



By David Christensen

As the floor is swept every day, so is the soul cleansed every day by confession.
(Hugh Connolly, "The Irish Penitentials")

Confession releases the soul's trauma to God. Sin traumatizes the soul as do many other life experiences. Sorrow over the death of a child; the sting of failure; rejection by a parent; betrayal of trust; false accusation or vicious criticism; loss of ability through sickness; and the shock of facing a personal tragedy can all traumatize the soul. God has created in man marvelous coping mechanisms that shelter us from shock beyond our capacity to bear. We seal off the pain in our inner compartments, walling off the hurt so we can survive the trauma. We insulate ourselves from the memory or project our feelings onto others to control our pain. Confession is God's method for dealing with soul trauma and releasing the pain from the closets of our inner beings.

Confession opens the soul to accept love. Hiding hinders intimacy with God and with others. Walls go up. We hide our hurt inside our fortress as we look with suspicion at all around us. "Those whose guilt within their bosom lies imagine every eye beholds their blame" (Shakespeare). Hiding our trauma may be motivated by fear. We fear more rejection and pain. We fight exposure for exposure makes us feel vulnerable and opens the wounds that we are working desperately to seal. Transparency often produces greater trauma, and our natural fears scream to protect us from that threat of greater pain. Hiding our sin is often an act of pride. We want to control our image before others, so we pull up the drawbridge and hide behind our walls. We have all witnessed the pain of damaged human relationships that come from confessed sin, and we do not want to risk that kind of humiliation. Our natural tendency is to hide the trauma deep inside where no one else can see, but this natural tendency creates its own painful legacy. Hiding creates emotional distance. We cannot enjoy intimacy with God and with others while hiding these struggles in our souls.

What does the Bible say about this important doctrine of confession? The results may be somewhat surprising to many. The root word translated "confess" in the New Testament has four major meanings: (1) promise, assure; (2) agree, admit; (3) confess in a judicial or religious setting; and

(4) to declare or acknowledge something.¹ A common related word for confess can mean to promise or consent but also to admit, acknowledge and praise.² This second word is the one commonly used in the early church fathers for the act of confession made by a sinner to admit sin. These two words are used in three distinct senses in the New Testament. We need to understand the force of these senses if we are to understand the doctrine of confession properly.

Confession means confession of God the vast majority of times. We acknowledge some truth about God, or we profess our identification by faith in Christ (Titus 1:16; Mt. 10:32; 1 Tim. 6:12; Lk. 12:8; Acts 24:14; 1 Jn. 2:23). The primary usage of confession in the Bible is not a confession of sin at all. It is a confession of God. We declare the Lordship of Christ (Rom. 10:9; Phil. 2:11), or we agree to believe some truth about Christ (1 Jn. 4:2; 2 Jn. 7; Jn. 1:20; 9:22; 12:42). The second kind of confession in the New Testament is the confession of sin to God (1 Jn. 1:9; Mt. 3:6; Mk. 1:5; Acts 19:18). The third kind of confession is the confession of sin to others. There is only one passage that explicitly uses the word confess in this sense (James 5:16)³, so we best be careful about making this concept of confession the primary emphasis of the New Testament. The primary emphasis in the New Testament is on confession of God. After we have acknowledged His authority over our lives, then we are ready to confess our sinfulness to Him. Finally, there is a place for confession of sin to other believers, but this is not the primary focus of the New Testament. There is a strong New Testament emphasis on the responsibility of believers to confront sin in other believers (Mt. 18:15) and to bear the burdens of those caught in sin (Gal. 6:1-2), but the initiative in these cases is with the confronting brother, not the confessing sinner. The role of “fraternal admonition” is biblical but we must carefully handle the practice of personal confession to others. When, and how, should we confess hurt, trauma and sin to other Christians?

