Reexamining the place of public confession of sins in a reformed context.

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THESIS APPROVAL

This thesis entitled

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Abstract

A dangerous tendency plagues the scripturally mandated practice of confession within many mainline Christian churches. The danger is that the theological thrust of the practice has been ignored or compromised in such a way that the manner in which confession is practiced ignores fundamental elements which underlie the need for confession, specifically public confession performed before one's fellow believers. It is especially evident that the confession of one's sins, which once took place in public before the ecclesial body, has seen a significant amount of change within the Reformed context. The focus of this essay is to identify the theological reason behind the sinner publically seeking to be reconciled with God and one's faith community, as well as the reason behind public confession as a means through which one may embrace grace and overcome one's sinful behavior. In this work, I argue that the public confession of sins before an ecclesial body is theologically essential to the faith and life of the believer not only as a means by which one may acknowledge and accept God's freely given grace, but also as a means through which the believer is empowered to take responsibility for his or her sins. By publically taking responsibility, the believer is further empowered to accept the full measure of grace necessary for reconciliation with God and with humankind.
Chapter One

Introduction: Called as Christians to Confess

The words of Scripture are clear, calling Christians to actively and regularly confess their sins (Proverbs 18:13 and 1 John 1:9) and to confess or disclose their sins to one another (James 5:16). This clearly mandated call to confession before God and one’s fellow believers is for the purpose of individual repentance and reconciliation with God and with the ecclesial or larger community. Scripture does not clearly express, however, how the believer is to practice this mandate, whether before a community of believers, privately before clergy, or before God alone. Such a distinction is necessary in order to discern the believer’s call to recognize, disclose, and reveal his or her sins. Confession, when practiced humbly and in the appropriate manner, is a necessary and fundamental tenet of Christian faith and, when practiced responsibly within a faith community, is firmly rooted in Christian history and theology. It provides an opportunity for believers to attempt to disclose all that has separated them from God or the community in hopes of being reconciled with both God and their ecclesial community through grace.

Theologically speaking, it is undeniable that one’s relationship with God is affected by one’s sin.¹ This understanding of individual and corporate transgression within one’s relationship with God and humanity permeates Scripture. As human beings seek to reconcile themselves with God, they continually find that the one they praise is a God from whom they are divided by sin. Similarly, one cannot help but acknowledge the

ways in which one's community is harmed by a single member's sins and the effect such acts have on the interpersonal relationship of community members. Take for example theft. When an individual steals an item or items from a store, the store owner's profit suffers, and in order to make up for the loss, prices must increase. Another example is the sin of murder. Not only is the murderer required to pay a penalty for his or her act but the friends and family of the victim suffer the pain of having lost a loved one. Harm caused by sin within the community may also be understood as harm brought about through their collective sins, such as slavery. Like a stone dropped in a pond whose initial impact sends ripples of tumult to the farthest edges, so too does one's actions against a fellow human ripple through one's community. While eternal implications may not exist for all violations against one's community through interpersonal sins, an individual may still find that his or her sinful acts lead to alienation from the larger group, thus making reconciliation necessary.

What is of greater interest than the impact of one's sinful deeds upon the surrounding community is the manner in which these sins affect the specific worshiping community of the sinner. This ecclesial group of believers is called to represent the body of Christ (Romans 12:4-6) by being present on the earth and holding one another accountable while existing as representatives of God's grace (Proverbs 27:17). The ecclesial community, made up of one's fellow faith-practicing individuals, who are also sinful human beings, is often the victim of or otherwise impacted by an individual's sinful acts. Regardless of who they are committed against, sinful acts harm the

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2 The Heidelberg Catechism Lords Day 3: Question and Answer 7 explicitly states that human nature was poisoned by the Fall in so drastic a manner that all are born sinners and are corrupt. Such corruption permeates every aspect of human life, including the believer's faith practices. *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 1988), 15.
individual’s relationship with God and with the body of Christ and in so doing alienate the believer from the proclamation of God’s redeeming grace. The catechism of the Roman Catholic Church reminds believers that Jesus Christ not only forgave sinners but also sought to return the believer to his or her place in the community of individuals from whom sin had alienated him or her.  

Recognizing their individual sins and publically confessing all of them, believers are, as German Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes, able to bring the source of their alienation into the light rather than hiding their actions as one might attempt to hide an object in the darkness. No longer repressed within the recesses of one’s conscience, sins are brought to the surface and expressed before God and before the body of Christ. This act of disclosure insists that individuals examine and recognize their sinful acts. In this way, one sees the sins that have transpired and thus seeks to be reconciled with God and one’s ecclesial community.

Rooted in the Early Church, the practice of public confession in the Western Christian Churches has changed while clinging to the act of faith in one form or another. The current practices of confessing one’s sins to a fellow believer are most often associated with the Roman Catholic tradition. The current practice of confessing one’s sins among the Roman Catholic Church is reserved to private confession to a priest or 

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5 The primary focus of this work is the theological motivation for the practice of public confession of sins before one’s fellow believers but the closely tied practical element of confession which emerges from the systematic theology of confession cannot be ignored.

6 Catechism of the Catholic Church, 396-417.
bishop, which in recent years has been on the decline. In the Roman Catholic Church, one is called to individually confess before a member of the clergy unless extreme need, such as illness, dictates otherwise.

The perception that confession to another believer is only present in the Roman Catholic tradition demonstrates the lack of scholarship addressing this topic in the Reformed practices, leaving much to be examined within the Protestant and Reformed theological studies. While confession is addressed by Protestant Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin, little was written within the Reformed tradition regarding public confession until Bonhoeffer. Confession, therefore, became a liturgical element that was instituted as part of the worship service prior to, or in addition to, the two Reformed sacraments of baptism and communion. Within some Protestant congregations, confession appears solely in the form of unison liturgical prayers recited by the ecclesial groups vaguely or silently praying for the fallen state of humanity as a congregation rather than confessing one’s individual sins aloud.

Both the Reformed and Roman Catholic practices differ from the original practice of the confession of sins. Over time, the two practices stopped requiring that individuals stand before the people of God to publically confess their transgressions in order that they

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8 Catechism of the Catholic Church, 414.

