Still Wearing Fig Leaves

A Practical Theology Regarding the Absent Practice of Corporate Confession

By

Tim Martin

Introduction

The scriptures themselves and the preachers of those same scriptures often remind us of the dual nature that many doctrines possess. *Grace* and *faith*. *Death* and *resurrection*. *Law* and *gospel*. The *old* and the *new*. The *first* *Adam* and the *Last* *Adam*. *Confession* and *repentance*. Together these are the scaffoldings of the great framework of Biblical narrative. These composite images of doctrine are not only to be understood in an orthodox manner, but also through orthopraxy. Should one tile in the mosaic be absent or marred, then the whole picture has its beauty stolen. While the absence of any facet of fundamental theology will leave a pit for the believer to fall into, the presence of correct practice is a testimony to God’s glory. We affirm His truth by acting as if it is true. In particular, obedience to the precedent set in 2 Timothy 3:16-17[[1]](#footnote-1) regarding “all scripture” has always been the fertile soil from which the healthiest churches have sprung up. On the other hand, malformed churches are the product of abandoned doctrines or confusion regarding them. It then follows that if scripture commands one practice and the church has not obeyed it, then the church will not only fail to reap the blessings of discipline but also has erred into disobedience. Specifically, Protestant, Evangelical, and Fundamentalist churches have unsuccessfully wrestled with the matter of corporate confession in the centuries following the Reformation. The following essay argues that the church needs to develop a functional doctrine of corporate confession and put it into practice.

Generations of Reformers quested to bring the full picture of scripture not only into understanding, but also into practice. They set out to purify what they believed Rome had corrupted beyond recognition. Their systematic re-examination of nearly a thousand years of private interpretation wrought the re-balancing of many skewed practices, many of which had become bases of institutional power instead of doctrines which inspired devotion. Chief among these, and one of the grossest offenders to the spirit of the reformation, was the practice of private auricular confession. Largely based off a Latin language reading of John 20:23[[2]](#footnote-2) (“If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained.” NASB), the practice of auricular private confession dictated that a congregant must orally confess his sins to a priest to be guaranteed remittance and absolution from some specific sin.

Five hundred years later, the practice is almost entirely absent within the evangelical world. Unlike other articles of importance that reformers grappled with however, the post-Reformation church has never fully restored the corporate practice. Preachers and authors are quick to warn of the danger of confession without repentance, but the flipside has rarely been addressed: is the church also in danger of committing a grave error by engaging repentance without confession? Has a depth of understanding been lost in non-corporate and private confession before the presence of God due to the absence of corporate confession? Before misapplication at the hands of an institution driven by private interpretation, where did the doctrine and practice originate? This most public offense (of priestly confession) by the church in the eyes of the Magisterial Reformers never found resolve in their own day either; Luther and the book of Concord[[3]](#footnote-3) advocated to redeem it and purify it, Calvin boldly stated that *“besides the fact that ordinary confession has been commended by the Lord’s mouth, no one of sound mind, who weighs its usefulness, can dare disapprove it”* [[4]](#footnote-4) while others such as Zwingli opposed it with polemical attacks.[[5]](#footnote-5)

While church history has yet to deliver a conclusive verdict, redemptive history may offer a clearer perspective for the church today. The first act of corporate confession recorded in scripture occurs within Genesis, as Adam and Eve bring their guilt before a convicting God. First, they recognized their impurity and guiltiness, and ran to the self-righteous solution of hiding under tunics made from fig leaves. In the *Coram Deo* (Latin: “presence of God”), they both pleaded their guilt and confessed “and I ate” (Genesis 3:12-13) before the restorative process began, and they were able to repent and turn back to their purpose. This passage – and many others like it – contain the pattern of what a scripturally grounded interpretation should look like for the dual-nature of *repentance* and *confession.* What issues the biblical counseling movement (for example) has set out to address, a proper understanding of confession can redress.Without a practice embodying the scriptural examples of corporate confession and the resulting accountability, the church community is still wearing fig leaves.

Definitions

Due to the varied history of this discussion it is important to lay down definitions for the sake of maintaining unity of thought while reading the rest of the paper.