CONFESSION TO OTHERS

Many years ago, an older woman in our church asked to meet with me. She poured out her heart that day. She confessed that she had harbored bitterness and resentment toward me because one day – months earlier – I had ignored her greeting at church. Apparently, she had spoken to me, but I had walked right past her without saying a word, and she felt that I was angry with her for some reason. Other slights were then noticed and suspicions cataloged, before long she had developed a deep resentment toward me that she knew was wrong. I was totally oblivious to all of this and never even remembered the incident, but I quickly told her how sorry I was for the offense and that I certainly was not angry toward her at all. We were able to establish a warm relationship, and I was very careful in the future to greet her at church so as not to offend her again.

A local church can become an incubator for resentment. Opportunities abound for misunderstandings to develop. Personalities clash. Words wound. Our idiosyncrasies and personality quirks cause hurt feelings. We fail one another causing hard feelings. We sin, and the sin ripples out into other lives that are affected by the sin. Confession to others is God’s prescription for whatever we do that damages our relationships with others. Unilateral forgiveness is God’s prescription for whatever others do to damage their relationship with us. The first, and best, antidote is to forgive unilaterally so that resentment does not build in us toward others. However, often sin infiltrates our fellowship and must be confessed to others to purify both our fellowship and us. Confession opens the doors of our hearts toward each other in the fellowship of a local church. Confession allows us to prosper spiritually and relationally once again. *He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.* (Prov. 28:13).

Why do we have so much difficulty with a confession to others? And how does this lack of confession to others affect our confession to God? Pride is at the root of hiding our sin from God. We are so clever at finding creative ways to deceive ourselves into thinking God does not know (Jer. 17:9) that we harden our hearts as the next verse in Proverbs proves. *Blessed is the man who always fears the LORD, but he who hardens his heart falls into trouble.* (Prov. 28:14) Honest confession is humiliating, so I avoid admitting when I am wrong as if I can pretend God didn't notice. One of the ways I hide from God is by hiding from others. There is a connection between the vertical and horizontal avoidance of confession. For example, I find it hard to admit to my wife or my children when I am wrong. It is humbling. But if I find it hard to admit a wrong to my wife how can I be sure that I am humble before God?! How real am I with God if I cannot be real with my wife? If I find it easier to confess my sins to an invisible God than visible people, then maybe I am not confessing to God at all. My relationship with God takes on a sense of unreality. God is real enough, but I can find ways to insulate myself psychologically from His reality. The truth is that I am not seeing God as a real person and confession to God as anything more than a psychological catharsis if I can casually confess to God but not to anyone else. The shame of confession to others has a way of making our confession to God real.⁴

The process of human disclosure makes the process of divine disclosure real. It is hard. It is humbling, but it is effective. The human exposure brings light to the sin in a way that can heal the soul. Dietrich Bonhoeffer saw this principle clearly. "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 been brought into the light."⁵

THE DANGERS OF PUBLIC CONFESSION

Susan is a typical confessor. There are "Susan's" in every church. She was the first to "pop up" during the Sunday evening testimony time. The pastor could always count on Susan to "prime the pump." The problem was that Susan could sometimes dominate the service sharing her struggles. The stories could get long, and the sharing could become uncomfortably personal. You sometimes felt like you were looking through the window of her bedroom and you should look away. She always gave credit to the Lord for helping her through her latest crisis, but most of the talk revealed her failures and her needs through watery eyes. Often as you listened, you felt a strange discomfort you couldn't finger because, while the words sounded right, you sensed that Susan seemed to like the attention a little overmuch. Her need to share revealed her desire for attention and the service provided her a platform for self-fulfillment.

One day, Jim shared in the small group meeting at Bob's home that he struggled with homosexuality. Bob had not expected it nor had anyone else suspected it. Jim was fairly new to the group of 5 couples all of whom had young children who were normally in the next room playing while the couples shared and prayed together. Jim came alone, and the group had tried to reach out to him in the few weeks that he had been attending because he seemed so lonely. Then he blurted out the details of his homosexual feelings as well as confessed a broken relationship that had ended earlier that year. He asked prayer for healing and help for his struggles. The group was kind and prayed for Jim that night. Bob led Jim to talk with the pastor, and he was connected with a Christian counselor who could help. Jim kept coming and continued to share his ongoing struggle. One by one the couples began making excuses for missing the group. The smaller the group became, the more Jim

talked. The group was turning into a therapy session for Jim. Bob talked with the pastor, and together they gently confronted Jim and asked him not to attend the group. The pastor got Jim connected with a support group for men struggling with sexual addiction. But Jim was hurt. He eventually stopped attending church and blamed the Christians for their lack of love.

