

The Confession of Sin in Reformed Worship

It was a Sunday like any other with a group of Presbyterians dutifully following their order of worship printed in the bulletin — until Ms. Jean stood up during the silence after the corporate confession of sin. “I need to confess something to you this morning,” she said.

The children coloring in the back pew put their crayons down. Even they knew this wasn't normal. Someone was departing from what was printed in the bulletin.

“Many of you know,” Ms. Jean continued, “that I've been very sick for awhile now. I need to confess the sin of despair. About a month ago, I wanted to die. I didn't think God cared about my suffering, and I just wanted to end it all. Now that's weighing heavy on my conscience, and I need to confess that I despaired.”

Folks sitting in the pews around Ms. Jean just naturally reached out to her. Her husband took her hand in his, then wrapped his other arm around her waist. The friend sitting next to her put her arm around Jean's shoulder. Others near her just laid their hand gently upon her arm and shoulders. Then someone softly began to pray for her release. Others started praying softly for Jean, too. Then people began softly confessing their own sins out loud and asked God to forgive and free them.

When the Spirit settled like a comforter around the congregation, the stunned pastor gave the assurance of pardon and pronounced, “In Jesus Christ we are forgiven!” The congregation spontaneously broke forth into singing the response printed in the bulletin with joy—sheer, unadulterated joy. “It was the first time that we really understood the power of confession,” the pastor commented. “It was written all over our faces.”

Confession of Sin: One of the Hallmarks of Reformed Worship

Ms. Jean helped her congregation experience the joy of confessing our sin before God and one another. While some might think the confession of sin is “a real downer,” as one person said to his pastor, confessing our sin releases us from our bondage to whatever gets in the way of pressing toward the mark of our high calling as followers of Christ.

This is why one of the hallmarks of the Reformed liturgical tradition is the prominence of the confession of sin in public worship. Gathered in the presence of the holy, triune God, we immediately recognize our unrighteousness and brokenness in the light of God's glory. Even as we praise God's infinite goodness, we are deeply aware of our finitude and failure to live as God intends. Therefore, with the apostle Paul, we acknowledge that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Recognizing our unworthiness even to stand in the presence of God, we are compelled to repent, to confess our sin. What else can we do but seek the grace of God?

The prototypical example of this in scripture is the story of the prophet Isaiah's encounter with God in the temple (Isaiah 6:1-8). Isaiah glimpses a vision of the Holy One on the throne, high and lofty; the hem of God's garment alone fills the temple. Divine attendants called seraphs, shielding their faces from the glory of God with their wings, sing the celestial hymn: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts." How does Isaiah respond? By confessing his sin: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" Hearing Isaiah's honest confession, God is quick to act. One of the seraphs touches the prophet's mouth with a burning coal from the altar, saying: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Isaiah is now ready to respond to God's call to service.

God is just as quick to respond to our own forthright confession of sin. As one well known call to confession states:

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:8-9).

When we confess our sin, we do so not with a spirit of despair, but with hope and confidence in the mercy of God, known to us through the saving love of Jesus Christ—who gave his life to deliver us from sin, and even now intercedes on our behalf. As another scriptural passage (also commonly used as a liturgical call to confession) elaborates:

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Hebrews 4:14-16).

Having confessed our sin before God and one another, we hear again the good news of the gospel: that in Jesus Christ we are forgiven. We give thanks and praise to God for this good news—that nothing in life or in death "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39). Forgiven and free, we seek to be reconciled to one another even as the grace of Christ has reconciled us to God. Furthermore, like Isaiah, we are now ready to hear God's word and respond to God's call to faithfulness and service.

Sin and Repentance in Reformed Theology

The significance of the confession of sin in Reformed worship is bound up with the central affirmations of our theological tradition: the sovereignty of

God, the sinful state of humanity, and the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. God's law is perfect, God's faithfulness is unailing, and God's justice is sure. We were created in God's own image to glorify and enjoy God forever. Since the time of our earliest ancestors, however, we spurned God's good gifts and rebelled against God's way, seeking satisfaction and security through our own selfish schemes. But our sovereign God has never given up on us! God made a covenant with the people of Israel, delivered them from bondage, sent prophets to proclaim the way of justice and righteousness, and finally—in the fullness of time—sent Jesus Christ to deliver us through the gift of his very life, poured out in love for the world. By the grace of God, we have access to that ancient covenant through our faith in Jesus Christ, who saves us from sin and death. Faith itself is a gift of God, for it is only by the power of the Holy Spirit that we are able to repent and believe in Christ. As members of Christ's body, we are called to live new and transformed lives, offering ourselves as a living sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to God.

In the Westminster Confession of Faith from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) *Book of Confessions* we find a relatively concise statement of the importance of the confession of sin in the Reformed theological tradition: ¹

Repentance unto life is an evangelical grace, the doctrine whereof is to be preached by every minister of the gospel, as well as that of faith in Christ.

