The Need for Accountability and Confession in order to Grow in Christ by David Schuchardt
Northview Community Church
Wednesday, October 17, 2018
Northview's leadership group meets three times per year. This is done for a variety of reasons: we want to make sure that the various ministries remain integrated, we want to help, encourage, and pray for each other, we want to invest in our leaders by growing leadership skills, and we want to ensure that our leaders are intentionally growing in Christ. For this last outcome we take an hour and forty-five minutes to divide up by gender and ask and answer these questions: where have you seen God at work in your life, what is God saying to you recently, how are your devotional habits, and are you regularly connecting with your accountability partner? It is with this last question that I often get questions about, namely what should this relationship look like?

In one sense it seems to be very straight forward. An accountability partner is someone who we meet with to be held accountable and to hold accountable (if it's a reciprocal relationship) . But, accountable for what? This is where things get more general and the usual understanding is, for things I need to be accountable for, like goal setting for example. Perhaps in our context that would be around devotional habits: have you been reading your Bible daily and praying? That sort of accountability has value and can be a part of the relationship that we're asking our leaders to engage in. However, if that is all it is, it is missing the main element of what we want this relationship to be about.

We want the accountability relationship to be about SIN, or rather, the elimination of sin. It should come as no surprise that we all have our own personal struggle with sin. For some of us that can take the form of pornography, while for others it can be gossip, or envy. Because we all
deal with sin and all of us have our own particular besetting sin, we need to be intentional in dealing with it. Dealing with sin is more than just feeling bad about it or even saying sorry to God for having committed it. We are Wesleyans, so we believe that God's grace not only releases us from the guilt of sin, but it delivers us from the power of $\sin$.

Accountability relationships are about intentionally seeking deliverance from besetting sins through the means of grace. In this case the particular means of grace is through the discipline of confession. While many are familiar with the confessional of the Catholic Church, less are aware of the role of confession in the Protestant Church. More than that, many in the Evangelical tradition assume that the discipline of confessing to another human went out during the Protestant rejection of Catholicism. It didn't, but even if it had, we would need to bring it back. Richard Foster, a recognized authority on spiritual disciplines, says this, "[Confession] involves an objective change in our relationship with God and a subjective change in us. It is a means of healing and transforming the inner spirit." ${ }^{1}$ In short, this is a gift given to us by God.

There seems to be two main objections that evangelicals raise against confessing sins to other people. The first one is shame, the notion of revealing our sins to another person is embarrassing. Adele Calhoun insightfully writes:

Confession may be good for the soul, but it can be very hard to do. We are invested in looking like good moral people. After all, appearing good is one way of dealing with the notion that something is wrong with us. We haven't murdered anyone or robbed a bank. Furthermore, when we do wrong we try to fix it and make it better. We can put a great deal of energy into maintaining the image that we are good moral people. ${ }^{2}$

[^0]The heart of what is being said here is that we are not only embarrassed by our sin, but we want to hide it. This is the very reason why it needs the light of Christ to shine on it. Calhoun finishes, "But this very appearance of goodness can be a way we defend ourselves against our sin. For when we can't see our sin we have nothing to confess." ${ }^{3}$

The second objection is related to the first, we are more comfortable telling God our sin than we are telling others. To justify this feeling we buy into the idea that we are not called in Scripture to confess to anyone but God. Many misunderstand Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers in this way. They assume that Luther is saying that we no longer need anyone to mediate between us and God-we can go directly to God and be our own priests. However, that is not what Luther was saying - he continued meeting with and confessing to his spiritual advisor his whole life. Rather, his point was that the ministry of hearing confession and speaking words of absolution was given to the whole body, not just to one ordained person. We are all to be priests to one another. That's why we receive instructions in Scripture on how to do this, "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed" (James 5:16). We are also told, "If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven" (John 20:23). Scripturally, confession is not designed to be between the individual and God.

This paper is not designed to give a full treatment for confession, for that please read the chapters from Richard Foster and Dietrich Bonhoeffer attached as appendixes. Instead, generally, here are some basic directions for accountability:

[^1]1. Be intentional in looking for an accountability partner. It won't happen by accident. You need to determine that this is a discipline you are being called into and you are going to pursue purposefully.
2. As you're looking, you want someone of the same gender as you, who you are either already comfortable with or with whom you think you can become comfortable. Trust is a key component. Perhaps obviously, they should be a fellow Christian believer of godly character.
3. When you approach them you are asking if they will be your accountability partner, not necessarily vice versa. While it would be ideal for the relationship to be reciprocal, it isn't necessary. They may already have this relationship elsewhere or may not be ready for this discipline (their not being ready for the discipline doesn't excuse us from it, after all it is called a discipline for a reason and as shown above we will never gravitate to this naturally).
4. Make a schedule for meeting. Again, intentionality is key for success with this discipline. We sin multiple times every day, so a shorter schedule would be ideal, perhaps once every two weeks, but no longer than once per month.
5. Once you've established a safe person and a safe place, you'll need to do the hard work of honestly confessing your sin. Unless you're a rare person you'll probably start small, but as trust builds you will be able to share more honestly.
6. After confessing your sin (and perhaps reflecting together on the patterns of sin emerging) the person to whom you are confessing will speak words of absolution to you and over you, "Your sins have been forgiven." Of course, this is not the individual speaking their own words, they are speaking the truth of God's word, as much as they would be if they were
telling you that God loves you. Again, see the appendixes, this is all rooted in the work of Christ on the cross.

John Wesley is the founding father of our movement, the Free Methodist Church in Canada. In a writing describing how Methodism arose and developed the way it did Wesley recounts the following regarding what he called the bands (groupings of sincere people looking to grow in Christ):
[Young and old, men and women], therefore, wanted some means of closer union; they wanted to pour their hearts without reserve, particularly with regard to sin which did still easily beset them and the temptations which were most apt to prevail over them. And they were the more desirous of this when they observed it was the express advice of an inspired writer: "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed" (James 5:16 KJV).