Confession of sin to others is filled with danger. We tend to see the local church idealistically and assume that believers will function like the Lord. But we are not God. Believers do not have an infinite capacity to handle the trauma of confession. Some are too shocked to deal with it properly. Others try, but their emotional resources wear out long before the healing takes place. Constant confession of personal needs drains people trying to deal with the struggles of their own lives. The forum of public confession can become narcissistic rather than therapeutic. Instead of bringing healing for sin, confession is all too easily turned into a platform to call attention to self. Some people are drainers. They will grab that pulpit and use it fill their insatiable need for attention while driving others to avoid them for self-preservation. Other people shock and traumatize needlessly causing emotional withdrawal and awkward, if not tense, relationships. For every example of healing confession in the church, there are many horror stories of damaging confessions that hurt and wound others without bringing healing to the sinner at all.

There are four major dangers with a public confession. First, some confessions breed a false sense of victory. I have watched believers confess their sin before others leading to a momentary emotional high that only makes the later fall more precipitous. They fall back into the sin they “confessed” and the fall back is deeper and blacker than the fall confessed. The medieval writer Thomas a Kempis wrote: “How great is the frailty of human nature which is ever prone to evil! Today you confess your sins and tomorrow you again commit the sins you confessed. One moment you resolve to be careful, and yet after an hour you act as though you had made no resolution.”⁶ This is the phenomena of “altar call” Christianity. The same people repeatedly respond to the altar call confessing again and again and again the same sins. The spiritual roller coaster ride is damaging for both sinner and church. We need to be careful to avoid this syndrome in the practice of confession to other believers.

Second, confession can deeply wound others through callous indifference to their feelings. Many sins involve another person as a partner in the sin. Adultery is one example where the confessing sinner can destroy the other person through public confession before the other person is ready to handle that exposure emotionally or by the way he portrays the other person in the confession. The sinner has no right to publicly confess the sins of another without the permission of that person. “Yes, I sinned but she’s a slut” is not a confession that leads to healing. Many sins involve another person as a victim of the sin. Rape and sexual abuse come to mind. Imagine the damage done by the sexual abuser who “confesses” in public the name of the child he abused! I have observed horrific family trauma stemming from such public confessions/accusations of abuse. This sort of confession needs to be handled privately and carefully to avoid the public trauma to innocent members of the family. There may even be times when confession to one whom we have wronged may cause more damage than it is worth. There are times when confession to others may not be wise given the trauma it will cause to others. George Buttrick wrote: “Confession to those we have wronged is sometimes, not always, wise: there are circumstances in which such confession would spread and aggravate the hurt. But confession to God, whom we have more deeply wronged, is always wise: he has understanding and love.”⁷ Discerning confession is far better than destroying confession.

Third, confession is sometimes used as a conscious or unconscious tool of manipulation. Some people use confession as a means to force forgiveness. Confession becomes a weapon of “superior spirituality” coercing the other person to feel guilty or in debt to the confessor. The serial sinner who mechanically says, “I’m sorry” when caught fully expects the other person to respond with, “I forgive you.” The confession becomes a juvenile tool for avoiding consequences. Insincere confession heaps a burden on the one to whom we confess. She now feels obligated to forgive even though she senses that the confession was mechanical. The confessor uses the confession in a power struggle to control the weaker party and manipulate the situation to his advantage.

Fourth, many Christians cannot control their tongues, so confession merely starts the church’s gossip chain (James 3:5-6). As a pastor, I have often observed that the people chosen to receive confession are often the least able to handle the confession received. They just have to tell someone what they were told. Busybodies exist in every church (2 Thess. 3:11) and the juicier the tidbit, the greater the temptation to tell someone. Many a prayer meeting has turned into a gossip session because of the immaturity of those to whom sin was confessed. This is one of the greatest fears inhibiting true confession from taking place in the church. Many times a person has come to my office to confess sin but prefaced that confession with the fear of public exposure by the loose lips of other Christians. The average Christian who has lived in any church for any length of time knows this fear for he has seen the devastating effects of the tongue destroying the lives of others.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE TEACH?