9 Specifically U.S. North American denominations for instance; Presbyterian Church of the United States of America (PCUSA) Cumberland Presbyterian Church, Reformed Church in America (RCA), and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) to name a few.

might find healing and forgiveness not only from God but also from the Christian community.\textsuperscript{11} Within these two traditions, the act of confession remains an act of humble contrition before God and the people of God with the desire to be readmitted into the presence of both. One must ask, however, whether the current practices suffice when one seeks reconciliation with God and with the ecclesial body. For instance, when one joins his or her fellow believers in a unison prayer of confession, the prayer may be so general that the believer fails to acknowledge the specific sins requiring forgiveness and reconciliation with God and the community of believers.

Straying from the Scriptural mandate or varying the way in which one practices confession, Christian believers not only risk failing to focus on the sins they have committed but they also lose sight of why they are called to confess in the first place. Losing sight of why one is called to confess his or her sins, the believer may rationalize his or her sins. Rationalization of one's sins makes it difficult for one to admit that transgressions, in any form, have taken place and that he or she has sinned. This then makes it nearly impossible to confess one's sins before a perfect God or one's fellow believers and even leads to the believer ignoring his or her need for God and the ecclesial community. The believer who ignores the need for God or God's grace is left with little option for forgiveness, and he or she runs the risk of arrogantly becoming reliant on one's own means for salvation—means which will never suffice.

Public confession enables the believer to understand and accept the grace given by God through Christ. In Bonhoeffer's work \textit{Life Together}, he describes how sin poisons the believer by remaining within the individual rather than being exposed.\textsuperscript{12} Because of

\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Catechism of the Catholic Church}, 402-403, 414.
this tendency to shy away from public confession, believers hide their sins and retain them within their being rather than honestly confessing them and releasing them before one another and seeking remedy for their dis-ease as sinful beings. Keeping one’s sins internalized not only harms the individual but, by retaining the sins as opposed to admitting them in open and public confession, one also poisons to the community and the Church universal.

The German theologian and pastor also states that, “Many Christians would be unimaginably horrified if a real sinner were suddenly to turn up among the pious.”¹³ This could lead an individual, whether inside the church or outside looking in, to believe that, due to fear of judgmental peers, Christians simply do not sin or Christians deny their fallen state. Either way, such understandings only cause greater harm to the believer who is struggling with sin. The former, denying the existence of human sin, is explicitly addressed in Scripture which states that all people do indeed sin (Romans 3:23). The latter option, wherein believers deny their fallen state, is more likely the case and further demonstrates the need for an examination of the call to all believers to confess their sins.

The denial of individual sins against God only leads to the further denial of one’s need for forgiveness and reconciliation with God and the community. Bonhoeffer’s statement makes it sound as though, if a truly repentant sinner were to stand before the people and admit that he or she had committed a violation against God’s will (and his or her community), the Christian faithful may regard the act of sinning as foreign. Such a fear means that the penitent, confessing believer avoids confession rather than face judgment and the potential for accepting grace and reconciliation. Bonhoeffer goes on to


say, however, that, “The call within the Christian community to mutual confession and forgiveness goes out as a call to the great grace of God in the congregation.” Bonhoeffer’s statements are a commentary on the state of Christian faith in modern times and Christianity’s need for believers to confess to and before one another.

Examples of such a compromise of this fundamental tenet of faith include, but are not limited to, the failure to include confession in the liturgical act of worship and the failure to require confession prior to receiving the Eucharist. Too drastic of a compromise in the practice of confession undermines the theology of the act and will no doubt cause the penitential act to no longer resemble its former self. In-so-doing, the theological understanding of why one is called to public confession will disappear from current and future practices. The greatest danger is that the individual will regard the act of confession as such a private act that it will no longer be a part of the ecclesial worship or the public life of the believer. Such privatization, disguised as private or silent prayers of confession, may only lead to further internalization of the act. Were this to happen, individuals would no longer seek reconciliation with God or with one’s community. Worse yet, the individual may no longer recognize a need for such reconciliation.

Recent scholarship has not dealt directly with the theological motives for confessing one’s sins before another and opts rather to focus on the manner in which confession is practiced, —a practice that is rooted in theology and history, including the

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15 Modern times often are a matter of perspective, for this paper the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty first centuries are regarded as modern.

recent phenomena of confession taking place in an online forum. While the confession of sins continues to be practiced in the Roman Catholic Church and is supported by the Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church, the theology behind the shift from public confession to the practice of confessing to a priest or bishop has been historically established. The Roman Catholic Church also finds Scriptural support for this by stating that Christ himself addressed sinners individually when forgiving sins (Mark 2:5). Aside from Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s twentieth century references to confession taking place before members of the ecclesial body, Protestant and Reformed traditions have had little to add since John Calvin addressed confession, yet they continue to ensure that believers understand the serious implications of sin.

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19 Catechism of the Catholic Church, 414.


It is because of these changes from public confession to private confession, the shift in motivation behind confession, and the lack of recent theological scholarship addressing the topic that it is of the utmost importance for believers today. Believers must explore why, as individuals saved by grace, Christians are called to the confession of sins before God and to confess publically before one's community. It must be noted that confession, within the realm of Protestantism (specifically Reformed practices), is not the act by which one receives grace but rather a means by which one acknowledges and accepts grace. In addition, one must note that confession is more than just an easing of the conscience; it is a true spiritual release that frees the sinner from the bondage of sin. The sinner is justified by God, meaning that, while guilty of transgressions against God and one's fellow human, God graciously pardons and accepts the sinner. This is accomplished by God's grace alone and not by any work of the sinner. Along with this, the believer is sanctified by God's grace; the believer is in the

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23 This thesis does not address the topic of salvation or atonement as understood through the Christian lens, that of salvation through the grace of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:8-10). There are numerous writings addressing the doctrine of atonement in which forgiveness and salvation are found from God alone in the gracious acts of Christ. For instance, one may turn to John Calvin, *The Institutes of Christian Belief*, Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1-4*, (New York, NY: T&T Clark International, 2004) and T. F. Torrance; *Atonement: The Person and Work of Jesus Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 2009) to name a few. For this thesis however, the focus remains on the importance of confession for the individual who receives grace through faith. By confessing one's sins publically, one acknowledges one's need for God's grace and humbly seeks reconciliation.


process of "being made holy." This is the renewal of one’s life by the power of the Holy Spirit through participation in Christ by being a part of Christ’s body, which is made up of one’s ecclesial and faith community.