He continues to describe the results from this:

Great and many are the advantages which have ever since flowed from this closer union of the believers with each other. They prayed for one another that they might be healed of their faults they had confessed; and it was so. The chains were broken, the bonds were burst in sunder, and sin had no more dominion over them. Many were delivered from the temptations out of which, till then, they found no way to escape. They were built up in our most holy faith. They rejoiced in the Lord more abundantly. They were strengthened in love, and more effectually provoked to abound in every good work. ${ }^{4}$

Wesley also resourced his people with the following questions to ask at every meeting and they may be helpful for meeting in an accountability relationship:

1. What known sins have you committed since our last meeting?
2. What temptations have you met with?
3. How were you delivered?
4. What have you thought, said, or done, of which you doubt whether it is sin or not? ${ }^{5}$

What you see in Wesley's writing around confession you'll also encounter in Foster and Bonhoeffer: there is joy to be found in the discipline of confession because we are being granted

[^2]the freedom for which Christ set us free. We do not need to bear sin or its guilt any longer. As well, we will be sure that the confession we make is not simply a pantomime of our own head. This is an important discipline for all of us (in leadership or not) to engage in, in order to grow in Christ. This is the way we desire you to be accountable with your accountability partner.

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LIFe Together
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except in the case of brief quotations embodied in
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HarperCollins Publishers, 10 East 53 rd Street, New
York, N.Y. 10022 .
This book was originally published in Germany under the
title of GEmEINSAMES LEbEN.

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## CHAPTERFIVE

## Confession and Communion

"Confess your faults one to another" (Jas. $5: 16$ ). He who is alone with his $\sin$ is utterly alone. It may be that Christians, notwithstanding corporate worship, common prayer, and all their fellowship in service, may still be left to their loneliness. The final break-through to fellowship does not occur, because, though they have fellowship with one another as believers and as devout people, they do not have fellowship as the undevout, as sinners. The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal his sin from himself and from the fellowship. We dare not be sinners. Many Christians are unthinkably horrified when a real sinner is suddenly discovered among the righteous. So we remain alone with our sin, living in lies and hypocrisy. The fact is that we are sinners!
But it is the grace of the Gospel, which is so hard for the pious to understand, that it confronts us with the truth and
says: You are a sinner, a great, desperate sinner; now come, as the sinner that you are, to God who loves you. He wants you as you are; He does not want anything from you, a sacrifice, a work; He wants you alone. "My son, give me thine heart" (Prov. 23:26). God has come to you to save the sinner. Be glad! This message is liberation through truth. You can hide nothing from God. The mask you wear before men will do you no good before Him. He wants to see you as you are, He wants to be gracious to you. You do not have to go on lying to yourself and your brothers, as if you were without sin; you can dare to be a sinner. Thank God for that; He loves the sinner but He hates sin.
Christ became our Brother in the flesh in order that we might believe in him. In him the love of God came to the sinner. Through him men could be sinners and only so could they be helped. All sham was ended in the presence of Christ. The misery of the sinner and the mercy of Godthis was the truth of the Gospel in Jesus Christ. It was in this truth that his Church was to live. Therefore, he gave his followers the authority to hear the confession of $\sin$ and to forgive sin in his name. "Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained" (John 20:23).
When he did that Christ made the Church, and in it our brother, a blessing to us. Now our brother stands in Christ's stead. Before him I need no longer to dissemble. Before him alone in the whole world I dare to be the sinner that I am; here the truth of Jesus Christ and his mercy rules. Christ became our Brother in order to help us. Through him our brother has become Christ for us in the power and authority of the commission Christ has given to him. Our brother
stands before us as the sign of the truth and the grace of God. He has been given to us to help us. He hears the confession of our sins in Christ's stead and he forgives our sins in Christ's name. He keeps the secret of our confession as God keeps it. When I go to my brother to confess, I am going to God.

So in the Christian community when the call to brotherly confession and forgiveness goes forth it is a call to the great grace of God in the Church.

## Breaking Through to Community

In confession the break-through to community takes place. Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him, and the more deeply he becomes involved in it, the more disastrous is his isolation. Sin wants to remain unknown. It shuns the light. In the darkness of the unexpressed it poisons the whole being of a person. This can happen even in the midst of a pious community. In confession the light of the Gospel breaks into the darkness and seclusion of the heart. The sin must be brought into the light. The unexpressed must be openly spoken and acknowledged. All that is secret and hidden is made manifest. It is a hard struggle until the sin is openly admitted. But God breaks gates of brass and bars of iron (Ps. 107:16).
Since the confession of $\sin$ is made in the presence of a Christian brother, the last stronghold of self-justification is abandoned. The sinner surrenders; he gives up all his evil. He gives his heart to God, and he finds the forgiveness of all his $\sin$ in the fellowship of Jesus Christ and his brother.

The expressed, acknowledged $\sin$ has lost all its power. It has been revealed and judged as sin. It can no longer tear the fellowship asunder. Now the fellowship bears the sin of the brother. He is no longer alone with his evil for he has cast off his sin in confession and handed it over to God. It has been taken away from him. Now he stands in the fellowship of sinners who live by the grace of God in the Cross of Jesus Christ. Now he can be a sinner and still enjoy the grace of God. He can confess his sins and in this very act find fellowship for the first time. The sin concealed separated him from the fellowship, made all his apparent fellowship a sham; the sin confessed has helped him to find true fellowship with the brethren in Jesus Christ.

Moreover, what we have said applies solely to confession between two Christians. A confession of sin in the presence of all the members of the congregation is not required to restore one to fellowship with the whole congregation. I meet the whole congregation in the one brother to whom I confess my sins and who forgives my sins. In the fellowship I find with this one brother I have already found fellowship with the whole congregation. In this matter no one acts in his own name nor by his own authority, but by the commission of Jesus Christ. This commission is given to the whole congregation and the individual is called merely to exercise it for the congregation. If a Christian is in the felIowship of confession with a brother he will never be alone again, anywhere.