Public confession of private sin is not commanded in Scripture. There may be times when it is appropriate or circumstances where it is necessary, such as a pastor who sins in a way that damages the whole church (1 Tim. 5:20),⁸ but normal circumstances do not require public confession. The one passage sometimes used to defend public confession is James 5:16 but this passage is set in a context of personal, not corporate confession.⁹ The one exception is Acts 19:18. Here the magical arts practiced extensively in the city of Ephesus had been exposed by Paul and fear fell upon all the people. Many (not all) of those who believed were confessing their magical arts and disclosing their magical practices in public while burning their parchments in public. The public process was important to expose the widespread trade in the magical arts but, even so, it was clearly voluntary and related to conversion. The OT public “confessions” (Nehemiah 9:1-38), made in a national assembly of repentance, were not personal but corporate in nature and the confessions were generic rather than individual. There is no teaching of Scripture that would indicate we should normally confess personal sins before large groups of people.

Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. (James 5:16)

Personal confession of personal sin is commanded in Scripture. This command can hardly mean that we are to confess every sinful thought or private act to every person we meet. The point is that we need to confess sins to each other regularly so that we can properly pray for each other in the battles we face together as believers. The sins we confess to each other are sins that have spiritual consequences. They affect our relationship with God and with each other. James is talking about sins that bring sickness (v.14), need forgiveness (v. 15), and require healing (v. 16). Most sickness is not the direct result of personal sin, but some physical and emotional sickness is brought upon a believer as chastening from God for personal sin. This kind of sickness must be dealt with in a specific manner for restoration of health to occur.¹⁰ Guilt over sin can cause many psychological, emotional and even

physical problems that plague the sinner constantly or erupt years later when some traumatic circumstance opens a Pandora's Box of issues. Pastors and counselors see this phenomenon fairly frequently in ministry.

Four principles of Scripture emerge as we apply this command to our lives coupled with other Scriptures that help us understand the liberating power of confession.

1. CONFESS SIN TO THOSE DIRECTLY WRONGED BY THE SIN SEEKING RECONCILIATION WITH THE WRONGED.

If we are confronted by the one against whom we have sinned, we should honestly admit the sin and seek to right the relationship (Mt. 18:15) without hedging, fudging or rationalizing our answers. If we are worshipping and God convicts us of sin against another, we should leave our worship and quickly go to that person and seek reconciliation through the act of confession (Mt. 5:23-26). The wrong in view here is not merely that someone feels offended by something we have done. The wrong in view here is the kind of wrong that results in real social or civil consequences as the next verses make clear. We should move rapidly to confess and reconcile with the person we have wronged lest the time of grace come to an end and legal consequences are invoked against us! There is urgency here as well as a warning that the opportunity for reconciliation does not last long.

Some sins affect only one other person while other sins do wider damage. If your sin directly wrongs only one other person then go to that person in private and confess the sin seeking to correct the wrong you have done to that person. If your sin wrongs more than one person, then go to each person privately and confess your sin to each. How far do you extend this circle of confession? Some would say that you should confess to anyone who is affected by the sin but this can become a serious problem. I have seen those who thought a person had been affected and confessed to him only to find out that he knew next to nothing about the sin and now the sinner is guilty of gossip. So be careful. The ripple of effect of sin can go on and on indefinitely through gossip and rumor, but this heaps an unreasonable burden of correction on the sinner. The rule of thumb: confess to those directly wronged by the sin. The sins of parents should not be confessed to children unless the children are directly wronged by the sin and are mature enough to handle the disclosure. The sins of a church member do not have to be aired before every other church member. Membership in a local church does not mean that everyone is directly wronged by every sin committed by every person in that church.