The grace of justification and the ongoing grace of sanctification are integral to one’s self-reflection and confession. Confession in the midst of God’s grace, therefore, is a means by which one recognizes his or her own transgressions against fellow believer and that which divides the Christian from faithful adherence to God’s will for humankind and God’s very being (i.e. sin). Such recognition aids the Christian in overcoming her or his past, present, and future transgressions so that he or she may fully embrace the gift of grace from Christ Jesus. The focus of this essay is to identify the theological reason behind the sinner seeking reconciliation with God and one’s faith community, as well as the reason behind the call to action. I will argue that the public confession of sins before an ecclesial body is theologically essential to the faith and life of the believer, not only as a means by which one may acknowledge and accept God’s freely given grace but also as a means through which the believer is empowered to take responsibility for his or her sins. By taking responsibility, the believer is further empowered to accept the full measure of grace necessary for reconciliation with God and with humankind.

Before one can fully grasp what a believer must confess and the importance of public confession within the faith and life of an individual, one must first understand and define that which believers are called to confess. The first chapter of this work therefore seeks to establish a solid understanding of human sin by distinguishing it from guilt or simply “feeling bad” about one’s deeds. The second chapter builds upon this definition

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26 Migliore, Faith Seeking Understanding, 423.

27 Migliore, Faith Seeking Understanding, 423.
by expressing the theological necessity for the confession of sins in general as a means by which an individual may recognize his or her need for grace and thus accept the grace freely given by God. Having established the need for confession of sins as a theological tenet of the Church, the third chapter discusses the theology of both public and private confession of sins and examines the benefits as well as the deficits of each. From this discussion emerges the danger of confession, especially when performed in public, becoming a means of humiliation for the believer rather than a means of reconciliation; therefore, the fourth chapter clarifies the notion that confession of sins is not meant to humiliate the believer but that it is in actuality a humble act of worship. Such an examination includes a brief psychological explanation of humiliation, which is rooted in pride, and how, when practiced partially or incorrectly, confession can cause more harm to the faith of the believer. In the final chapter I examine the rhetoric of confession, and demonstrating that when confession is done publically in a way that seeks to fully reconcile the believer with all parties harmed by his or her sinful deeds, public confession also empowers the believer to recognize and accept God’s grace.
Chapter Two

Sin and Confession

As a means by which one may recognize the need for God’s grace and seek God’s gracious forgiveness, public confession empowers the believer to obtain reconciliation with both God and God’s people. In order to take full responsibility for one’s actions and accept the full measure of grace given by God for reconciliation through the public confession of sins, the believer must have a solid definition of sin. Many times when one thinks of the need to confess for his or her deeds, one thinks about the human beings they have wronged or hurt. Due to this archival nature of wrong-doing in the human conscience, sinful human behavior brings about feelings of guilt. In the criminal justice system, guilt and sentencing is based on how and to what extent one human has harmed other human beings, their private or public property, or an animal. Secular society does not always recognize wrong-doing in the same manner as those within a religious setting; however, the two views do overlap in many instances. One must therefore examine the fine line found between crime, as defined by the ruling state or civil party, and sin, which is defined as one’s opposition to God and God’s will.¹

The consumption of alcohol serves as an example of the difference between sinful behavior and behavior that is not against civil law. It is not against the law for an individual to drink to the state of drunkenness within one’s own home, yet it is considered harmful to one’s relationship with God and community (Romans 13:13). Thus

the individual, while not committing a crime, as long as the inebriated individual does not get behind the wheel of a car or in this drunken state otherwise misbehaves, is guilty of a sin. Furthermore, there have also been times throughout history in which disobedience to the law of the land has been the correct behavior for God’s faithful people. Defying the civil government meant breaking the law, but it did not always mean that the individual had sinned, such as those individuals who chose to defy the Third Reich and the Nazi regime.² A vast majority of the time, crimes and sins are viewed as one in the same, for instance the civil and religious prohibition of murder. Within the civil courts, the taking of another’s life through an act of murder is reason for a guilty verdict. Within the faith community, murder impacts the believer’s relationship with his or her fellow humans as victims and those otherwise affected by the act of murder, but by defying God’s Law, the intentional killing also impacts the Divine-human relationship.

How, then, does one decipher that which is a crime against the state alone and that which is a transgression against God and God’s people in an ecclesial community? Sin, according to Cornelius Plantinga, “is a religious concept, not just a moral one.”³ One must therefore understand sin in relation to God as well as to one’s fellow human beings.⁴ Such an understanding means that sin is not simply an act or words that cause low self-esteem in the believer. When a novice runner decides that he is going to run a marathon

² Romans 13:1-7 does say that the people of God should submit to the authority of the government because those in governmental power have been placed there by God. Paul emphatically states that those who defy the authority will bring judgment upon themselves. However, it is important to note that believers are to give to the reigning authority what is owed, “if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor” (13:7). If the governmental powers do not warrant respect or honor, it is appropriate for the people of God to address those in authority and to ensure that the government is in no way hindering the preaching of the Gospel or establishing an “absolute authority” over and against God. See also The Belgic Confession: Article 36 and Cornelius Plantinga, Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin, 39-51.

³ Plantinga, Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be, 12.

⁴ Shuster, The Fall and Sin, 105.
and then feels guilty for not training as diligently as necessary, it does not mean that the runner has sinned. Similarly, a student may feel guilt, and even the need to confess to a teacher, for the fact that his or her homework is incomplete. Both instances may bring about a sense low self-esteem or guilt in the individual, but unless each of the above instances was only a symptom of an individual's slothful tendencies, one would not regard either as sin.

Plantinga goes on to state that “Sin is not only the breaking of law but also the breaking of covenant with one’s savior.” Sin is therefore not simply a moral evil but an evil that also violates God’s order. When one speaks of sin as the breaking of the covenant with God and the violation of God’s order, there is within the definition a regard for God as the Lawgiver. God holds a specific role in the Divine-human relationship as the maker of the law while humans fulfill their role as those who are called to obey the law. In addition, God is revealed to humanity through the law. God is revealed as the one who is in relation with humankind, who addresses humankind, and who calls for certain behavior from humankind while also demanding that individuals refrain from specific behaviors. The law of God and the role that law played in the lives of God’s people was and is a foundational aspect of the relationship between God and humanity. The relationship between God and humanity is not simply one of God

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5 Plantinga, Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be, 12.
6 Shuster, The Fall and Sin, 102.
7 Shuster, The Fall and Sin, 103.
8 Shuster, The Fall and Sin, 103.
9 Shuster, The Fall and Sin, 103.
demanding that humans obey, but it is also one based on love, expectation, failure, and forgiveness.