## Breaking Through to the Cross

In confession occurs the break-through to the Cross. The root of all $\sin$ is pride, superbia. I want to be my own law,

I have a right to my self, my hatred and my desires, my life and my death. The mind and flesh of man are set on fire by pride; for it is precisely in his wickedness that man wants to be as God. Confession in the presence of a brother is the profoundest kind of humiliation. It hurts, it cuts a man down, it is a dreadful blow to pride. To stand there before a brother as a sinner is an ignominy that is almost unbearable. In the confession of concrete sins the old man dies a painful, shameful death before the eyes of a brother. Because this humiliation is so hard we continually scheme to evade confessing to a brother. Our eyes are so blinded that they no longer see the promise and the glory in such abasement.
It was none other than Jesus Christ himself who suffered the scandalous, public death of a sinner in our stead. He was not ashamed to be crucified for us as an evildoer. It is nothing else but our fellowship with Jesus Christ that leads us to the ignominious dying that comes in confession, in order that we may in truth share in his Cross. The Cross of Jesus Christ destroys all pride. We cannot find the Cross of Jesus if we shrink from going to the place where it is to be found, namely, the public death of the sinner. And we refuse to bear the Cross when we are ashamed to take upon ourselves the shameful death of the sinner in confession. In confession we break through to the true fellowship of the Cross of Jesus Christ, in confession we affirm and accept our cross. In the deep mental and physical pain of humiliation before a brother-which means, before God-we experience the Cross of Jesus as our rescue and salvation. The old man dies, but it is God who has conquered him. Now we share in the resurrection of Christ and eternal life.

## Breaking Through to New Life

In confession the break-through to new life occurs. Where $\sin$ is hated, admitted, and forgiven, there the bicak with the past is made. "Old things are passed away." But where there is a break with sin, there is conversion. Confession is conversion. "Behold, all things are become new" (II Cor. 5:17). Christ has made a new beginning with us.
As the first disciples left all and followed when Jesus called, so in confession the Christian gives up all and follows. Confession is discipleship. Life with Jesus Christ and his community has begun. "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy" (Prov. 28:13). In confession the Christian begins to forsake his sins. Their dominion is broken. From now on the Christian wins victory after victory.

What happened to us in baptism is bestowed upon as anew in confession. We are delivered out of darkness into the kingdom of Jesus Christ. That is joyful news. Confession is the renewal of the joy of baptism. "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning" (Ps. 30:5).

## Breaking Through to Certainty

In confession a man breaks through to certainty. Why is it that it is often easier for us to confess our sins to God than to a brother? God is holy and sinless, He is a just judge of evil and the enemy of all disobedience. But a brother is sinful as we are. He knows from his own expcrience the dark night of secret $\sin$. Why should we not find it easier to go to a brother than to the holy God? But if we do, we must ask ourselves whether we have not often been
deceiving ourselves with our confession of sin to God, whether we have not rather been confessing our sins to ourselves and also granting ourselves absolution. And is not the reason perhaps for our countless relapses and the feebleness of our Christian obedience to be found precisely in the fact that we are living on self-forgiveness and not a real forgiveness? Self-forgiveness can never lead to a breach with sin; this can be accomplished only by the judging and pardoning Word of God itself.

Who can give us the certainty that, in the confession and the forgiveness of our sins, we are not dealing with ourselves but with the living God? God gives us this certainty through our brother. Our brother breaks the circle of selfdeception. A man who confesses his sins in the presence of a brother knows that he is no longer alone with himself; he experiences the presence of God in the reality of the other person. As long as I am by myself in the confession of my sins everything remains in the dark, but in the presence of a brother the sin has to be brought into the light. But since the sin must come to light some time, it is better that it happens today between me and my brother, rather than on the last day in the piercing light of the final judgment. It is a mercy that we can confess our sins to a brother. Such grace spares us the terrors of the last judgment.
Our brother has been given me that even here and now I may be made certain through him of the reality of God in His judgment and His grace. As the open confession of my sins to a brother insures me against self-deception, so, too, the assurance of forgiveness becomes fully certain to me only when it is spoken by a brother in the name of God.

Mutual, brotherly confession is given to us by God in order that we may be sure of divine forgiveness.

But it is precisely for the sake of this certainty that confession should deal with concrete sins. People usually are satisfied when they make a general confession. But one experiences the utter perdition and corruption of human nature, in so far as this ever enters into experience at all, when one sees his own specific sins. Self-examination on the basis of all Ten Commandments will therefore be the right preparation for confession. Otherwise it might happen that one could still be a hypocrite even in confessing to a brother and thus miss the good of the confession. Jesus dealt with people whose sins were obvious, with publicans and harlots. They knew why they needed forgiveness, and they received it as forgiveness of their specific sins. Blind Bartimaeus was asked by Jesus: What do you want me to do for you? Before confession we must have a clear answer to this question. In confession we, too, receive the forgiveness of the particular sins which are here brought to light, and by this very token the forgiveness of all our sins, known and unknown.

Does all this mean that confession to a brother is a divine law? No, confession is not a law, it is an offer of divine help for the sinner. It is possible that a person may by God's grace break through to certainty, new life, the Cross, and fellowship without benefit of confession to a brother. It is possible that a person may never know what it is to doubt his own forgiveness and despair of his own confession of sin, that he may be given everything in his own private confession to God. We have spoken here for those who cannot make this assertion. Luther himself was one of those
for whom the Christian life was unthinkable without mutual, brotherly confession. In the Large Catechism he said: "Therefore when I admonish you to confession I am admonishing you to be a Christian." Those who, despite all their seeking and trying, cannot find the great joy of fellowship, the Cross, the new life, and certainty should be shown the blessing that God offers us in mutual confession. Confession is within the liberty of the Christian. Who can refuse, without suffering loss, a help that God has deemed it necessary to offer?