**Confession:** Confession (usually translated from either the Greek *exomologeō* or the Hebrew *yadah*) has two opposing connotations in the modern religious setting. One is the positive affirmation of faith and belief and the other is the shame and guilt-ridden admission of sin. This paper sees less tension between the concept’s presentation within the Biblical narrative. This paper supposes that both the Greek and Hebrew words describe the same concept applied in a multitude of situations. Within this paper it is meant to confer a flexible and neutral definition regarding the *intentional revelation of a fact.* However, this paper is also primarily focusing on the idea of the confession of sin.

**Corporate Confession:** This paper will share it’s understanding of what makes confession “corporate” with many of the early Reformers. *Corporate* does not necessarily denote a collective group of people but does not exclude such a thing either. The etymological root behind the idea instead refers to the *body of Christ* (*corpis*) and can range either to the confession of a single individual, to two neighbors, to an entire church. This paper would like the confer the idea of communal activity within the church without attaching any exact numerical value when using the word *corporate.*

**Form and Occasion:** Recognizing the complexity of the idea of *corporate confession*, this paper wishes to further simplify it by breaking it down into two *occasions* and multiple *forms*, an idea similarly expressed by Martin Luther and the Lutheran church in its Larger Catechism, Shorter Catechism, and Book of Concord. The first *occasion* includes the idea of corporate confession within public context and the second *occasion* refers to the idea of confession in a private context. *Forms* are specific instances and exercises of the doctrine a presented by scripture.

Primary Text

Regarding what course the modern church can take, the closing exhortation of the book of James (James 5:7-20) provides the clearest New Testament example to pattern church orthopraxy regarding corporate confession. Verse 16 has been the common point of reference. The passage reads: “Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.” (NASB)

The initial “therefore” is directing the recipients of the letter to the preceding three verses, which read as the following:

“Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises. Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him.” (NASB)

Before proceeding with the exposition of the exhortation, it is important to take note of several ambiguities which the original Greek texts reveal. Where *sickness* is almost exclusively used to reference those that are physically impaired by a disease in English, there are some more dynamic definitions in the original passage that offer us hints to what James was making direct reference to. Both *astheneō* (*to be feeble*) and *kamnō* (*to be weary*, translated in the accusative case as “the one who is sick” in James 5:15) do not necessary denote a corporeal condition, and are instead used throughout the New Testament Canon as descriptions of one’s spiritual and mental condition as well. The defining example for *astheneō* would be2 Corinthians 13:3-4, which states:

“Since you are seeking for proof of the Christ who speaks in me, and who ***is not weak*** toward you, but mighty in you. For indeed He was crucified because of weakness, yet He lives because of the power of God. For we also ***are weak*** in Him, yet we will live with Him because of the power of God directed toward you.” (NASB)

The two other instances of *kamnō* also point towards spiritual condition instead of the physical. Hebrews 12:3 presents Christ’s ability to sympathize with those suffering under the hostility of sinners, granting them resilience to the corrosive influence of persecution which may cause them to ***grow weary.*** Revelation 2:3 likewise speaks of a similar perseverance endured for Christ’s namesake, as the Ephesian church ***has not grown weary.*** These interpretations of *kamnō* present a dynamic contrast between those who have been assailed by the sin wounds of the world, and those that are being empowered by the resurrection healing of the person of Christ. The idea that this is an allusion to spiritual warfare lends further credence by the presence of the phrase “in the name of the Lord”, a phrase used as a confessional statement elsewhere in scripture.

Assuming a spiritual interpretation of these verses, the reader may assume that James’ word of exhortation is meant to deliver a message similar to Romans 14:1, wherein the church is reminded to show patience with the weak (*astheneō*) in faith. This reframing of the passage is parallel to other passages in scripture that deal with the communal accountability of the church for its congregants’ welfare. It permits for a smoother transition into the primary topic of the passage – confession.

 James’ thesis reads: “Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.”