The obedience which God expects from God's people is rooted in the fact that God is the people's creator, sustainer, and redeemer. Explicit language of God establishing a covenant with God's people is present in God's relationship with Noah both before the flood: "But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark—you and your sons and your wife and your sons' wives with you" (Genesis 6:18). Scripture continues,

And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth." So God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth." (Genesis 9:9-17).

God also establishes a covenant with Abram and his lineage, a covenant that would remain for generations. God said, "I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you" (Genesis 17:7).

Whether one examines the Hebrew Scriptures or the New Testament, one finds that throughout Scripture God is both covenant-maker and liberating redeemer. The first words of the Decalogue are a reminder to the people receiving the Law of exactly who God is in relation to God's people: "And God spoke these words, 'I am the Lord your

10 Shuster, The Fall and Sin, 103.
God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Exodus 20:1-2). God is a God who liberates God’s people, not a God who oppresses those whom God loves by imposing unnecessary laws and mandates. The covenant established by God with God’s people seeks to perpetuate life in relation with God. Similarly, one looks to the New Testament Scriptures to see that Christ, in the institution of the Eucharist, proclaims that he invites his disciples to participate in a “new covenant,” a covenant which is for the forgiveness of sins (Matthew 26:27). Jesus, as God’s revelation of God’s self, proclaimed to humanity that he sought to fulfill the law and called believers to behave in adherence with the law. Christ did so by calling believers to go above and beyond the law in their daily behavior.

Christ’s words in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7; see also the Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6:17-49) call believers to a higher standard than had previously been taught by compelling individuals to not only examine their deeds but also their inward emotions and feelings that lead to sinful acts. The Decalogue states specifically that individuals should not kill, nor are individuals to commit adultery (Exodus 20:13-14). The physical acts of taking a life and committing adultery are considered sinful, but similarly, the emotions which lead to the acts, anger and lust, are also regarded by Christ as sinful (Matthew 5:21-31). The Lord’s Days 40 and 41 of the Heidelberg Catechism, examining the Decalogue, state that God hates the root of these sins which emerge from

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There is much discussion regarding the translation of this word "תהלל", whether it is to be understood as “kill” or “murder.” While this discussion is ongoing, there is significant reason to regard the translation as “kill,” meaning the taking of another’s life unintentionally as well as the conscience act of murder as an appropriate translation. See Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox 1976), 419-421; Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 221-222; Paul Lehmann, *The Decalogue and a Human Future* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 163.
one’s emotions, thoughts, and words. Many would argue that anger and lust are innocent emotions compared to the active crime of murder or the relationship-rending activity of adultery, yet Christ compels believers to examine the desires which lie at the heart of these acts. By doing this, the incarnate God informs believers that one’s desires are also capable of causing damage to one’s relationship with fellow human being as well as one’s relationship with God.

In sin, humankind is not simply separated from God, but as Swiss Reformer Karl Barth states, as sinful beings, “We know that we are God’s enemies...” The God who created humankind regards creation, or at least the human element, as God’s enemy due the transgressions against, the denial of, and the prevention of God’s divine will. Barth goes on to say, “The Word of God whose revelation is attested in Scripture tells man that he is a rebel who has wantonly abandoned the fellowship between himself as creature and God as creator and set himself in a place where this fellowship is impossible.” Understanding that fellowship with God is the ultimate goal of the believer, it is the sinful nature of a fallen humanity that prevents such a relationship. Barth states, “To be sinners, as we are shown to be in the revelation of Jesus Christ, means that we have separated ourselves from the One without whom we would not be even in this separation and yet, separated from whom, we cannot be in any true and proper sense.”

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12 Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions, 63-64.
13 Barth, CD, I/1, 407.
14 Barth, CD, I/1, 407-408.
15 Barth, CD, I/1, 444.
Francis Turretin states, “The effects of sin are commonly said to be two: pollution and guilt.”\textsuperscript{16} Whatever the sin may be—one’s acts, words, or deeds—it is a violation of God’s will and “guilt flows from sin…”\textsuperscript{17} It is sin, as well as the guilt which stems from sin, that separates the individual from his or her faith community in addition to his or her relationship with God. Through acts counter to God and God’s will, the sinner has violated his or her role in serving God in the community. By works done and those left undone that are counter to God’s will for the people of God, the sinner violates God’s will and harms the community as a whole, and both of these violations require reconciliation.

Sins are therefore all the instances in which humans have displeased God through their actions as well as their thoughts, words, emotions, and desires and, as such, have distanced themselves from God. Sins are also the absence of “right” acts, thoughts, words, emotions, or desires.\textsuperscript{18} Such a definition reminds individuals that every person has sinned. One must not reserve the title of “sinner” for the criminal or the faithless alone. All people sin including the faithful believer and the saint.\textsuperscript{19} The doctrine of sin\textsuperscript{20} depicts

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\item Turretin, \textit{Elenctic Theology} vol. 1, 594.
\item Turretin, \textit{Elenctic Theology} vol. 1, 595.
\item Plantinga, \textit{Not the Way It's Supposed to Be}, 13.
\item Shuster, \textit{The Fall and Sin}, 167.
\item The Doctrine of Sin states that humanity, created good by God, exist in a fallen state in which individuals choose their own will over and against the will of God. In doing so, humankind lives in opposition to God and is alienated from God and fails to adhere to God’s divine will and Law. For readings on the Doctrine of Sin see Shuster, \textit{The Fall and Sin}, Plantinga, \textit{Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be}; Migliore, \textit{Faith Seeking Understanding}, 141-159; see also Herman Bavinck, \textit{Reformed Dogmatics} 4 volumes, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, (Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Academic, 2006), 25-190; Louis Berkhof, \textit{Systematic Theology} (Grand Rapids, MI, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 219-261.
\end{thebibliography}
all humanity as corrupted by sin and that none are free from this corruption at any time in his or her life.\textsuperscript{21}