## To Whom Confess?

To whom shall we make confession? According to Jesus' promise, every Christian brother can hear the confession of another. But will he understand? May he not be so far above us in his Christian life that he would only turn away from us with no understanding of our personal sins?
Anybody who lives beneath the Cross and who has discerned in the Cross of Jesus the utter wickedness of all men and of his own heart will find there is no sin that can ever be alien to him. Anybody who has once been horrified by the dreadfulness of his own in that nailed Jesus to the Cross will no longer be horrified by even the rankest sins of a brother. Looking at the Cross of Jesus, he knows the human heart. He knows how utterly lost it is in sin and weakness, how it goes astray in the ways of $\sin$, and he also knows that it is accepted in grace and mercy. Only the brother under the Cross can hear a confession.
It is not experience of life but experience of the Cross that makes one a worthy hearer of confessions. The most experienced psychologist or observer of human nature
knows infinitely less of the human heart than the simplest Christian who lives beneath the Cross of Jesus. The greatest psychological insight, ability, and experience cannot grasp this one thing: what sin is. Worldly wisdom knows what distress and weakness and failure are, but it does not know the godlessness of men. And so it also does not know that man is destroyed only by his sin and can be healed only by forgiveness. Only the Christian knows this. In the presence of a psychiatrist I can only be a sick man; in the presence of a Christian brother I can dare to be a sinner. The psychiatrist must first search my heart and yet he never plumbs its ultimate depth. The Christian brother knows when I come to him: here is a sinner like myself, a godless man who wants to confess and yearns for God's forgiveness. The psychiatrist views me as if there were no God. The brother views me as I am before the judging and merciful God in the Cross of Jesus Christ. It is not lack of psychological knowledge but lack of love for the crucified Jesus Christ that makes us so poor and inefficient in brotherly confession.

In daily, earnest living with the Cross of Christ the Christian loses the spirit of human censoriousness on the one hand and weak indulgence on the other, and he receives the spirit of divine severity and divine love. The death of the sinner before God and life that comes out of that death through grace become for him a daily reality. So he loves the brothers with the merciful love of God that leads through the death of the sinner to the life of the child of God. Who can hear our confession? He who himself lives beneath the Cross. Wherever the message concerning the Crucified is a vital, living thing, there brotherly confession will also avail.

## Troo Dangers

There are two dangers that a Christian community which practices confession must guard against. The first concerns the one who hears confessions. It is not a good thing for one person to be the confessor for all the others. All too easily this one person will be overburdened; thus confession will become for him an empty routine, and this will give rise to the disastrous misuse of the confessional for the exercise of spiritual domination of souls. In order that he may not succumb to this sinister danger of the confessional every person should refrain from listening to confession who does not himself practice it. Only the person who has so humbled himself can hear a brother's confession without harm.

The second danger concerns the confessant. For the salvation of his soul let him guard against ever making a pious work of his confession. If he does so, it will become the final, most abominable, vicious, and impure prostitution of the heart; the act becomes an idle, lustful babbling. Confession as a pious work is an invention of the devil. It is only God's offer of grace, help, and forgiveness that could make us dare to enter the abyss of confession. We can confess solely for the sake of the promise of absolution. Confession as a routine duty is spiritual death; confession in reliance upon the promise is life. The forgiveness of sins is the sole ground and goal of confession.

## The Joyful Sacrament

Though it is true that confession is an act in the name of Christ that is complete in itself and is exercised in the fellowship as frequently as there is desire for it, it serves the

Christian community especially as a preparation for the common reception of the holy Communion. Reconciled to God and men, Christians desire to receive the body and blood of Jesus Christ. It is the command of Jesus that none should come to the altar with a heart that is unreconciled to his brother. If this command of Jesus applies to every service of worship, indeed, to every prayer we utter, then it most certainly applies to reception of the Lord's Supper.

The day before the Lord's Supper is administered will find the brethren of a Christian fellowship together and each will beg the forgiveness of the others for the wrongs committed. Nobody who avoids this approach to his brother can go rightly prepared to the table of the Lord. All anger, strife, envy, evil gossip, and unbrotherly conduct must have been settled and finished if the brethren wish to receive the grace of God together in the sacrament. But to beg a brother's pardon is still not confession, and only the latter is subject to the express command of Jesus.

But preparation for the Lord's Supper will also awaken in the individual the desire to be completely certain that the particular sins which disturb and torment him and are known only to God are forgiven. It is this desire that the offer of brotherly confession and absolution fulfills. Where there is deep anxiety and trouble over one's own sins, where the certainty of forgiveness is sought, there comes the invitation in the name of Jesus to come to brotherly confession. What brought upon Jesus the accusation of blasphemy, namely, that he forgave sinners, is what now takes place in the Christian brotherhood in the power of the presence of Jesus Christ. One forgives the other all his sins in the name of the triune God. And there is joy in the presence of the
angels of God over the sinner who repents. Hence the time of preparation for the Lord's Supper will be filled with brotherly admonition and encouragement, with prayers, with fear, and with joy.
The day of the Lord's Supper is an occasion of joy for the Christian community. Reconciled in their hearts with God and the brethren, the congregation receives the gift of the body and blood of Jesus Christ, and, receiving that, it receives forgiveness, new life, and salvation. It is given new fellowship with God and men. The fellowship of the Lord's Supper is the superlative fulfillment of Christian fellowship. As the members of the congregation are united in body and blood at the table of the Lord so will they be together in eternity. Here the community has reached its goal. Here joy in Christ and his community is complete. The life of Christians together under the Word has reached its perfection in the sacrament.

