

The Error of Auricular Confession

Confess your sins to one another (Jam 5:16)

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www.onthewing.org Aug 2020

Many Roman Catholics have fled to reformed churches, to be edified by the DOCTRINES OF GRACE — to hear the Gospel that salvation is received by God’s grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, standing on Scripture alone, to the glory of God alone. Unfortunately, some ex-Catholics bring into these Protestant communities, their misunderstanding of what it means to confess our sins to one another. They put themselves and other believers into the shoes of a priest, to hear confessions of sin — as if hoping to be forgiven by another believer, and *not* by *God alone* through the atoning sacrifice of *Christ alone*. This is the error of *auricular confession*: confessing into the ear of another believer, to receive forgiveness of sins not committed against that person.

The biblical principle: We confess our sins to another believer, asking that believer for forgiveness, *only* when that believer is the person we have sinned against.

The Roman Catholic error:

Confess: to hear the confession of a believer. In this “auricular confession,” the one who takes the confession, forgives the penitent, or assigns penance to atone for the sin. A donation or fee was expected for hearing the confession, and it was considered charity to the church. “Having one day reflected that the impious and sinners who neglect to redeem their sins, are condemned to eternal pains with demons, suddenly God inspired us with His divine mercy; our heart was touched; and it was with fear, eagerness, and anxiety that we sought the counsel of priests and religious men, in order to know how we could escape the wrath of the eternal judge. The counsel that has been given us is that, among the virtues, there is none greater than charity, and that the act we ought to prefer above all others, is to give to the monastery a portion of our wealth.” — Charles Lasteyrie, *History of Auricular Confession*, vol II (London, 1848), p. 130.

In his 18th c. commentary, John Gill explains James 5.16 this way:

Confess your faults one to another,.... Which must be understood of sins *committed against one another*; these should be acknowledged, and repentance declared for them, in order for mutual forgiveness and reconciliation. This is necessary at all times, and especially on beds of affliction, and when death and eternity seem near approaching. Therefore this does *not* support **auricular confession**, used by the Papists, which is forgiveness of *all* sins; whereas *this* confession is only of those sins by which men offend one another. *That* confession is made to priests; *this* confession is made by the saints to one another — by the offending party to the one who is offended — *for the purpose of reconciliation*, by which a good end results. Whereas, there is none by the *other* confession, and very often bad consequences follow.

Bullinger on Auricular Confession

In his collection of sermons, titled DECADES, the reformer Henry Bullinger wrote the following explanation of the APOSTLES CREED concerning confessing our sins to one another:

THE TENTH ARTICLE of our belief is, “The forgiveness of sins.” The second fruit or commodity of our belief in God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, is set forth here — and that is, the remission of sins. Although it is contained in sanctification, which was spoken of in the last article, it is, notwithstanding, more lively expressed in this place. There is no salvation without the church, just as there would have been none without the ark of Noah; but in the church, I mean, in the fellowship of Christ and the saints, there is full forgiveness of all offences. That this may be better understood, I will divide it into some parts.

First of all, it is needful to acknowledge and confess that we are sinners, and that by nature and our own proper merits, we are the children of wrath and damnation. For it is not in vain, nor without a cause, that St. John calls every one a liar, who says he has no sin. ^{1Joh 1.8} And God, who knows the hearts of men, has commanded us even till the last gasp, to pray saying, “Forgive us our debts.” Moreover, in the gospel we have two excellent examples of men openly confessing their sins to God: the prodigal son, I say, and the publican in St. Luke. ¹

Let us therefore think that we are all sinners, as Paul also taught; yes, as he has evidently *proved* in the first chapter to the Romans. And with David in the 32nd and 51st Psalms, let us freely confess our sins to God, saying, “I have made my sin known to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden. I have said, I will confess my unrighteousness against myself; and You have forgiven the iniquity of my offence.” “Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your great mercy,” etc. The Psalm is well-known.

Secondly, let us believe that all these sins of ours are pardoned and forgiven by God, not for acknowledging and confessing our sins, but for the merit and blood of the Son of God; not for our own works or merits, but for the truth and mercy, or grace, of God.