The Heidelberg Catechism asks the believer on the Lord’s Day 3 where the corruption of humanity comes from and answers that the misery of corruption comes from “the fall.”\textsuperscript{22} How humans came to possess such a disregard for God’s will through human actions, thoughts, words, emotions, etc. is told in the fall narrative found in the book of Genesis (Genesis 3). The Heidelberg Catechism goes on to state that the event of the fall, “...has so poisoned our nature that we are born sinners—corrupt from conception on.”\textsuperscript{23} Elsewhere in Scripture, one reads that all, like sheep, have gone astray (Isaiah 53:6) and that there are “none on earth so righteous as to do good without sinning” (Ecclesiastes 7:20). In the institution of the Lord’s Prayer, Christ teaches the disciples to pray for the forgiveness of their individual sins or debts as well as for the forgiveness of others’ sins or debts (Matthew 6:12; Luke 11:4). The first epistle of John states emphatically that one who perceives that he or she does not sin “deceives” him or herself (1 John 1:8-10). Paul, in his letter to the Romans, reminds the believer that the state of original sin is not one of hopelessness. Paul states, “just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned” (Romans 5:12).

Sin may therefore be understood as the act of every human individual, at one time or another, placing his or her desires above God and God's covenant relationship with

\textsuperscript{21} Shuster, \textit{The Fall and Sin}, 168.

\textsuperscript{22} Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions, 15.

\textsuperscript{23} Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions, 15.
humanity or placing his or her pride before the glory of God. Sin has plagued humanity throughout history, yet the manner in which Christian believers have dealt with sin and sought reconciliation with God and others, while inconsistent over time, has remained a central theme. This constant theme serves to remind individuals that, while ever present, believers were not able to accept sins as simply part of the human being’s existence and has serious consequences for one’s relationship with God.

In the early practices of Christianity, the Church broke sins down into transgressions that posed a threat to the individual’s spiritual life and those that were considered less threatening to the individual’s relationship with the divine. Mortal sins were defined as those sins which destroy one’s spiritual life. Unless members of the ecclesial community forgave or “loosed” these mortal sins on earth, they would be retained throughout eternity, and such earthly acts would separate the mortal from God’s divine presence forever.

Under the broad definition of sin, there were also venial sins which, while grievous and harmful to the individual’s relationship with God and community, did not have the same eternal impact as mortal sins. Venial sins were the sins that did not completely sever the believer’s relationship with God. By no means were venial sins to be regarded as any less significant in the life of the believer. Venial sins were acts into

24 Shuster, *The Fall and Sin*, 104.
25 Baur, *Frequent Confession*, 75.
26 Baur, *Frequent Confession*, 75.
27 Baur, *Frequent Confession*, 75.
which a believer might fall more often and were considered morally evil, but the acts themselves were not permanently damaging to the believer’s relationship with God.29 While it is true that all sins are violations of God’s will, venial sins were understood as less harmful and more easily overcome by believers than mortal sins. In 1 John the believer reads, “If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that. All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death.” (1 John 5:16-17). Venial sins, while harmful to the believer’s relationship with God, did not completely cut one off from God and impede one’s ability to grow in faith as well as live in God’s grace.30 While not deadly in this sense, venial sins were understood to have the potential to dispose the believer to mortal sins.31

Thus, both mortal and venial sins were very real transgressions against God and one’s community, and as legitimate threats, neither should have been dismissed from one’s conscience lightly. The primary focus in regards to sin in the believer’s life, however, was mortal sin, which was regarded as more eternally harmful and thus irrevocable.32 The Church fathers recognized the danger in one believing that if one has not committed a mortal sin, one’s sins are harmless.33 All sins affect the believer’s life in a negative way and draw the believer from his or her relationship with God and the faith

29 O’Brien, The Remission of Venial Sin, 10.
30 Baur, Frequent Confession, 76.
31 DeYoung, Glittering Vices, 35.
32 Baur, Frequent Confession, 76.
33 Baur, Frequent Confession, 76.
community. Because of this discrepancy regarding sins and how believers were to behave, "the apostles and elders were gathered together to consider this matter" (Acts 15:6). Out of the assembly came what is known as the Apostolic Decree found in Acts 15:28-29.  

This decree stated that, while all sinful acts, both mortal and venial, were to be adamantly avoided, there were certain behaviors which were strictly forbidden, and three offenses were raised above all others, recognizing them as unpardonable. These prohibited behaviors were the pollutions of idols, fornication, and homicide.  

Variations of these three behaviors break homicide into two groups: things strangled and those killed by bloodshed. This designation gave the appearance of four forbidden acts, as was sometimes preached.  

Another slight variation regards fornication or "unchastity" as that of being sexually "unclean," which leaves much room for interpretation as to what exactly is unclean sexual behavior.  

If these or any acts of sin were avoided by believers, they would find that they would "do well" in life (Acts 15:29). Hearing Scripture once more, the believer is reminded that all sin and fall short of the glory of God, thus ensuring that the most an individual can hope to do is try not to sin (Romans 3:23). What became, then, of those who did find themselves guilty of such acts, which were regarded as capital or mortal sins? When a believer confessed venial sins, forgiveness was pronounced, and through completion of penance, he or she sought reconciliation with God and one's fellow human

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37 Marshall, The Penitential Discipline, 86.
beings. Yet, upon confession, those guilty of capital sins found that they were not always welcomed back into the community of believers as they may have hoped.

In her book *Glittering Vices*, Rebecca DeYoung writes that the list of specific deadly sins or vices arose due to the fact that the acts caused a spiritual death in the believer by cutting one off from God’s grace. By committing the deadly sins, one was in effect choosing one’s will over and above the will of God, rejecting the presence of the Holy Spirit in one’s life, and rejecting the call by God to love God and neighbor. There is argument that the decision to not forgive an individual’s mortal sins was the Church, acting out of caution, choosing to relegate the judgment of these sins to God and God alone. This served to protect finite and fallible humanity from making ill-informed decisions or failing to see the true repentance of an individual’s heart in the same manner as only God is able. Thus for God, there may not be a scale upon which sin is measured, where one sin is more grievous than another and warranting more or less punishment, but within the minds and hearts of humans, a specific few sins would stand out as greater than all others.