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## To Carolynn

wife, counselor, companion, encourager

Unless otherwise indicated, all scriptural quotations are from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible.
Some of the material from chapter 2 was originally published in the booklet Meditative Prayer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983).
celebration of discipline, Revised Edition. Copyright © 1978, 1988 by Richard J. Foster. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information address HarperCollins Publishers, 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Foster, Richard J.
    Celebration of discipline.
    Bibliography: p.
    Includes indexes.
    1. Spiritual life-Quaker authors. I. Title.
BV4501.2.F655 1988 248.4'896 88-45135
ISBN 0-06-062839-1
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## 10. The Discipline of Confession

The confession of evil works is the first beginning of good works.

- AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

At the heart of God is the desire to give and to forgive. Because of this, he set into motion the entire redemptive process that culminated in the cross and was confirmed in the resurrection. The usual notion of what Jesus did on the cross runs something like this: people were so bad and so mean and God was so angry with them that he could not forgive them unless somebody big enough took the rap for the whole lot of them.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Love, not anger, brought Jesus to the cross. Golgotha came as a result of God's great desire to forgive, not his reluctance. Jesus knew that by his vicarious suffering he could actually absorb all the evil of humanity and so heal it, forgive it, redeem it.

This is why Jesus refused the customary painkiller when it was offered him. He wanted to be completely alert for this greatest work of redemption. In a deep and mysterious way he was preparing to take on the collective sin of the human race. Since Jesus lives in the eternal now, this work was not just for those around him, but he took in all the violence, all the fear, all the sin of all the past, all the present, and all the future. This was his highest and most holy work, the work that makes confession and the forgiveness of sins possible.

Some seem to think that when Jesus shouted "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" it was a moment of weakness (Mark 15:34). Not at all. This was his moment of greatest triumph. Jesus, who had walked in constant communion with
the Father, now became so totally identified with humankind that he was the actual embodiment of sin. As Paul writes, "he made him to be sin who knew no sin" (2 Cor. 5:21). Jesus succeeded in taking into himself all the dark powers of this present evil age and defeated every one of them by the light of his presence. He accomplished such a total identification with the sin of the race that he experienced the abandonment of God. Only in that way could he redeem $\sin$. It was indeed his moment of greatest triumph.
Having accomplished this greatest of all his works, Jesus then took refreshment. "It is finished," he announced. That is, this great work of redemption was completed. He could feel the last dregs of the misery of humankind flow through him and into the care of the Father. The last twinges of evil, hostility, anger, and fear drained out of him, and he was able to turn again into the light of God's presence. "It is finished." The task is complete. Soon after, he was free to give up his spirit to the Father.

To shame our sins He blushed in blood;
He closed His eyes to show us God;
Let all the world fall down and know
That none but God such love can show.

> -Bernard of Clairvaux

This redemptive process is a great mystery hidden in the heart of God. But I know that it is true. I know this not only because the Bible says it is true, but because I have seen its effects in the lives of many people, including myself. It is the ground upon which we can know that confession and forgiveness are realities that transform us. Without the cross the Discipline of confession would be only psychologically therapeutic. But it is so much more. It involves an objective change in our relationship with God and a subjective change in us. It is a means of healing and transforming the inner spirit.
"But I thought that Christ on the cross and redemption deals with salvation," you may say. It does. But salvation as the Bible
speaks of it refers to far more than who comes to faith in Christ or who gets to heaven. The Bible views salvation as both an event and a process. To converted people Paul says, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12). In a sermon titled "The Repentance of Believers," John Wesley spoke of the necessity of Christians coming into more of the forgiving grace of God. The Discipline of confession helps the believer to grow into "mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13).
"But isn't confession a grace instead of a Discipline?" It is both. Unless God gives the grace, no genuine confession can be made. But it is also a Discipline because there are things we must do. It is a consciously chosen course of action that brings us under the shadow of the Almighty.
"How is it that confession is listed under the Corporate Disciplines? I thought this was a private matter between the individual and God." Again the answer is not "either/or," but "both/and." We are grateful for the biblical teaching, underscored in the Reformation, that "there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" ( $1 \mathrm{Tim} .2: 5$ ). We are also grateful for the biblical teaching, newly appreciated in our day, to "confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another . . ." (James 5:16). Both are found in Scripture and neither need exclude the other.
Confession is a difficult Discipline for us because we all too often view the believing community as a fellowship of saints before we see it as a fellowship of sinners. We feel that everyone else has advanced so far into holiness that we are isolated and alone in our sin. We cannot bear to reveal our failures and shortcomings to others. We imagine that we are the only ones who have not stepped onto the high road to heaven. Therefore, we hide ourselves from one another and live in veiled lies and hypocrisy.
But if we know that the people of God are first a fellowship of sinners, we are freed to hear the unconditional call of God's love and to confess our needs openly before our brothers and
sisters. We know we are not alone in our sin. The fear and pride that cling to us like barnacles cling to others also. We are sinners together. In acts of mutual confession we release the power that heals. Our humanity is no longer denied, but transformed.

## Authority to Forgive

The followers of Jesus Christ have been given the authority to receive the confession of $\sin$ and to forgive it in his name. "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (John 20:23). What a wonderful privilege! Why do we shy away from such a life-giving ministry? If we, not out of merit but sheer grace, have been given the authority to set others free, how dare we withhold this great gift! Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, "Our brother . . . has been given to us to help us. He hears the confession of our sins in Christ's stead and he forgives our sins in Christ's name. He keeps the secret of our confession as God keeps it. When I go to my brother to confess, I am going to God. ${ }^{11}$