How should we confess?¹¹ I would summarize the process in the following ways.

- Be specific and definite. Do not merely generalize and do not lump many sins into one overall confession. The more concrete you can make the confession the greater the possibility for reconciliation.
- Focus on self, not others. Many sins may involve others, but we should avoid making them the emphasis of the confession or imply shared blame. Shared sin does not equal shared blame. The dividing up of blame into percentages (60/40) serves little purpose and does great harm.
- Do not name others whose shame you cannot bear. Confession can do great harm to another who is not in the same place that you are. Avoid implicating others to make you feel better.

- Avoid the almighty “but.” The listener instinctively believes what follows the “but” more than what precedes the “but.”
- Avoid excessive tears and grandiose statements that hinder the process with dramatic flair. Confession can become a subliminal form of ego gratification.
- Do not lecture the one to whom you confess about his/her responsibilities or flaws. Confess don’t preach.
- Be quick to confess sin to God but slow to confess sin to those not directly involved. Confession to those not directly involved is a form of gossip if it involves naming anyone else involved in your sin.
- Be careful not to claim victory because premature claims to victory are very common in false confessions of sin.
- Avoid projecting on to another the feelings that you feel. A confession is a personal act regarding personal feelings. Own those feelings by yourself without thinking you know how the other person feels.
- Avoid talking about your sin to anyone else not involved. Unloading sin on others may make you feel better while others feel worse, dirty or used by you.

2. CONFESS SIN TO THOSE SPIRITUAL LEADERS WHO ARE GIVEN CHARGE OVER YOUR SOUL BY GOD.

God established spiritual leaders in the local church and entrusted those leaders with the responsibility to shepherd the people (Heb. 13:17; 1 Thess. 5:12). Every believer is to submit to the spiritual leaders of that church, and the spiritual leaders will give an account to God for how they handled the people. This means that spiritual leaders are – by definition – directly involved when sin damages the fellowship they are responsible for shepherding. Confession is not penance in the sense that we earn our forgiveness, but there is a legitimate accountability that comes with true confession. Most sin is not entirely private but affects others in one form or another. We need to be accountable to spiritual leaders, and such accountability may include restitution to the victim or actions designed to clear accounts with another person. These are often best managed under the oversight of a spiritual leader.

We live in a culture that disrespects authority even in the church. Church discipline (Mt. 18:15-20) almost never is completed in our modern American churches anymore because the sinner simply thumbs his nose at the leaders and moves on to a new church where he is welcomed with open arms. I have been a pastor or Bible teacher in one geographical area of the country now for 25 years. I have watched as people migrated from church to church in our area leaving behind a legacy of unresolved sin and relational damage everywhere they went, and I believe that God is deeply grieved by this callous disregard for the process He established for dealing with sin. Few stay in a church and submit to the process of biblical repentance, confession and restoration anymore. Why? I believe it is because part of that process is submission to spiritual leaders whose God-given task is to evaluate our confessions and prescribe the restoration process, and Christians do not want to submit to the authority of spiritual leaders today.

It is very interesting and highly instructive that the very passage most often used to emphasize personal confession of sin to one another is the passage that teaches the essential involvement of the spiritual leaders in that confession/forgiveness/healing process. James prefaces his command to confess our sins to each other by saying: *Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray*

over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. (James 5:14) The command to confess sins to each other (v.16) cannot be disassociated from the prayer of the elders. The “therefore” of verse 16 introduces the conclusion to the previous verses which speak of sin, sickness, and forgiveness. The prayer for healing in verse 15 is grammatically connected to the actions of the elders in verse 14. Because God sometimes uses sickness to discipline us for sin, we should confess our sins to each other and pray for each other. This should be the case when we call for the elders to pray for us to be healed as they consecrate us to the Lord. Spiritual leaders are to take this process of sin – sickness – confession – forgiveness and healing seriously.