The most recognized sins in society are perhaps those which are considered the seven deadly sins or vices. The seven deadly sins have been mislabeled by many throughout history simply because they are not actually sins. Instead, the list of seven are “deeply rooted patterns in our character, patterns broader than a single act but narrower

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39 DeYoung, *Glittering Vices*, 35.

40 DeYoung, *Glittering Vices*, 35.


than our sinful human condition in general. Rather than being labeled "deadly sins" DeYoung states that they are to be regarded as "deadly vices" that, as patterns of behavior, may lead to sinful acts.

While there has been much discussion regarding the number of vices and which vices make up the list, pride (vainglory), envy, anger, covetousness, gluttony, sloth, and lust are commonly agreed upon. The reason that each of these has been considered "deadly" is that each has the potential to be the source of greater, mortal or capital behavior. DeYoung draws the connection between the capital offenses and the Latin words caput and captis, which mean "head." DeYoung points out that execution in many instances meant separating the head from one's body, ensuring that the guilty party is dead. DeYoung goes on to emphasize the parallel that "head" in this case does not mean the anatomical head, but rather the "fountainhead" or source. Capital sins therefore do not kill the person by ending his or her life but rather are an end of the individual's spiritual life, in essence killing the spiritual relationship between God and the believer. Similar to the words of Christ, the believer who is angry or lustful, even within the confines of his or her heart, is as guilty of sin as if he or she has been caught in the physical act itself because such sins lead to the spiritual death of the believer.

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43 DeYoung, Glittering Vices, 34.
44 DeYoung, Glittering Vices, 34.
45 DeYoung, Glittering Vices, 28-31.
46 Shuster, The Fall and Sin, 144-145; DeYoung, Glittering Vices, 36.
47 Shuster, The Fall and Sin, 145.
48 DeYoung, Glittering Vices, 33.
49 DeYoung, Glittering Vices, 33.
50 DeYoung, Glittering Vices, 33.
(Matthew 5:21-28). Each of the seven capital sins or vices serve as a reminder to the believer that any and all sins are significant in the life of the individual. In relation to capital or mortal sins and vices, venial sins are the acts which may dispose the believer to mortal sins.\textsuperscript{51} This proves how easily one sin may lead to another, thrusts the faithful down a slippery-slope, leads him or her away from God and one’s community, and demonstrates that, for the believer, there are no minor sins.\textsuperscript{52}

Understanding that there are no minor sins in the life of the believer, humans appear to have no hope unless there is a means by which individuals may obtain forgiveness. It was stated in the Hebrew Scripture that following an offence against God the offenders could indeed find forgiveness (Exodus 29:36-37; 32:30; Leviticus 4-7; Ezekiel 43:26). In such instances, forgiveness was the result of ritual sacrifice to God to atone for one’s transgressions; thus the concept of forgiveness for one’s sins in the early Church was not a foreign or new concept. Forgiveness for capital sins, however, did not take place in the Christian Church for nearly two hundred years.\textsuperscript{53} It was later in the life of the early Christian Church that believers claimed, or perhaps reclaimed, the right to pronounce forgiveness for these mortal sins. Mortal sins, once again, would be absolvable, but these sins were always to be regarded as the most serious of all the sins committed against God and humankind. There would arise some individuals within Protestant theology who would argue that it is impossible for an individual to commit a

\textsuperscript{51} DeYoung, \textit{Glittering Vices}, 35

\textsuperscript{52} For more reading on the seven capital sins or deadly sins, one may turn to DeYoung, \textit{Glittering Vices} in which the author explores each offense in detail as well as current interpretations of each offense. See also Schimmel, \textit{The Seven Deadly Sins}.

\textsuperscript{53} Marshall, \textit{The Penitential Discipline}, 88; Watkins, \textit{A History of Penance}, vol. 1, 12.
mortal or capital sin after one receives the gift of God’s grace. Drawing on Paul’s letter to the Romans, they would find solid evidence to believe that once individuals were justified there would be nothing that could separate the believer from the love of God (Romans 8:38-39).

While capital sins were regarded by some as, “beyond the scope of the absolution” within the Church, this did not mean that the sins themselves were unforgivable nor were the sinners beyond absolution. In fact, the words of Christ in his commission to the Church give the Church the power to forgive or retain any sins, even capital sins. Are there then levels of sin in the eyes of God regarding one sin as worse than any other? The answer would have to be no. All sins, regardless of what they may be, warrant one price, the price owed by sinners but paid by Christ on humanity’s behalf—the price of death. With mortal or capital sins, however, it was not that the sins were unpardonable or that the ones who were guilty of sinful behavior were unforgivable, but rather that these sins were most detrimental to the sinner’s relationships and thus warranted serious examination prior to grace being pronounced and accepted.

Whether or not one is able to receive forgiveness for mortal sins, or whether or not the justified believer is capable of committing capital offences against God, the deadly sins would continue to be understood as dangerous to the believer’s spiritual life. Other sins were understood as serious in their impact upon a believer’s relationship with

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54 DeYoung, Glittering Vices, 35.

55 DeYoung, Glittering Vices, 35.


57 There is mention of the “Unforgivable Sin” of “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit” which is regarded as unforgivable (Matthew 12:31; Mark 3:29; Luke 12:10); Watkins, 10-11.

58 Catechism of the Catholic Church, 278.
God and with his or her fellow believer, and, while no sin was ever to be taken lightly as all sin offended God and humankind, no offences were placed in the same category as the three capital or mortal offences of homicide, idolatry, and sexually unclean behavior.\(^{59}\) One could say that these sins are still regarded by many as the most grievous of all sins given the current religious and political discussions revolving around abortion, homosexuality, capital punishment, etc.

Regardless of how sin is defined in the history of the Church, the acts, thoughts, words, and deeds that divide the believer from God and his or her community are serious and have a negative impact on the believer’s life. It is therefore of the utmost importance that individuals seek liberation from their sins and embrace the freely given grace of God, which, as I will soon demonstrate, may be done through confession before God and one’s community.