Such authority in no way threatens the value or efficacy of private confession. It is a wonderful truth that the individual can break through into new life in the cross without the aid of any human mediator. In the days of the Reformation that reality swept into the Church like a breath of fresh air. It became a trumpet call of liberation from the bondage and manipulation that had crept into the ecclesiastical confessional system. But we also need to remember that Luther himself believed in mutual, brotherly confession. In the Large Catechism he writes, "Therefore when I admonish you to confession I am admonishing you to be a Christian. ${ }^{2}$ Nor should we forget that when the confessional system was first introduced into the Church it sparked a genuine revival of personal piety and holiness.
The person who has known forgiveness and release from persistent, nagging habits of $\sin$ through private confession should rejoice greatly in this evidence of God's mercy. But there
are others for whom this has not happened. Let me describe what it is like. We have prayed, even begged, for forgiveness, and though we hope we have been forgiven, we sense no release. We doubt our forgiveness and despair at our confession. We fear that perhaps we have made confession only to ourselves and not to God. The haunting sorrows and hurts of the past have not been healed. We try to convince ourselves that God forgives only the sin; he does not heal the memory. But deep within our being we know there must be something more. People have told us to take our forgiveness by faith and not to call God a liar. Not wanting to call God a liar, we do our best to take it by faith. But because misery and bitterness remain in our lives, we again despair. Eventually we begin to believe either that forgiveness is only a ticket to heaven and not meant to affect our lives now, or that we are not worthy of the forgiving grace of God.
Those who in some small way identify with these words can rejoice. We have not exhausted our resources nor God's grace when we have tried private confession. In the Book of Common Prayer, following the call to self-examination and repentance, we read these encouraging words: "If there be any of you who by this means cannot quiet his own conscience herein but require further comfort or counsel, let him come to me or to some other minister of God's word, and open his grief. . . ."3 God has given us our brothers and sisters to stand in Christ's stead and make God's presence and forgiveness real to us.

The Scripture teaches us that all believers are priests before God: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood" (1 Pet. 2:9). At the time of the Reformation this was called "the universal priesthood of all believers." One of the functions of the Old Testament priest was to bring the forgiveness of sins through the holy sacrifice. The book of Hebrews, of course, makes clear that Jesus Christ is the final and sufficient sacrifice. And Jesus has given to us his priesthood: the ministry of making that sacrifice real in the hearts and lives of other human beings. It is through the voice of our brothers and sisters that the word
of forgiveness is heard and takes root in our lives. Bonhoeffer writes: "A man who confesses his sins in the presence of a brother knows that he is no longer alone with himself; he experiences the presence of God in the reality of the other person. As long as I am by myself in the confession of my sins everything remains in the dark, but in the presence of a brother the $\sin$ has to be brought into the light. ${ }^{44}$

The stylized form of this avenue of help has been called the Confessional or the sacrament of penance. Though many of us, myself included, would feel highly uncomfortable with that form of confession, it does have certain advantages. First, the formalized form of the printed confession does not allow for any excuses or extenuating circumstances. We must confess that we have sinned by our own fault, our own most grievous fault. Our sins cannot be called errors in judgment, nor is there any room to blame them on upbringing or family or mean neighbors. This is a Reality Therapy of the best sort since we are so prone to blame our sins on everybody and everything instead of taking personal responsibility for them.

A second advantage of the Confessional is that the word of forgiveness is expected and given in the absolution. The word of Scripture, or some similar word, is actually spoken out loud. "If we confess our sins, he is faithfui and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). The penitent is then told in clear, authoritative words that he is totally forgiven and set free of his sin. The assurance of forgiveness is sealed in the Spirit when it is spoken by our brother or sister in the name of Christ.

There is a third advantage to the institutionalized Confessional, namely, penance. If penance is viewed as a way of earning forgiveness, it is dangerous indeed. But if it is seen as an opportunity to pause a moment to consider the seriousness of our sin, then it has genuine merit. Today we take our offenses to the love of God far too lightly. If we had only a tinge of the sense of revulsion that God feels toward sin, we would be moved to holier living. God pleads with us, "Oh, do not do
this abominable thing that I hate!" (Jer. 44:4). The purpose of penance is to help us move into that deeper sense of the sinfulness of $\sin$.

These things, of course, can be accomplished without a formalized Confessional. In fact, when we know what we are about, it is an enormous advance to see the ministry of confession as the common property of the people of God. How can this be done? Perhaps a living example will aid in making these concepts more concrete.

## Diary of a Confession

Although I had read in the Bible about the ministry of confession in the Christian brotherhood, I had never experienced it until I was pastoring my first church. I did not take the difficult step of laying bare my inner life to another out of any deep burden or sense of sin. I did not feel there was anything wrong in the least-except one thing. I longed for more power to do the work of God. I felt inadequate to deal with many of the desperate needs that confronted me. There had to be more spiritual resources than I was experiencing (and I'd had all the Holy Spirit experiences you're supposed to have; you name them, I'd had them!). "Lord," I prayed, "is there more you want to bring into my life? I want to be conquered and ruled by you. If there is anything blocking the flow of your power, reveal it to me." He did. Not by an audible voice or even through any human voice, but simply by a growing impression that perhaps something in my past was impeding the flow of his life. So I devised a plan. I divided my life into three periods: childhood, adolescence, adulthood. On the first day I came before God in prayer and meditation, pencil and paper in hand. Inviting him to reveal to me anything during my childhood that needed either forgiveness or healing or both, I waited in absolute silence for some ten minutes. Anything about my childhood that surfaced to my conscious mind, I wrote down. I made no attempt to analyze the items or put any value judgment on them. My
assurance was that God would reveal anything that needed his healing touch. Having finished, I put the pencil and paper down for the day. The next day I went through the same exercise for my adolescent years, and the third day for my adult years.

Paper in hand, I then went to a dear brother in Christ. I had made arrangements with him a week ahead so he understood the purpose of our meeting. Slowly, sometimes painfully, I read my sheet, adding only those comments necessary to make the sin clear. When I had finished, I began to return the paper to my briefcase. Wisely, my counselor/confessor gently stopped my hand and took the sheet of paper. Without a word he took a wastebasket, and, as I watched, he tore the paper into hundreds of tiny pieces and dropped them into it. That powerful, nonverbal expression of forgiveness was followed by a simple absolution. My sins, I knew, were as far away as the east is from the west.

Next, my friend, with the laying on of hands, prayed a prayer of healing for all the sorrows and hurts of the past. The power of that prayer lives with me today.