The Greek root word for confession throughout the New Testament is *exomologeō,* which carries the idea of declaration. Translated in various locations as “confess”, “profess”, “give praise”, and “consent”, full knowledgeable and willing assent to the truthfulness of the declaration marks the expression with burning earnestness. The Old Testament vocabulary for confession centers around the word *yadah*, which possesses an equally dynamic meaning as *exomologeō*. For the Christian to faithfully immerse himself in the deep undercurrent of the practice behind either *exomologeō or yadah* is for the Christian to commit himself to the “light” of Ephesians 5, wherein his mouth becomes a truth-bearing wellspring of truth-telling statements which “take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.” (ESV) For “when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible *is* light.” (ESV)

By this reading, James’ exhortation does not insert an idiosyncratic anecdote about miraculous healings of the physical body, but instead an actionable and practical method for the local church to live out an important element of God’s redemptive work, wherein the confessant has his shame carried away. This is the communal recognition and practice that flows from an understanding that the church has been translated from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light.

What James dictates is devoid of ritualism – “that you may be healed” – as the command is endowed with a promise of results. The *exomologeō* is the *means* by which the healing comes, and the community of brothers and sisters who are exposing their sins to the light and to each other is the *place* in which it occurs. The confession of one ”to another” (*allēlōn –* carrying the idea of reciprocity) presents a bond of trust and affection between congregants that is absent in many contemporary churches. Yet the image of Christ’s Body that James shows is one that is comfortable with drawing out their shame and jettisoning it before a God Who is faithful to carry it away.

In conclusion for this passage, it is worth noting the ending phrase in the verse: “The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.” Seen in the positive form here, such a declaration carries hope for sick sinners. The act of prayer is work-in-motion and the farthest thing from “vain-repetition” in this context. The ministry of congregational prayerful reconciliation is infused with the power of our Great Reconciler, Christ. However, to view this statement in the negative form is to see what the church has lost. Abandoning this communal image of brother restoring brother through prayer for sin and the confession of it is to rob us of the wisdom that the Holy Spirit directed the apostle to instruct, and leave us like the psalmist in Psalm 32, verses 3-4, which read: “When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away Through my groaning all day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer. Selah.” (NASB)

It is worth making the observation that this same Psalm makes the connection between healing and confession, much in the same way that the epistle of James does. The next verse and stanza, reads: “I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I did not hide; I said, I will confess my transgressions to the LORD; And You forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah.” (NASB)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one of the few Protestant theologians to engage the idea of corporate confession since the first Reformers, and said this in his book on Christian community, *Life Together:*

“In confession there takes place a breakthrough to community. Sin wants to be alone with people. It takes them away from the community. The more lonely people become, the more destructive the power of sin over them . . . 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 finds forgiveness of all his sin in the community of Jesus Christ and his brother. Sin that has been spoken and confessed has lost all of its power.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

With God as the healer and absolver and a Christian neighbor as the witness and restorer, James has presented the “full mosaic” for the practice of confession and the neutering of sin’s affect on the body of Christ.

Secondary Texts

 Several cross-references of scripture are worth noting in support of the previous reading of the text in James. Perhaps one of the most significant is the verse which the doctrine of Rome claimed as its bedrock, John 20:23, wherein it appears that the Son of Man issued a special fiat to the apostles for the remission of sin. Downstream from this interpretation came the idea of the priest (in apostolic succession) as the absolver of sins, and the ministry of reconciliation was made dependent upon a man’s effectual confirmation.

  **“**If you forgive the sins of any, *their sins* have been forgiven them; if you retain the *sins* of any, they have been retained.”

Though an argument can be made from the use of the aorist tense of aphiami (“have been forgiven”) indicating a fiat for confirmation and not absolution, for the layman simply recognizing the principle of scripture interpreting scripture should instantly muzzle any wrong interpretation. Matthew 16:19 in fact places these verses back into the context of corporate confession, reading: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.” Though opaque to the modern reader, such phrases as “to loose” and “to bind” has been noted to be rabbinical, and William Barclay states that the audience would have understood it to simply mean “to allow” and “to forbid.” [[7]](#footnote-7)

This weds church discipline with the ministry of corporate reconciliation. In order for the confirmation of God’s absolution to be made, it must first be confessed. So that an issue can either be confirmed or forbidden, it must be evinced from the heart of one individual to another. Christ has not mandated the private absolution of man by man, but instead the open confession of sin from man to man.