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Chapter Three

Biblical/Theological Foundation of the Confession of Sins

Having defined sin and having examined mortal and venial sins seriously, the early Church needed some sort of structure that would dictate how confession would take place. Such structure would ensure that sins be truly and humbly confessed as well as absolved. From the earliest days of the Christian Church, it is not exactly clear how confession or penance took place; was it to be done in public before an assembly of the faithful or in private? There is evidence that at the turn of the first century (approximately 95-110 AD) public confession was being practiced regularly.¹

Public confession served to demonstrate the believer’s willingness to reconcile him or herself to the faith community before God and the people. The reason behind this call for believers to practice public acts of confession and public penance is important in the life of the individual’s relationship with his or her fellow believers as well as the individual’s relationship with God. It demonstrated, before God and the community, one’s ability to accept that he or she had done wrong in some form and expressed the desire to move beyond the act itself into repentance and forgiveness. Done in public, this act showed that the sinner would not attempt to hide his or her sins from God or the people. Once in the open and addressed, the guilty believer could seek forgiveness and humbly rejoin his or her fellow believers and God in faith.

In the years following Christ’s death and resurrection, the Christian movement was growing. As it grew, the movement found itself attempting to establish how one’s faith could be lived out daily as believers awaited the return of Christ in glory. The question emerged: Without Jesus, God incarnate, physically present to pronounce forgiveness for one’s sins, could one’s sins be regarded as forgiven? After all, “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Mark 2:7). Would believers be required to revert back to former practices of sacrifice through which one would atone for sin? If so, what lasting implications did Christ’s atoning acts upon the cross have in the lives of the believers in the early Church as well as those to come? Confession would forever change the faith practice of believers by becoming a means by which individuals would take responsibility for their transgressions and therefore find themselves empowered to accept the God-given grace necessary for reconciliation with God and the faithful community. Moreover, those called to hear the confession of Christian believers would be none other than the sinner’s fellow believers who were both human and fallen.

Before one can confess publically to his or her fellow believers or hear another believer admit guilt of past or present transgressions against God or community, the faith community must know what one must disclose. Is the believer called to confess his or her sins or his or her sin? At first glance, this may appear to be a matter of semantics. The difference between sins and sin could simply be understood as the number of transgressions this sinner is willing to admit. Has the sinner committed a (singular) sin, like stealing a coin, or has he or she committed many (plural) sins by committing multiple thefts? The discrepancy between sins and sin goes deeper still.

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2 For examples of the mandate for sacrificial atonement in Hebrew practices see Exodus 29:36; Leviticus 4; Leviticus 5; Leviticus 6:7, 30; Leviticus 14:19; Leviticus 17:11; Numbers 5:8.
When confessing a *sin*, the believer is stating that he or she has distanced him or herself from God by rebelling against the Lord. This sinful state in which humans reside is the result of original sin. Original sin is the state of being into which all people are born as a result of the fall that took place shortly after creation (Genesis 3). While affirming that humanity was created in the image of God and was created good (Genesis 1:26-31), original sin states that humans defied God and God’s will and, as a result, are alienated from God and from each other. Thus, through the corruption and perversion of that which was originally created by God, humans have lived in a fallen state with a tendency to selfishly choose their own will over and against God’s, returning to sin time and time again.

By confessing one’s sinful state, the believer admits that he or she has, at the very least, the potential to transgress against God at least once, and that his or her very being is tainted by a tendency to sin at least once, which is in and of itself enough to warrant punishment (Romans 6:23). It is not as though one is able to sin only in part or violate one’s relationship with God only slightly. All sin incurs guilt before God. To confess *sin* is therefore admitting a self-awareness of one’s state as a fallen human being. Such a confession is acknowledgement of one’s sinful nature without disclosure of one’s actions that are the evidence of the sinful state.

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4 Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 150.


When the believer confesses his or her sins, the believer admits the violations that stem from the individual’s state of being in sin.\(^7\) It is this list of transgressions that are recognized as acts which have been committed against God and community. To confess one’s sins (plural) is to disclose all that has taken place in one’s fallen state of existence or living under the power of sin (singular). The two may not need to be separated because one’s sins are the result of the fallen human state of sin, which are often attributed to original sin and the fall.\(^8\) Yet it is easier to admit that one is simply “a bad person” (existing in a state of sin), rather than admit to all the acts that make her or him “a bad person” (having committed sins). One is to be held accountable for all his or her deeds which have separated the individual from God and the faithful community, not simply give a brief overview. It would seem that once one has confessed that he or she exists in a fallen state or one’s sins are confessed and the list of infractions acknowledged, one may once again rejoin the ecclesial community in sacramental celebration.

The question arises then, whether this act is enough. Does full forgiveness and full acceptance of grace require complete disclosure of one’s sins? Thus, the original question that persists is, are believers called to confess before God and before the community? Are believers to confess that they simply live in a fallen state of sin, or are they compelled to recount the violations of God’s created order and divine will through their sins?

The answer is that the Christian believer is called to confess nothing less than both. Individuals should first confess that they are individuals who have violated God’s law for humankind (sin) but also all of the violations themselves (sins). Recognizing,

\(^7\) Collins, The Fate of Confession, 5.

\(^8\) Shuster, The Fall and Sin, 136.
however, that one is called to confess that one is a sinner and that one is called to confess all of the sins that have been brought about by the individual in such a state, is simple. To whom one must confess and how confession transpires beckons one to return to the words of the New Testament and Christ himself, eliciting believers to confess before one another in community.

By the words of Christ humans receive the authority to hear confession and pronounce forgiveness for sins. In the Gospel of Matthew, Christ tells Simon Peter that he, Peter, is blessed and that “upon this rock I [Christ] will build my [his] church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I [Christ] will give you [Peter] the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you [Peter] bind[s] on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you [Peter] loose[s] on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:17-19).  