I cannot say I experienced any dramatic feelings. I did not. In fact, the entire experience was an act of sheer obedience with no compelling feelings in the least. But I am convinced that it set me free in ways I had not known before. It seemed that I was released to explore what were for me new and uncharted regions of the Spirit. Following that event, I began to move into several of the Disciplines described in this book that I had never experienced before. Was there a causal connection? I do not know, and frankly I do not care. It is enough to have obeyed the inner prompting from above.

There was one interesting sidelight. The exposure of my humanity evidently sparked a freedom in my counselor/friend, for, directly following his prayer for me, he was able to express a deep and troubling sin that he had been unable to confess until then. Freedom begets freedom.

## Counsel in the Giving of a Confession

Not only is it true that "we love, because he first loved us," but we are enabled to make confession only and especially because he first loved us ( 1 John $4: 19$ ). The evidence of mercy and grace sparks a contrite heart and allows confession to flow. We are drawn to him as Hosea tells us, "with cords of compassion, with the bands of love" (Hos. 11:4). We come with hopeful hearts, for the One we are coming to waits for us like the father of the prodigal who saw his son when he was still a great way off and in compassion ran and embraced him and welcomed him back (Luke 15:20). His greatest delight is to forgive. He calls his light-filled creatures of heaven into celebration whenever one person makes confession.

What do we do? St. Alphonsus Liguori writes, "For a good confession three things are necessary: an examination of conscience, sorrow, and a determination to avoid sin."5
"An examination of conscience."* This is a time, as Douglas Steere writes, "where a soul comes under the gaze of God and where in His silent and loving Presence this soul is pierced to the quick and becomes conscious of the things that must be forgiven and put right before it can continue to love One whose care has been so constant. ${ }^{.6}$ We are inviting God to move upon the heart and show us areas that need his forgiving and healing touch.

In this experience of opening ourselves to the "gaze of God" we must be prepared to deal with definite sins. A generalized confession may save us from humiliation and shame, but it will not ignite inner healing. The people who came to Jesus came with obvious, specific sins, and they were forgiven for each one. It is far too easy to avoid our real guilt in a general confes-

[^4]sion. In our confession we bring concrete sins. By calling them concrete, however, I do not mean only outward sins. I mean definite sins, the sins of the heart-pride, avarice, anger, fearas well as the sins of the flesh-sloth, gluttony, adultery, murder. We may use the method described earlier. Perhaps we will be drawn to the method Luther used in which he sought to examine himself on the basis of the Ten Commandments. We may be led to another approach altogether.
In our desire to be specific we must not, however, run to the opposite danger of being unduly concerned to rout out every last detail in our lives. With profound common sense Francis de Sales counsels, "Do not feel worried if you do not remember all your little peccadilloes in confession, for as you often fall imperceptibly, so you are often raised up imperceptibly."7
"Sorrow" is necessary to a good confession. Sorrow as it relates to confession is not primarily an emotion, though emotion may be involved. It is an abhorrence at having committed the sin, a deep regret at having offended the heart of the Father. Sorrow is an issue of the will before it is an issue of the emo tions. In fact, being sorrowful in the emotions without a godly sorrow in the will destroys the confession.
Sorrow is a way of taking the confession seriously. It is the opposite of the priest, and undoubtedly the penitent, ridiculed by Chaucer in The Canterbury Tales:

> Full sweetly heard he confession, And pleasant was his absolution. ${ }^{8}$
"A determination to avoid $\sin$ " is the third essential for a good confession. In the Discipline of confession we ask God to give us a yearning for holy living, a hatred for unholy living. John Wesley once said: "Give me one hundred preachers who fear nothing but sin and desire nothing but God . . . such alone will shake the gates of hell and set up the kingdom of heaven on earth."99 It is the will to be delivered from sin that we seek from God as we prepare to make confession. We must desire to be conquered and ruled by God, or if we do not desire it,
to desire to desire it. Such a desire is a gracious gift from God. The seeking of this gift is one of the preliminaries for confessing to a brother or sister.
Does all this sound complicated? Do you fear you might miss one of the points and thus render everything ineffectual? It is usually much more complicated in the analysis than in the experience. Remember the heart of the Father; he is like a shepherd who will risk anything to find that one lost sheep. We do not have to make God willing to forgive. In fact, it is God who is working to make us willing to seek his forgiveness.
One further note on the preparation for confession; there must be a definite termination point in the self-examination process. Otherwise, we can easily fall into a permanent habit of self-condemnation. Confession begins in sorrow, but it ends in joy. There is celebration in the forgiveness of sins because it results in a genuinely changed life.
Then there is the practical matter of to whom we should go to confess. It is quite correct theologically to say that every Christian believer can receive the confession of another, but not every Christian believer will have sufficient empathy and understanding. Though it is unfortunate, it is a fact of life that some people seem unable to keep a confidence. Others are disqualified because they would be horrified at the revealing of certain sins. Still others, not understanding the nature and value of confession, would shrug it off with a "That's not so bad." Fortunately, many people do understand and would be delighted to minister in this way. These people are found by asking God to reveal them to us. They are also found by observing people to see who evidences a lively faith in God's power to forgive and exhibits the joy of the Lord in his or her heart. The key qualifications are spiritual maturity, wisdom, compassion, good common sense, the ability to keep a confidence, and a wholesome sense of humor. Many pastorsthough by no means all-can serve in this way. Often ordinary folk who hold no office or title whatever are among the best at receiving a confession.