Next, presupposing the above interpretation of James fits into the larger image that scripture gives us to model, one should find not only the command of corporate confession but the *practice* of it in scripture. Scattered throughout both the Old Testament and the New are demonstrations of faithful responses to God’s call for His people to bring their burdens before Him. These will serve to tether together the pieces of the mosaic and demonstrate how the nature of the doctrine has been historically expressed through channels of orthopraxy prior to the Roman confusion.

**Genesis 3:** Where this essay derives its name is also where the first act of corporate confession can be found. The first sinners were also the first confessors. Standing in the sanctuary where God and man meet, they confessed before each other and before their Creator, permitting the imperfection to be known as they each uttered the words “and I ate.” And while they were cut off from the Tree of Life, the confession was soon followed by restoration as their naked sinfulness was replaced subsequently by bloodstained righteousness.

**Leviticus 16:** From the other side of the first Advent, the Day of Atonement provides a clear Christological image for those of us on this side of the advent. Here, the high priest has gathered together all the people of the Lord and made a blood sacrifice. Accompanying the atonement and repentance are two specific instances of confession within the chapter. Before loosing of the scapegoat can relieve corporate Israel, there is first the loosing of the individual penitent’s guilt to the high priest in an act of silent but direct confession. “Then Aaron shall offer the bull for the sin offering which is for himself, that he may make atonement for himself and for his household.” (NASB) Secondly, there is the public acknowledgement and transferal of all the guilt by the high priest upon the bloodstained scapegoat. “Then Aaron shall lay both of his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the sons of Israel and all their transgressions.” (NASB) Connecting this passage with the priestly office of Christ as described in Hebrews 6 therefore infers the guarantee of greater atonement for the tandem act of confession and repentance that the church itself was founded upon.

**2 Chronicles 6:** Before the indwelling of the Spirit and the tabernacling of the Son with the church re-organized the temple system, the joint imagery of corporate confession and repentance wreathed the consecration of Solomon’s temple. Woven between adorations and supplications are several important instances of confession before the whole nation of Israel. Binding it in the language of blessing and curse, Solomon recognizes the component’s necessity in covenant relationships and as a realization of covenant love. Much like James 5[[8]](#footnote-8), the author is clear that this session of figurehead directed prayer is in direct address to the person of God, as all claims are made in His name. The expected response from the believer that affirms “there is no god like You in heaven or on earth, keeping covenant and showinglovingkindness to Your servants who walk before You with all their heart” is to “pray toward this place and confess Your name, and turn from their sin when You afflict them” so that God will “teach them the good way in which they should walk.”

**Ezra 10 & Nehemiah 9:** Perhaps the most public of all the declarations of confession for the sake of repentance. Catalytic to the corporate revival of Israel – and successive to the personal revival of Ezra – was their mass convocation for the sake of openly making known the violence done to the covenant love of God. Renewal and healing followed as a result.

**Mark 1 & Matthew 3:** The ministration of Christ’s forerunner was one of a most public nature. Here the penitent heart confessed both in word and in deed his personal declaration of cleaving to the coming salvation. John’s plea was not one for the meek to take a knee in their pew and hide from their community – hence maintaining the pretense of a timeline of unbroken purity – but instead one where “they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.” Significance is also to be found in the fact that Christ – the last Adam – affiliated Himself with the first Adam’s race by similar public confession of faith in the redemptive work. This would later be symbolic for the remission the whole church has a part in.

**Matthew 5:23-14** “If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” Though not public, this is still corporate in the sense that it is a matter of community. Besides being a confessional and penitent restoration of friendship, it is worth mention that this sort of confession is a prerequisite to worship. Furthermore, if “the gift must be left on the altar” for iniquity between man and man, how much more is there a *call to confession* before worship so that man may ensure he is reconciled with God? The Reformer Martin Bucer saw this as a biblical precedent and started his services with a call to confession before a call to worship.[[9]](#footnote-9) The same communal cautions shown before approaching the table of communion should logically preceed normative times of worship as well.