By it a sinner, out of the sign and sense, not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his [*sic*; see note below] sins, as contrary to the holy nature and righteous law of God, and upon the apprehension of his mercy in Christ to such as are penitent, so grieves for, and hates his sins, as to turn from them all unto God, purposing and endeavoring to walk with him in all the ways of his commandments.

Although repentance be not rested in as any satisfaction for sin, or any cause of the pardon thereof, which is the act of God's free grace in Christ; yet is it of such necessity to all sinners, that none may expect pardon without it.

As there is no sin so small but it deserves damnation; so there is no sin so great that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent.

Men ought not to content themselves with a general repentance, but it is every man's duty to endeavor to repent of his particular sins, particularly.

As every man is bound to make private confession of his sins to

¹ The historic masculine language is retained in this quotation in order to aid comprehension of the original thought.

God, praying for the pardon thereof, upon which, and the forsaking of them, he shall find mercy: so he that scandalizeth his brother, or the church of Christ, ought to be willing, by a private or public confession and sorrow for his sin, to declare his repentance to those that are offended; who are thereupon to be reconciled to him, and in love to receive him (6.081 - 6.086).

Confession and the Sacraments

The regular confession of sin in public worship is also related to the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Concerning the former, as Paul wrote,

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ... We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. ... So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus (Romans 6:3-11).

When we confess our sin, we remember our baptism, by which we: participate in Christ's saving death and resurrection; are cleansed and pardoned of our sin; are called beloved children of God by the gift of the Spirit, and empowered for ministry in Christ's name; become members of Christ's body, the church; and anticipate the coming of Christ's realm of justice and peace. Many pastors have begun to lead the call to confession and assurance of forgiveness from the baptismal font, underscoring this important relationship between baptism and the confession of sin. Each time they confess their sin, worshipers may remember their baptism and be thankful.

There are also profound connections between the confession of sin and the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Around the table of grace, we proclaim the mystery of our faith: that Christ died and rose for us, so that sin and death might no longer have any power over us. We recall Christ's words over the cup: "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:27-28). We pray the prayer that Christ taught, saying: "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

Accordingly, the confession of sin is part of our preparation to approach the eucharistic table, and thus is an integral part of the Service for the Lord's Day *especially* when the eucharist is celebrated. As Paul wrote to the church at Corinth: "Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves" (1 Corinthians 11:28-29). When we come to the Lord's Table, we are called to be reconciled not only to God, but to one another. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said: "first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:24).

However, this is *not* to presume that only the righteous and holy may come to the table—as if such persons could be found! The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) *Directory for Worship* explains:

access to the Table is not a right conferred upon the worthy, but a privilege given to the undeserving who come in faith, repentance, and love. In preparing to receive Christ in this sacrament, the believer is to confess sin and brokenness, to seek reconciliation with God and neighbor, and to trust in Jesus Christ for cleansing and renewal. Even one who doubts or whose trust is wavering may come to the Table in order to be assured of God's love and grace in Christ Jesus (W-2.4011a).

A note of caution, however—although baptism and the Lord's Supper are integrally related to confession and repentance, their significance should not be restricted to narrowly penitential themes. For instance, baptism is also the joyous celebration of our incorporation into Christ, and the source of our Christian vocation. The Lord's Supper is a joyful feast of thanksgiving to God our Creator, and a tantalizing taste of heavenly banquet to come.

Three Common Misconceptions

Although the confession of sin has a vital and historic place in Reformed worship, it has not always been well understood—even within our own tradition. The confession of sin is not about berating ourselves for our transgressions or wallowing in the depths of human depravity. It is about being honest with God and honest with ourselves about the stark reality of our situation, and praying for the grace of God, who alone has the power to save us from our sin. Confession that does not move us toward conversion and restored relationship is worth nothing. Real repentance leads to the renewal of life, as in Christ we are set free from sin and death and made to “walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4).

We also miss the point when we “confess our humanity,” as though simply being human were something for which we should apologize. Our humanity is a gift from God, who created us and called us good, and whose own Word has shared our flesh and lived among us. The point of confession is to confront—and genuinely grieve—the reality of our *sin*: our alienation from God, our abandonment of the covenant, our animosity towards one another, and our abuse of God's good gifts. Confessing our humanity both dishonors the God in whose image we were created, and distracts us from the real need to confess our sin.

Another common problem in the confession of sin is our tendency to focus on individual sin, to the exclusion of systemic or institutional injustice. We are all too often obsessed with the lurid details of personal sin, and oblivious to our collective complacency and complicity with systems that

oppress other human beings and destroy God's good creation. The Reformed insistence on the corporate or communal nature of our confession is an important corrective to this inclination. This is not to obviate the need for personal confession, but to expand it through an awareness of our corporate sin.

Given these frequent and pervasive distortions of the confession of sin, Reformed churches (and Christian churches in general) would do well to embrace a renewed practice of confession—one that is broader and deeper. Our confession of sin must become *broader* in the sense that it:

- (1) encompasses not only the sensational and stigmatized sins of our culture, but the whole range of everyday sin as well (envy or gossip, e.g.);
- (2) discerns the far-reaching implications of our sins, including their impact on the suffering of others; and
- (3) accounts for the societal as well as the personal dimensions of sin.