But what if there is an offense we could never bring ourselves to reveal? What if we lack the courage to open a particular corner of our lives? Then all we need to do is say to our brother or sister: "I need your help. There is a sin that I cannot bring myself to confess." Our confessor/friend will "then adopt an easy means of dragging from its den the wild beast that would devour you. All you will have to do is to answer Yes or No to his interrogations. And behold, both the temporal and the eternal hell have disappeared, the grace of God is recovered, and peace of conscience reigns supreme." ${ }^{10}$

## Counsel in the Receiving of a Confession

Like any spiritual ministry there is a preparation involved in being able to hear rightly the confession of a brother or sister.
We begin by learning to live under the cross. Bonhoeffer writes, "Anybody who lives beneath the Cross and who has discerned in the Cross of Jesus the utter wickedness of all men and of his own heart will find there is no sin that can ever be alien to him. Anybody who has once been horrified by the dreadfulness of his own sin that nailed Jesus to the Cross will no longer be horrified by even the rankest sins of a brother."11 This is the one thing that will save us from ever being offended in the confession of another. It forever delivers us from conveying any attitude of superiority. We know the deceptiveness of the human heart, and we know the grace and mercy of God's acceptance. Once we see the awfulness of sin we know that, regardless of what others have done, we ourselves are the chief of sinners.
Therefore, there is nothing that anyone can say that will disturb us. Nothing. By living under the cross we can hear the worst possible things from the best possible people without so much as batting an eyelash. If we live in that reality, we will convey that spirit to others. They know it is safe to come to us. They know we can receive anything they could possibly
reveal. They know we will never condescend to them but, instead, understand.

When we live in this spirit, we do not need to tell others that we will keep privileged information privileged. They know we will never betray a confidence. We do not have to tell them. Nor will we ever be tempted to betray it, for we know the godly sorrow that has driven them to this difficult step.

By living under the cross we are delivered from the danger of spiritual domination. We have stood where our brother now stands and so the desire to use his confession against him is gone. Nor do we feel any need to control him or to straighten him out. All we feel is acceptance and understanding.

As we prepare for this sacred ministry it is wise that we regularly pray for an increase of the light of Christ within us so that, as we are with others, we will radiate his life and light into them. We want to learn how to live so that our very presence will speak of the love and forgiving grace of God. Also, we should pray for an increase of the gift of discernment. This is especially important when we minister to them following the confession. We need to be able to perceive the real healing needed in the deep, inner spirit.

It is important that when others are opening their griefs to us we discipline ourselves to be quiet. We will be tempted severely to relieve the tension of the situation by some offhanded comment. This is very distracting and even destructive to the sacredness of the moment. Neither should we try to pry out more details than are necessary. If we feel that out of embarrassment or fear they are holding something back, the best method is to wait silently and prayerfully.

On one occasion a woman was confessing her sorrow to me and to the Lord. When she finished I felt impressed to wait in silence. Presently, she began sharing a deep inward sin that she had never been able to tell anyone. Later she told me that as I waited, she looked at me and "saw" superimposed upon my eyes the eyes of Another who conveyed to her a love and acceptance that released her to unburden her heart. I had felt
nothing nor did I "see" anything, but I do not doubt her experience for it did result in a wonderful inner healing.
That story illustrates another important factor in receiving a confession. It is often helpful by prayer to set the cross between yourself and the penitent. This protects them from receiving merely human emotion from you and protects you from receiving any harmful influences from them. Everything is filtered through the light of the cross. Your human compassion is heightened and enlivened by divine love. You are praying for them through the power of the cross.
It hardly needs to be said that as they share, you are praying for them. Inwardly and imperceptively (it would be unkind to make a display of your praying) you are sending prayers of love and forgiveness into them. Also, you are praying that they will share the "key" that will reveal any area needing the healing touch of Christ.
Finally, it is extremely important that you pray for the person and not just counsel with them. Before or during the prayer we should announce to them that the forgiveness that is in Jesus Christ is now real and effective for them. We can say this in words and tones of genuine authority for we have all of heaven behind the absolution (John 20:22, 23).*
The prayer is for the healing of the inner wounds that the $\sin$ has caused. It is best to accompany the prayer with the "laying on of hands" which is an elemental teaching of the Bible and is a means through which God communicates his lifegiving power (Heb. 6:2). Invite God to flow into the deep inner mind and heal the sorrows of the past. Picture the healing. Thank him for it. Of this ministry of prayer Agnes Sanford

[^5]writes, "One makes a very deep rapport in this kind of prayer. One feels the feelings of the person for whom one prays; so much so that often the tears come from some deep center of compassion within the soul. Yet, if one weeps, it is not in grief but in joy, knowing that these tears are not one's own but are the tears of the compassionate heart of Christ brooding over this lost one, and the joy of Christ that at last He has been given a channel through which He can reach this person whom He loves." ${ }^{12}$
The Discipline of confession brings an end to pretense. God is calling into being a Church that can openly confess its frail humanity and know the forgiving and empowering graces of Christ. Honesty leads to confession, and confession leads to change. May God give grace to the Church once again to recover the Discipline of confession.


[^0]:    ${ }^{1}$ Richard J. Foster, Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth, revised ed. (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1988), 144.
    ${ }^{2}$ Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2005), 92.

[^1]:    ${ }^{3}$ Spiritual Disciplines Handbook, 92.

[^2]:    ${ }^{4}$ Alice Russie, ed., The Essential Works of John Wesley: Selected Books, Sermons, and Other Writings (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour Publishing, 2011), 816-817.
    ${ }^{5}$ Essential Works of John Wesley, 862.

[^3]:    Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 54-5848
    International Standard Book Number: 0-06-060852-8

[^4]:    The ancient Christian idea of the examination of conscience as a preparation for confession is light years away from the modern secular idea of "let your conscience be your guide." The conscience by itself is depraved and culturally conditioned-a most unreliable guide in matters of ethics and belief.

[^5]:    *In these words of Jesus we have not only the ministry of forgiving sins, but the ministry of retaining sins. "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." The ministry of retaining sins is simply the refusal to try to bring people into something for which they are not ready. Sometimes peole are so anxious to get others into the kingdom that they will try to announce their forgiveness before they have sought it or even wanted it. Unfortunately, this malady is characteristic of a great deal of modern evangelism.