For we plainly profess, saying: “I believe the forgiveness of sins.” We do not say I buy, nor I get by gifts, nor I obtain by works, the forgiveness of sins — but “I believe the forgiveness of sins.” And the word “remission” or “forgiveness” signifies a free pardoning, by a metaphor taken from creditors and debtors. For the creditor forgives the debtor when he is not able to pay. Therefore, remission is a forgiving according to this saying of our Saviour in the Gospel: “A certain lender had two debtors; and when they were not able to pay, he forgave them both.” ^{Luk 7.41-42}

To this also belongs that saying in the Lord’s prayer: “And forgive us our debts;” for our debts are our sins. We request them to be remitted, that is, to be forgiven us. In this sense also, St. Paul says, “To him that works, the reward reckoned is not of grace, but due as of a debt; but to him that does not work but believes on him that justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness: — even as David describes the blessedness of that man to whom God imputes righteousness without works, saying, ‘Blessed are those whose unrighteousnesses are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is that man to whom the Lord will not impute sin.’” ^{Rom 4.4-8} Therefore, in respect to us who do not have the means to repay, our sins are *freely* forgiven; but in respect to God’s justice, they are forgiven for the merit and *satisfaction* of Christ.

Moreover, it is not only the sins of a few men, of one or two ages, or only a few and certain number of sins, that are forgiven; but the sins of all men, of all ages, the whole multitude of sins, whatever *is* and is *called* sin, whether it is original or actual, or any others beside. In short, *all* sins are forgiven us. We hereby learn this, because the solitary sacrifice of Christ is effectual enough ² to wash away all the offences of all sinners who by faith come to the mercy-seat of God’s grace. ^{Heb 4.16} And yet we do not teach men to sin because the Lord has long since made satisfaction for all sins. But if any man does sin, we teach him to hope well, and not to despair, but to flee to the throne of grace; for there we say that Christ, sitting at the right hand of the Father, is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” ^{Joh 1.29}

And truly, it is expressly said in the Creed, “I believe the forgiveness of sins,” and not *of sin*. For when we say “of sins,” we acknowledge that God forgives *all* sins. It will be sufficient to let pass the proofs of this out of the 3rd and 5th chapters of Paul to the Romans, and those out of St. John the apostle and evangelist. In his epistle, he testifies saying, “The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from every sin.” ^{1Joh 1.7} Look, he says from *every* sin. The one who says from *every*

¹ Luk 15.21, and 18.13.

² We say, Christ’s sacrifice is *sufficient* for the sins of all men for all time, but *efficient* only for the elect. – WHG

one, makes no exceptions, unless it is that which the Lord himself excepted — I mean, the sin against the Holy Ghost, for which the very same St. John forbids us to pray. ³

Again, he also says, “If we acknowledge our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all our unrighteousness.” ^{1Joh 1.9} The apostle did not think it was enough to say barely, “To forgive us our sins;” but that he might declare the thing as it is. Indeed, to declare it so plainly that it might be easily understood, he moreover adds this saying: “And to cleanse us from all our unrighteousness.” Look, here he again says, “from *all* unrighteousness.” Some caviller ⁴ might perhaps make an objection, saying, “This kind of doctrine makes men sluggish and slow to amend; for men under the pretense of God’s grace will not cease to sin.” Therefore, in his 2nd chapter, John answers their objection and says, “Babes, I write these things to you, that you do not sin: and if any man sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And he is the atonement for our sins: and not for our sins only, but also for the sins of the whole world.” ^{1Joh 2.1-2} Therefore it is assuredly true that by the death of Christ, all sins are forgiven those who believe.

Moreover, the Lord alone forgives sins. For it is the glory of God alone to forgive sins, and from unrighteous men, to make them righteous. Therefore, although men are said to forgive sins, which is to be understood of their ministry, and not of their power, the minister pronounces to the people that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake. And in so saying, he does not deceive them: for God indeed forgives the sins of those who believe, according to that saying, “Whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven them.” ^{Joh 20.23} And this is done as often as the word of the gospel is preached — so there is no need to pretend that auricular confession ⁵ and private absolution at the priest’s hand, are necessary for the remission of sins.