We follow this practice in our local assembly. When someone is sick and calls for the elders to come to the home, then I will go with several elders to anoint the sick person with olive oil in keeping with the ancient custom of the early church. I always explain that sickness can have many causes and we thank God for the skills of the medical community whom God normally uses to heal sickness. There are some illnesses that are caused by guilt over specific sin, and these are dealt with spiritually as well as medically. I will ask the person if there are any sins they need to confess before the elders that might be the cause of sickness. God can and does heal sin both through the medical community and miracles, but the promise in this passage only applies to sickness caused by God as a consequence of known sin. After confession, I will anoint with oil explaining that this oil was used for consecration, so we are consecrating the person to God on the basis of their confession before God. Then we will lay hands on the person and pray for God’s forgiveness and healing in that life.

3. CONFESS SIN TO THOSE WHO CAN RESTORE YOU SPIRITUALLY BY BEARING YOUR BURDENS.

Confession of sins is first a private, vertical act. We confess to the Lord, and the forgiveness comes from Him (1 John 1:9). Confession of sins to one another (James 5:16) is but the continuation of that process for it brings the reality of forgiveness to the soul that finds it hard to accept the forgiveness he has in Christ (John 20:23). Retaining the sins is an act of discipline carried out by the church on earth which God honors in heaven (Mt. 18:17-20). I am convinced, after years of pastoral ministry, that there is a direct connection between the process of horizontal confession and forgiveness and vertical confession and forgiveness. Those who confess privately – just the sinner and God – and never confess to anyone else - never seem to feel the benefits of forgiveness like those who also confess to others. They just do not feel forgiven until forgiven by another believer. Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it this way. “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.”¹²

Confession of sins to one another (James 5:16) is an element of the doctrine of the priesthood of believers (1 Peter 2:9). Therefore, the person we confess to needs certain “priestly” qualities. It is true that every believer is positionally a priest but not every believer is capable of handling the confession properly. Some are too shocked by the sin. Some carry baggage from the past that will not allow them to deal with the sin appropriately. Some are immature in the faith, baby Christians, who do not have the spiritual maturity to process the information and do not know what to do with the confession. We confess to a person who is able to maturely bear another’s burdens (Gal. 6:2). This means that the person is able to handle the matter with wisdom, grace, discernment and confidentiality. Far too many confessions have soured in the brine of gossip.

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ. If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, for each one should carry his own load. (Gal. 6:1-5)

Notice the qualities necessary to act in a priestly manner toward a believer who sins.

- First, the person must be spiritual. Godliness is a characteristic of life not a consequence of position or a product of passion.
- Second, the person must be gentle. The restoration process requires gentle, patient care by those in a position to restore the person. Not all believers are capable of restoring another gently because they lack the ability or authority.
- Third, the person must be careful. The priestly believer understands that she is fully capable of committing the same sin just confessed. This knowledge guards against a sense of superiority so damaging to restoration.
- Fourth, the priest must be capable of carrying the burdens laid on him without taking those burdens to others. Some people cannot handle the confession and do not carry that burden of information with confidentiality and integrity. They struggle with the process of handling private information about other people. Pastors and other spiritual leaders commonly must carry burdens of information that nobody else knows about, but many believers cannot be trusted to “carry” the load of confidential information.
- Fifth, the priest must be humble. Some believers quickly get inflated opinions about how something should be handled and become judgmental of others in the process. Such a priest begins to think too highly of himself.
- Sixth, the priest must constantly test himself. Her actions may cause additional problems, or she may begin to make comparisons driven by pride. Few events in life more quickly inflate the human ego than receiving a confession from someone who placed his trust in us for help.

4. CONFESS SIN TO THOSE WITH WHOM YOU DESIRE DEEPER INTIMACY.

Earl Wilson writes honestly about his struggle to share his sexual sins with others in the body of Christ. A pastor/friend had advised him not to share any more details of his sin with his wife Sandy or other Christians because it would only hurt them. Earl was relieved by this advice but soon found that keeping secrets created its own problems. It allowed him to continue his sinful patterns and aborted the healing process with those he loved. As long as he was keeping secrets from others, he found that emotional distance developed in his relationships as he walled off from others this part of his life. One day his counselor asked him if he had told his elderly father about his sexual sin. Earl Wilson replied, “No. He’s old and about to die; why would I want to tell him this stuff?” The response cut to the heart of the matter. “It depends on what kind of relationship you want to have with him while he is living. If you want a superficial relationship based on more lies and deceit, then don’t tell him. On the other hand, if you want a close and open relationship with him, then you’ll need to tell him.” Earl chose to tell his father, and the disclosure opened up a deep and wonderful relationship during those final years his father was in the nursing home. He often stopped in to see him, and they could share openly together. The other patients in the nursing home called his father’s room “Envy