**Acts 2 & 3:** Though the text is much subtler in its presentation of the rites of reconciliation, the ministry at Pentecost is just as public as that of John the Baptizer. The bedrock of the church’s formal foundation is that of a vibrant and thriving community whose bonds of unity were forged by the mutual recognition of each other’s guilt. “Repent, and each of you be baptized *in the name* of Jesus Christ…” marks both a positive and negative confession. As much as it is a proclamation of faith, it is an admission of guilt. An outpouring of this was the great “ingathering” of the church, where “they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” This sort of openness regarding sinful – by no means viewed as a private issue – formed the amino acids/building blocks for the first churches.

**Revelation 2:1-7:** Bookending the history of confession is the call for an entire church of Ephesus admit their guilt and return to their “First Love.” Confession before the ever-equitable God who damns all iniquity presents the covenant curses and blessings. For Ephesus, the church community depends upon confession “else [the Lord] is coming to [them] and will remove [their] lampstand out of its place.” For the confessor, however, God will restore through the Son and Spirit what he took away from the first Adam, saying that He will “I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.”

Conclusion

Lost in the caution of the Reformation, confession emerges or submerges on the grounds of whether or not the elders of the church will rally their banner around the cry of the Dutch pastor Jodocus van Lodenstein – “*Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda est secundum Verbum Dei*”[[10]](#footnote-10) – that “the church is Reformed and always [in need of] being reformed according to the Word of God.” If one believes the full picture of the redemptive history contains elements of corporate confession that accompanies the act of repentance, then the church must be reconciled until it resembles that. Unless the church desires to abandon its call to “preach the full counsel of God,” this requires further examination in most church communities. While many churches practice portions and fragments of corporate confession, the full harvest of a proper theology has yet to be realized. There is a great danger allowed to prowl freely when despiritualized counseling and psychology are decoupled from the heart-rending precepts of God’s revelation. The uncomfortable atmosphere of sanctimony that enshrouds many churches – where only virtue is admitted, and vice is never publicly dealt with – has no doubt left many under pastoral care writhing in their own personal damnation. Pews full of pornographers and adulterers have been allowed to romanticize their struggles when they appear to be monolithic. Shame-shackled and hurting saints of the church deceive themselves into believing that they are unique in their sin, crippling their potential to participate in kingdom work. The church without honest confession and obedience to God’s call for open community clings to indwelling sin as if it belongs in its own nature. Just as the mission of the church is not to retreat from the world, the believer is not called to withdraw into himself – but rather revel in the complete atonement offered by Christ. The word of the Lord states in Proverbs 23:13 that “whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.” But on the sacrificial altar of privacy, many churches “are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean.” The heart of God’s redeemed cannot remain a safe-harbor for private sin but should be the open vault for the inheritance of faith. Any resemblance to the death-nature of sin should be exhumed and exposed to the life-nature of our resurrection. The health of the kingdom depends on conquering the shame of nakedness and exchanging the garment of fig leaves for the robes of righteousness.

Bibliography

Aquinas, Thomas. “Commentary on Gospel of John 20” DHSPriory, unknown date of publication.

<https://dhspriory.org/thomas/english/John20.htm>

 Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. Life Together. Harper, 1954. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat04680a&AN=bju.b1052889&site=eds-live>.

Bowman, George William. The Dynamics of Confession. John Knox Press, 1969. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat04680a&AN=bju.b1002307&site=eds-live>.

Calvin, John. Institutes of the Christian Religion, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles. John Knox, 1960.

Clinebell, Howard John, and Howard John Clinebell. Basic Types of Pastoral Care & Counseling : Resources for the Ministry of Healing and Growth. Abingdon Press, 1984. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat04680a&AN=bju.b1173813&site=eds-live>.

Cornwell, John. The Dark Box : A Secret History of Confession. Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group, 2014. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat04680a&AN=bju.b1386639&site=eds-live>.

Forest, Jim (James H.). Confession: Doorway to Forgiveness. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edshlc&AN=edshlc.008846221.8&site=eds-live>.