For just as *auricular confession* was not in use among the saints before the coming of Christ, so we do not read that the apostles heard private confession, or used private absolution in the church of Christ. *It is enough for us to confess our sins to God* who, because he sees our hearts, should therefore most rightly hear our confessions. It is enough if we, as St. James teaches us, confess our faults and offences to one another between ourselves; ^{Jas 5.16} and so, after pardon is asked, we return into mutual favour again. It is enough for us to hear the gospel, promising the forgiveness of our sins through Christ, if we believe. Let us therefore believe the forgiveness of sins, and pray to the Lord that he will grant to give and increase in us this same belief. Of old, and in the primitive church, these things were effectual enough to obtain pardon and full remission of sins. And as they were sufficient then, so they are undoubtedly sufficient today too.

Furthermore, the Lord so pardons our sins, not they should not be in us anymore, nor leave their relics behind, like a sting in our flesh, but that they should not be imputed to us to our damnation. Concupiscence ⁶ sticks fast and shows itself in our flesh, striving still with the good Spirit of God, even in the holy ones, so long as life lasts on this earth. Here, therefore, we need long watching and much fasting, to draw from the flesh the nourishment of evil, and frequent prayers calling to God for aid, so that we will not be overcome by the evil. And if any man happens to fall out of feebleness, and is subdued by temptation, let him not yield himself by lying still, to be caught in the devil’s net. Let him rise up again by repentance, and run to Christ, believing that by the death of Christ, this fall of his shall be forgiven him. And he will have

³ 1Joh 5:16 If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin *which does not lead* to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not *leading* to death. There is sin *leading* to death. I do not say that he should pray about that.

⁴ *Caviller*: someone who *cavils*; he evades the point of an argument by raising irrelevant distinctions or objections.

⁵ *Auricular*, confessing aurally or “by ear.” Vocally confessing a sin to a priest in the confessional booth.

⁶ *Concupiscence*: a desire for sexual intimacy; erotic desires.

recourse to Christ as often as he is vanquished by concupiscence and sin. All the exhortations of the prophets and apostles shoot for this end, calling on us still to return to the Lord.

Finally, the Lord so forgives our sins, that he will never once remember them again. For so he foretold us by Jeremiah, in his 31st chapter. ^{Jer 31:34} The Lord therefore does not punish us. For he has not only forgiven the fault, but also the punishment due for the sin.

Now then, although the Lord sometimes whips us with his scourges, and whips us for our sins indeed (as the holy scripture plainly declares), he does not do it with the intent that with our affliction we should make satisfaction for the sins we have committed; for then the death of Christ would be of no effect. But the Lord chastises us with whipping; and by whipping us, he lets us understand that he does not like the sins which we have committed, and which he freely forgives. By whipping us, he also makes us examples to others, lest they sin too; and he cuts us off from all occasion for sinning; and by the cross he keeps our patience exercised.

The apostle uses the word ἀλληλους (*allelous*) in that verse, which signifies *mutually*, one another, one for one, or *reciprocally*. Thus we may infer this: If according to the apostle's precept, we must confess ourselves to one another, and *allelous* signifies mutually or reciprocally — that is, that we must confess ourselves by turns, first I to him and then he to me, as it indeed signifies — then it must be that after the laymen have confessed themselves to the priests, the priests should confess themselves back to the laymen; for that is what it means to make confession one to another. For we say, φιλοῦσιν ἀλληλους (*philousin allelous*) that is, they love one another mutually: he loves him, and that one loves him back. But if this troubles the priests,⁷ to have their confessions heard by laymen,⁸ let them then acknowledge that this place of the apostle does nothing [to support] their secret and auricular confession, which they have devised for their own commodity. Then the apostle adds: “And pray for one another, that you may be healed.” He therefore associates, and joins under one yoke as it were, both confession and prayer. And from that we again gather that, if we must confess to none but priests, then must we pray for none but priests.⁹ But we must *not* pray for priests alone; ergo, we must not confess to priests alone, but each one to one another.