Hotel” because they envied the loving father/son relationship they observed. Earl Wilson writes: “If I had not told Dad the truth, I would have stayed away for fear of having to explain why I was in the neighborhood so regularly (to see his counselor) – and all of that would have been lost.”¹³

Sharing secrets binds hearts together in love. Children instinctively understand this reality. The two girls who share their diaries with each other are seeking to form a deeper friendship. The boys who form a “secret” club with handshakes, codes and a clubhouse hidden deep in the woods are forging powerful bonds of loyalty. Secrets shared in love nurture the intimacy of marriage. Solomon wrote his beautiful love poem to his bride and explained a time of courtship when he felt she was hidden from him like the doves that hid in the rocks. He longed for her to show herself to him. He yearned to hear her voice again. *My dove in the clefts of the rock, in the hiding places on the mountainside, show me your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely. Catch for us the foxes, the little foxes that ruin the vineyards, our vineyards that are in bloom.* (Song of Songs 2:14-15) This revealing of the soul is the heart of intimacy. Solomon pleads with his bride to join him in catching the foxes that would invade their garden of love and steal their intimacy away. Confession is God’s way of catching the foxes that would invade our relationships. We need to share the secrets that would steal our love for the surrender of confession leads to the ecstasy of intimacy.

Christians are to be characterized by love (1 John 4:7, 11, 12) being kind, compassionate and forgiving to one another (Eph. 4:32; 1 Peter 3:8; Col. 3:13). We are not to lie to one another. Honesty is essential to our fellowship (Eph. 4:25; Col. 3:9). We are to submit to one another out of respect for our Lord (Eph. 5:21). A confession is a form of honest submission that cultivates close fellowship. The word “submit” that Paul uses in this verse becomes the operative word for the relationship that a wife has with her husband (Eph. 5:22). Obviously, there are levels or degrees of intimacy, and the submission we all should practice with one another does not necessarily lead to the same intimacy as the intimacy of marriage. Without honest confession that submits our wellbeing to the reactions of another, we will continue to live on the superficial level. The closer the intimacy, the deeper the trust that only comes through honest confession of private flaws. Confession is like peeling an onion, how deep we go determines how close we become. Tears are often the byproduct of peeling back the layers.

One objective of confession is intimacy. We confess to those with whom we want a deeper level of intimacy. We are not intimate with everyone. We routinely wall off parts of our lives from others without damaging results for we are not equally intimate with everyone we meet. This is one reason why we are often uncomfortable with public intimacies shared through public confessions. We instinctively recoil from knowing such details about a person with whom we do not want to be intimate. Public confessions of intimate details force intimacy on others. I often hear believers say, “I don’t want to know the details.” Why? They don’t want that level of intimacy with that person.

The rule of thumb is this: Confess your sins to another according to the level of intimacy you want with that person. We all live with levels of intimacy even in our own family relationships. Parents don’t confess everything to children – nor should they – because such intimacy traumatizes the child. We live with levels of intimacy within the church as well, and disclosure should follow the levels of intimacy we have, or desire to have, with others.

Henri Nouwen understood this concept and expressed it beautifully. He has left us a record of his struggle through a deep personal crisis late in his life. He chose not to give details about the personal crisis, but he did explain the process of healing that he experienced over a period of years. In his book, he wrote these helpful words:

“Do not tell everyone your story. You will only end up feeling more rejected. People cannot give you what you long for in your heart. The more you expect from people’s response to your experience . . . , the more you will feel exposed to ridicule.