Kettunen, Paavo. “The Function of Confession: A Study Based on Experiences.” Pastoral Psychology 51, no. 1 (September 2002): 13–25. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001436976&site=eds-live>

Koffeman, Leo J. "‘Ecclesia Reformata Semper Reformanda’ Church Renewal from a Reformed Perspective." Review of Ecumenical Studies Sibiu 7, no. 1 (2015): 8-19.

Luther, Martin. Luther*’*s Works, vol. 77. Edited by Benjamin T. G. Mayes and James L. Langebartels. Concordia Publishing House, 2014.

McMinn, Mark R. Why Sin Matters : The Surprising Relationship between God’s Grace and Our Sin. Tyndale House, 2004. http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat04680a&AN=bju.b1225071&site=eds-live.

Parson, Troy Dean. "Examining Confession as a Pastoral Care Practice." PhD diss., Erskine Theological Seminary, 2013.

Tentler, Thomas N. Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation. Princeton University Press, 1977. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt13x1cpp>.

Thurian, Max. 1958. Confession. Studies in Ministry and Worship. SCM Press. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat04680a&AN=bju.b1135965&site=eds-live>.

Tovey, Phillip. “The Collect in the Churches of the Reformation.” Edited by Bridget Nichols. Irish Theological Quarterly 76, no. 3. 2011. doi:10.1177/002114001140574333.

Appendix A: List of Occasions and Forms

Parsing through the Biblical narrative and rightly dividing the Word of Truth demonstrates multiple occasions and forms of the confession, which will hence be termed *rites of reconciliation*, which captures their purpose. First, there are the deeds done within full communal gathering, which can be identified as 1) **Congregation to God**, 2) **Congregant to God**, and 3) **Congregant to Congregant**. Secondly, there are occasions which occur in more private settings, identified as 1) the **Counseling of a Congregant**, 2) **Confirmation of the Congregant**, and 3) **Conciliation in Community.** Straddling the lines of both, there is also the idea of **intercessory confession.**

The **public** occasion of confession should follow the Biblical model of theocentric devotion and solemnity, fastening and binding the gathered believers to each other in light of the covenant that they share.

The form of the **congregation confessing to God** is the univocal declaration by a whole church body of brokenness over their imperfection before a just and holy God. This form of confession is an assenting statement and an active plea before the throne of God. Similar to how some churches practice a moment of reflection after the homily, the confession of the whole congregation before God can mirror that idea by beginning the service with a *rite of reconciliation* between the individual and God. In formal practice, this may look like a moment of quiet before the call to worship that allows the worshiper to center their heart and prepare it for worship. It could also be done in the auricular form as some Reformed denominations do today, with a written prayer that the entire congregation can confess together. This form is demonstrated variously in Ezra, Nehemiah, 2 Chronicles, and the work of the forerunner and the apostles.

The form of **congregant to God** is something that should be peppered throughout the entire worship gathering. This could be restated as “private confession for the sake of the whole body” and may happen either inside or outside of the Lord’s Day worship service. Every individual should be reminded during the reading of the word, the singing of songs and psalms, and the reverence of the occasion that he is the able to approach God and repent and confess to heal their relationship. In lieu of practices like the altar call, this sort of private prayer or consecration should be shameless – for it is the realization of the grace of God’s power, knowing it can take away the sins. This is the individual response to the working of the Spirit to the means of grace, done in the context of his church community. This is the form of confession found most frequently in scripture, and often the one that is solely practiced. Daniel 9: 3-12 is scripture’s own example of a publicly known but privately communicated confession. Historically, this was the purpose of such documents as St. Augustine’s confession.

