

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 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.”¹

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." ⁴

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 faithful 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 confession. 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, fear—as 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 emotions. 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.”⁹ 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 pastors—though 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 life-giving 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 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.