You have to close yourself to the outside world so you can enter your own heart and the heart of God through your pain. God will send to you the people with whom you can share your anguish, who can lead you closer to the true source of love.

God is faithful to God’s promises. . . . There is nothing to hold on to but this promise. Everything else has been taken away from you. Cling to that naked promise in faith.”¹⁴

Confession is God’s gift to us. Through confession we can release the hurt, the shame and the guilt that comes from sin, whether our sin or another’s, that has damaged us. Confession handled wisely and carefully is liberating for the soul and produces intimacy with God and with others that can only come when we stop hiding our secrets behind the walls of our castles. The release that comes from confession is essential to the renewal that comes from God’s healing work in our lives. We must learn to release the secrets that are poisoning our souls if we ever want to learn the secret of renewed life in Christ.

¹ Walter Bauer; William F. Arndt; F. Wilbur Gingrich; Frederick W. Danker, *ὁμολογέω A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979, p.568.

² *Ibid.*, ἐξομολογέω, p. 277.

³ It is unclear whether Acts 19:18 involves confession and disclosure of the sinful practices to other believers or to the Lord alone. What is clear from this passage is that this is a conversion event (initial sanctification) not part of the ongoing process of progressive sanctification. We should not apply Acts 19:18 to the process for dealing with sin in the lives of believers.

⁴ John White and Ken Blue, *Healing the Wounded: The Costly Love of Church Discipline*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1985, p. 183. “Here then is the rule: If it fills you with deep shame to confess to a close friend what is easily confessed to God, then your confession to God is in some sense unreal. The shame validates the transaction. . . . The practice of confessing our faults to another human being can in fact make the Godward transaction more real.”

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, New York: Harper & Row, 1952, p.116 quoted by Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 20th Anniversary Edition, 1998, p.148.

⁶ Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*. Chapter 22, *Thoughts on the Misery of Man*.

⁷ George Buttrick, *Prayer*, quoted by Richard Foster in *Devotional Classics*, p. 101.

⁸ It is not clear from the context whether the “all” in this verse refers to all the congregation or all the elders. The most natural force of the context is that it refers to rebuking in the presence of all the other elders.

⁹ Richard Foster in his excellent discussion of confession includes it in his section on corporate disciplines but correctly treats it in a non-corporate manner. (*Celebration of Discipline*, pp. 143-157).

¹⁰ For a complete discussion see Adamson, *James in the New International Commentary on the New Testament*, pp. 198ff; Davids, *James in the New International Greek New Testament Commentary*, pp. 194ff; Oesterley, *James*, in *Expositor’s Greek Testament*, p. 475. I think this is the best understanding of the passage for the following reasons. (1) The context of vss. 14-15 clearly emphasize the issue of sin and the healing of v. 15 is tied grammatically to the issue of sin. The whole context deals with sin as the primary focus. (2) There is a definite association between sin and sickness in the first century Jewish mindset which generally held that if one was sick it was because God was judging him for sin. (OT – Ps. 32; 38:3ff; 39:7ff; NT – Mk. 2:5; Jn. 5:14; 9:2-3; 1 Cor. 11:30 which uses the same word for weak as James). (3) Linguistically, there is every reason to believe that the healing here is physical not merely spiritual. The word “sick” means physical sickness in its primary meaning in the gospels although it can be used in the Epistles for religious or moral weakness (Rom. 14:1-2). The verb to “heal” (v.16) is the conclusion to prayer and confession of sins and refers to physical healing. I take it that the anointing in this passage refers to a

consecration of the person to God which is the primary force of the word throughout Scripture. The promise can not be given its full force because once someone has confessed sin we can be sure that God wants to restore the person to full health if the sickness was the result of discipline for known sin.

¹¹ Ken Sande has written an excellent summary of the process in his book, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997, pp. 109-119.

¹² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p. 112 quoted by Foster, *Discipline*, p. 146.

¹³ Wilson, Friesen and Paulson, *Restoring the Fallen*, Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1997, pp. 75-79.

¹⁴ Henri Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love: A Journey through Anguish to Freedom*, Image Books, Reprint Edition, 1999, p. 4.