The form of **the congregant to other congregants** in the public setting is a *rite of reconciliation* focused on either contrition or praise. In contrition, the bold and willing justified sinner may admit his struggles and seek the love of his community. Individual approaches to family and God and opening one’s heart so that dark may become light creates a form of edification where we can observe the healing of God in the life of another. In praise, positive confession can be lifted to the victory over sins – which again can result in the Spirit working by grace to bring forward the confession of sins in the hearer. In church practice, this may look like the regular or irregular call for openness in small groups or the public testimony of one’s Spirit granted victory over sins. As a result, this form of confession creates *accountability*. As the community of God opens up to one-another, the “concentric circles of accountability”[[11]](#footnote-11) will expand and strengthen the group. This is a valid interpretation of the form of confession practiced in the exhortation of James 5. This is also an appropriate in cases of congregational sin, where multiple members have sinned against multiple members. A positive equivalent is alluded to in 1 Timothy 6:12 wherein Timothy publicly affirms his own faith. This could appear during a salvation testimony, church membership, or when a work of God in the private life of a member would glorify Him by becoming public.

The **private** occasion of confession is an important element of the Law of Christ (per Galatians 6:2 – “Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.”) in which the Spirit moves through individuals as instruments of righteousness by direct application of scripture.

The form of private confession which involves the **counseling of a congregant** has been in the works of being restored for some time. Pastoral theology has long recognized the elder’s role in the practical *rite of reconciliation* between the under-shepherd and those under his watchcare. The Biblical counseling movement has rightly recognized this as both an act of healing and restoration and of discipline. Within a gospel community, counseling often looks like the struggling sinner seeking out a more matured elder sinner and bearing his heart wide open to have scripture applied to it. The head of the church is the Wonderful Counselor and the stewards He has called are called to a ministry of full imitation.

The form of private confession which involves the **confirmation of a congregant** is less practiced by the church universal. Particularly in protestant denominations, the elder’s role in the positive affirmation of a brother’s growth in faith has been forgotten. Such confirmation is in many ways the opposite of counseling, as an individual approaches another for the sole sake of confirming the work of God in them and building up their being. The church is called to “hold fast the confession of [their] hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful”[[12]](#footnote-12) and remind each other of this fact constantly. This may be viewed as the private form of a testimony, and the positive application of church discipline in light of Matthew 16:19. In particular, this sort of affirmation and approval would be most likely be practiced in the restoration of someone once under church discipline.

The form of private confession where the **conciliation within the community** occurs is the penitent meeting of two brothers, wherein one has wronged the other. To give grace through forgiveness of someone whose heart cries out in sincere sorrow is surely a mark of Christ’s redemptive work in the church. The forgiveness of debt, the private making of amends, and the recognition that two members of a congregation are both under the same blanket of covenant- love is to follow the example of Jacob and Esau, and thus glorifying God. To admit one’s fault before another and let them fulfill the command of Ephesians 4:32 is one of the greatest acts of community building and visibly marking the distinct nature of grace that flows forth from the regenerate.

Not necessarily bound to either the public or private sphere of the church body is the idea of **intercessory confession.** Just as James commands the church to confess their sins one-to-another, he also commands prayer for one another. This form of confession can indeed be found throughout the majority of the Old Testament, from Abraham pleading the case of Lot, to Moses’ confession for the people of Israel, to the Psalms, to the Prophets, and scattered all throughout the New Testament from Christ’s own high priestly prayer to almost all of the epistles. Either in a formal church gathering or in private prayer, this can be applied for the restoration of the sinful or the further edification and sanctification of those around us in the church. God’s personal work of reconciliation and healing through confession is also promised to His entire people.

1. 2 Timothy 3:16-17: ”All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Aquinas, Thomas*. Commentary on Gospel of John*. (DHSPriory). Lines 2542-2543. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Luther, Martin. *Luther’s Works*, vol 77. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2014). Pages 100-101. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Calvin, John. Institutes of the Christian Religion, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 3.4.11. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Tentler, Thomas N*. Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation*. (Princeton University Press, 1977). 249-250. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row, 2954), 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. William Barclay*, The Gospel of Matthew: Volume 2* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Regarding James’ command that follows confession for corporate prayer. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Nichols, Bridget. *The Collect in the Churches of the Reformation*. (London: SCM Press, 2012.) 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Koffeman, Leo J. "‘Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda’Church renewal from a Reformed perspective." Review of Ecumenical Studies Sibiu 7, no. 1 (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This is a phrase borrowed from Dr. Tim Geiger’s lectures at Bob Jones University’s 2019 CORE Conference. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Hebrews 10:23. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)