At the same time, our confession of sin must be *deeper* in the sense that it should:

- (1) promote a sincere and searching examination of the conscience, and not a perfunctory list of peccadillos;
- (2) avoid shallow and misplaced "confessions" of human nature, and focus on the reality of sin; and
- (3) constitute real repentance and result in a true conversion of heart and radical change of life.

The good news is that no matter the breadth and depth of our sin, God's grace is broader and deeper still. As the hymnist wrote, "There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea."

Confession and Lament

We might further expand our understanding and practice of confession by taking into account the suffering of the sinned-against—the consequence of sin. As liturgical theologian Ruth Duck has suggested:

If confession is the cry of the sinner, lament is the cry of the victim. As many as fifty-nine of the one hundred fifty psalms are psalms of lament. These psalms speak openly of suffering, violence, lies, persecution, abandonment, and exile. They respond with terror, rage, tears, and bitter pleas for help from a God who may seem to be absent or to tolerate injustice (Ruth C. Duck, "Hospitality to Victims: A Challenge for Christian Worship," in *The Other Side of Sin: Woundedness from the Perspective of the Sinned-Against*, Andrew Sung Park and Susan L. Nelson, eds. [Suny Press, 2001] 168).

Prayers of lament allow us to give voice to our hurt and sorrow in times of crisis and pain, times when we find it difficult to discern God's power and presence in our lives. Such stark and honest prayers do not represent a failure of faith; rather, they are a way of maintaining relationship with God, even through seasons of doubt and despair. Lament is precisely the kind of persistent prayer that Jesus praised in the parable of the widow and the unjust judge (Luke 18:1-8)—prayer that insistently seeks the help of God, who is merciful and just. The purpose of lament is always to move toward hope and healing—the hope and healing that comes from God alone.

Prayers of lament may also enable us to pray in solidarity with others who are suffering. At a time in which we have become nearly numb to reports of unspeakable violence, cruel oppression, and tragic calamity, lament can help to sensitize us—and move us to respond with compassion—to the struggle and pain of others, whether they live in distant lands or in our own churches and communities. In this sense, lament can be a resource for the renewal and reconciliation of human relationships. Biblical examples of this kind of prayer include Isaiah's suffering servant songs (Isaiah 42:1-4, 49:1-6, 50:4-11, and 52:13-53:12) and Jesus weeping over Jerusalem in Luke 19:41-44 (see also Luke 13:33-34 and 23:27-31).

As noted above, the book of Psalms—an ancient and abiding source for Jewish and Christian liturgy—is full of this kind of prayer. Here we find a helpful model for the use of lament in contemporary worship. The classic shape of the lament psalm, identified by biblical scholars, is as follows: (1) address to God, (2) description of suffering, (3) statement of trust in God, (4) petition for God's presence and power, and (5) vow of praise. A simple example of a lament prayer might look something like this:

Gracious God, our savior and strength in times of suffering,
hear the cries of all your people ... (name specific situations).
We know that you are faithful and just, generous and kind.
Strengthen, support, and sustain us through trouble and trial,
so that we may once again celebrate your goodness and grace.

Corporate or communal prayers of lament would be particularly appropriate as a response to natural disasters, acts of violence or destruction, times of war, famine, drought, economic or ecological crisis, or epidemic disease. Personal prayers of lament would be appropriate in situations of dire illness, mourning, loss of relationship, depression, social isolation, persecution, or financial hardship. Indeed, lament prayers have served these purposes since the times of ancient Israel!

Prayers of lament may also be useful in situations of church conflict or denominational disputes. In the psalms and other biblical prayers of lament we find a language for expressing our grief over the brokenness of Christ's body,

the church. Such prayers can be a powerful resource for healing and reconciliation—provided that they are properly used with pastoral care and theological sensitivity. Prayers of lament are not an excuse to heap blame or condemnation on others. Neither are they simply an outlet to vent—to air our laundry lists of complaints about the church. The goal of lament is *always* restored relationship with God and with one another, through the redeeming grace and transforming power of God.

Please note that this call for lament in Christian worship should in no way be understood to minimize or replace the confession of sin. Rather, it is hoped that a renewed practice of lament might offer a way to expand and supplement the element of confession, by taking into account the whole range of human suffering. Similarly, the call for lament is not intended to diminish our praise and thanksgiving to God—the heart of Reformed worship! On the contrary, by acknowledging our own struggles and the suffering of others, and by calling out to God with authentic prayer, we may be able—by the grace of God—to move toward more profound expressions of gratitude and praise.

This is what happened in Ms. Jean's congregation through her courage to stand and be honest about her sin, which allowed others the freedom to do the same. The pastor commented that something shifted in the church that day. People were more tender in how they treated one another. Visitors began to return and became members, commenting on how this church was different: "People are so genuinely caring toward one another here!" The pastor attributed the difference to the day of that extraordinary time of confession. "It was as if from that day forward," the pastor said, "that there was the recognition that we're all just common, forgiven sinners wending our way home and that we need to help others along the Way."