That place in James must not be understood to speak of secret and auricular confession, but of that open or public confession by which they return to charity again, by mutually confessing their faults which had previously offended each other, causing mutual injuries. And now being reconciled again, they pray for one another, that they may be saved. We therefore leave this as an undoubted truth: that those who argue for auricular confession have neither proved, nor can prove, that it was instituted and ordained by God. — BULLINGER.

Concluding Observations

Confession is not repentance; of itself, it's an admission of guilt without any change either of heart or conduct. And *without* repentance, there can be no *forgiveness* of sin.

“I tell you, no; but unless you **repent** you will all likewise *perish*. (Luk 13:3 NKJ)

He said to her, “Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?”¹¹ She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said to her, “Neither do I condemn you; go and **sin no more**.” (Joh 8:10-11)

Confessing shouldn't be used to *avoid* repentance, but it may be used to ask for help in repenting. Christian “accountability groups” can be *used* (or *abused*) that way. Being accountable to other

⁷ *presbyteris*, Lat. – elders.

⁸ to have — *laymen*, the translator's addition.

⁹ This argument is also Calvin's, *Instit. Lib. iii. cap. 4. 6.*

believers is not, and it *must not* become, a substitute for personal accountability to God. Others are not your conscience; their role isn't to coerce or shame you into obeying God's will. *Submission to God must be freely given.* "Humble yourselves, therefore..." (Jas 4.10; 1Pet 5.6)

The Holy Spirit is the One who convicts us of sin, not other believers (Joh 16.8). We confess our sins to God, not to other believers (1Joh 1.9). Our faith in Christ, appropriates – it lays hold of and receives – the forgiveness available *in and through Jesus Christ* (Mat 9.2; Luk 5.20). We are not sanctified by other believers, but by God alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

"to open their eyes, *in order* to turn *them* from darkness to light, and *from* the power of Satan to God, that they may **receive forgiveness of sins** and an inheritance among those who are **sanctified by FAITH in Me.**" (Act 26:18)

Even so, it's not wrong to ask other believers to join with us in our struggle against sin – to pray *for us*, and to pray *with us*, as we scrupulously put away our sins, and exercise our faith in Christ. Look at the whole context of James 5.16:

Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ And **the prayer of faith** will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And **if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.** ¹⁶ Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.

¹⁹ Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, ²⁰ let him know that **he who turns a sinner from the error of his way** will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins. (Jam 5:14-20)

John Gill writes,

That is, the prayer of the elders, being put up **in faith** by them, and in which **the sick person joins by faith**; such a prayer is a means of bringing down from God a blessing on the sick man, and of restoring him to his former health: ... **[his sins] shall be forgiven him**; he shall have a *discovery*, and an *application of pardoning grace* to him.

It's not that the prayer of the elders is the *means*, or *authorization*, or *decree* of forgiveness; but only *an aid to that believer's own faith*, to strengthen and fortify it, so that he might appropriate to himself the grace freely offered in Christ. Other believers may help him *discover* that grace for himself; they cannot *convey* it to him. We point a sinner to the truth of God's word – both the LAW which convicts, and the GOSPEL which frees – that the sinner be convicted *by the Holy Spirit*. Thus he turns from sin, of his own free will, *compelled by his conscience*. He receives the ready *mercy* of God, by believing the *truth* that sets him "free indeed." Gill continues,

He who converts a sinner from the error of his way; who is the *instrument* of restoring a backsliding *professor* of Christ – for such a one is meant by a "sinner," and not a profane (unsaved) person – or of turning a poor bewildered *believer*, who has gotten out of the way of truth and holiness, into the right way again; or of *convincing him of the error of his way*, whether it be in point of doctrine, or of duty; and thus bringing him to the fold of Christ again, from whence he has strayed.

Here then is the Body of Christ providing a *context* and not a *grant* of sanctification. Working, worshipping, and walking together, we are built up in love, until we ALL reach full maturity in Christ (Eph 3.17; 4.13, 16). We must never get between a believer and Christ. We are called to lead others *to Christ*, never *to ourselves*. For we are **all, His servants** (Rom 14.4; Rev 19.10).