and even, when most blessed, peals of healing laughter.

About the author

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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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