This statement of binding and loosing directly correlates to the retaining and forgiving of sins among fellow human beings. In Hebrew literature, to bind something is to forbid it; on the other hand, to loose something is to permit it. One sees the binding of an object as confining or even restricting something from moving or being set free. The act of letting something loose, however, is to free it from its former confines. This carries over into the understanding of one’s transgressions and sins in that, if they are let loose, the individual’s sins are released and no longer bound to the individual. If one’s sins are not loosed, but are rather bound to the individual’s being, the sinful act remains bound to the sinner throughout eternity. The Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church

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10 *Confession and Absolution*, 19.
states that "imparting to his apostles his own power to forgive sins the Lord also gives
them authority to reconcile sinners to the church."\(^{11}\)

Later in Matthew's Gospel, one finds that Christ extends this invitation to hear
confession and forgive one another beyond Peter alone by instructing people to listen as
"your brother or sister" admits fault, binding and loosing in the same way mentioned
above (Matthew 18:18). This passage adds the strong implication that each individual is
called not only to hear confessions and pronounce God's grace but also to admit his or
her faults before fellow believers (Matthew 18:15). I will address this important fact and
the role of the hearer in detail below. The Catechism goes on to describe binding and
loosing as an act in which all of Christ's followers are called to participate and one which
is inseparable from reconciliation with God.\(^{12}\)

In addition to the Gospels, the theological foundation of the call to confession and
to hear another's confession, is present in the Hebrew Scriptures as well as other books of
the New Testament. For example, "He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but
whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy" (Proverbs 28:13). Also, "If we
confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all
unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). These words of Scripture, instructing believers and
expressed by the early church, resound with the message that believers are called to seek
reconciliation.

A large part of the Biblical witness that calls one to confession rests on the
doctrine of justification, which is the understanding that the believer resides in the
comfort of grace. As a people living in grace, Christ commands that individuals not

\(^{11}\) Catechism of the Catholic Church, 402, 410.

\(^{12}\) Catechism of the Catholic Church, 402-403.
continue to live life in the same manner as he or she had prior to one’s gracious justification through Christ. Jesus states that individuals have no excuse for their sinful behavior after Christ’s presence in the world (John 15:22). Having been forgiven, humankind must move beyond their tendencies to sin and strive to live a life according to God’s will (Matthew 9:2; John 8:1-11).

These words speak to believers today, calling each individual to break free from the hold sin has upon the human persona. The Gospel of John supports not only the concept of public confession to fellow believers but also of hearing confession and pronouncing the forgiveness of sins. This call is present in Christ’s commissioning of the disciples. As the resurrected Christ breathes upon them, calling them to receive the Holy Spirit, he states that if the disciples forgive anyone his or her sins, the sins are forgiven. Likewise if the disciples retain an individual’s sins, the sins are retained, “Again Jesus said, ‘Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.’ And with that he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.’” (John 20:21-23).

This commissioning was not limited just to the disciples alone but given to the entire Church.¹³ Thus, it is upon Christ’s authority, God’s Word made flesh, that believers in all times and in all places are called to hear the confessions and pronounce God’s forgiveness which comes through God’s grace.

Once more, following his resurrection, Christ calls upon his disciples to preach this concept of repentance and forgiveness of sins beyond the local inhabitants or congregations to all the nations of the world (Luke 24:47). The empowerment of Christ’s followers to do so was established on the day of Pentecost. On Pentecost, the disciple

¹³ Confession and Absolution, 21.
Peter proclaimed that those “baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins” would be reconciled to God and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2: 37-38). It is here, in the earliest Apostolic Church, that one sees the first instances of individuals putting into practice that which was charged within the Christian community—to confess individual sins to one another in the ecclesial body, to hear confession, and pronounce forgiveness of sins by God’s grace. The apostles were called to encourage nothing less than the full confession of sins before God and one another within the newly established and emerging Christian Church.

As the years progressed and the early Church grew, this practice of confession had developed a close relation to penance, at times exchanging the label of one for the other, and continued to function as an important part of the Church life. Confession permitted those who had transgressed against God and the community to remain a part of the faithful; however, the number of times in which one could partake of such grace was limited. The rule in the Church during the first centuries after Christ only allowed confession and absolution once following baptism. This was because the believer had, upon baptism, been accepted by Christ and thus was expected to never sin again. It was an expectation that perhaps many individuals then and today would regard as impossible, and as such, many would hesitate to even try. The new life received through grace in baptism, however, did not rid the believer of his or her human nature which was weak and prone to sin. This strong yearning for a sinless life compelled the believer to, with

14 Penance is often understood as part of the act of confession due to the fact that penance was often prescribed and followed one’s confession as a demonstration of the individual’s willingness to change one’s life (conversion) as well as a means of reconciliation (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 413-414). For this writing however, the focus is on confession alone.

the help of Christ, endure the struggle of human frailty and strive to live life the way in which God calls all humanity to live. Impossible or not, the understanding was that baptized Christians were to live a sinless life.

This idea that one should live a sinless life after baptism emerged primarily from the visions of the Pastor of Hermas which were established as doctrine of the early Christian Church during the second century. In the third of his five visions, the Pastor of Hermas described a conversation he had had with a woman who shows him the faithful believers who sat on the right hand of God. Recognizing that he desired to sit with the faithful beside God, the woman pointed out that the Pastor is unable because his “shortcomings are many.” The Pastor’s many shortcomings, or his sins, prevented him not only from being seated beside God but also from fellowship with the faithful at the right hand of God. There was hope for the Pastor, however, as he “will be cleansed from [his] shortcomings,” which was understood at that time as the cleansing of ritual of baptism. This blessed “cleansing” was not reserved for the Pastor himself but was extended to “all who were not given to doubts.” As his third vision continues, the Pastor viewed stones that represented those who were “cut down and thrown away” by God because the individuals had “known the truth” but did not remain in the truth; in other words, they had been baptized and had fallen back into sinful ways. In his cryptic

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16 Catechism of the Catholic Church, 398.
17 Catechism of the Catholic Church, 398.
18 Pastor of Hermas, Visions, 13.
21 Pastor of Hermas, Visions, 14.
writing, the Pastor of Hermas noted the seriousness of baptized individuals who commit sinful acts—regarding them as nothing less than hypocrites and stating that God had no place for such people in the Church.  

It was therefore understood that upon receiving baptism the believer was cleansed and engrafted into the faith community as a sinless being. This meant that the church labeled the sins committed, from the day of baptism to the believer’s death, as unforgivable, as the believer had no other means by which to be cleansed.

There were times when upon special emergency, remittance of sins was allowed. When an individual was involved in an accident that was not the fault of the believer and posed a legitimate threat to his or her life, the sinner was granted a special remittance of sins upon his or her death bed. It was, however, established in the first 300 years of the early Christian Church that confession was to take place only once prior to baptism and allowable once after baptism if necessary. It was still the aim and the hope that the one-time confession prior to baptism would serve as the only time in which the believer would find the need to confess his or her sins. With the end of days understood as imminent, it was believed that it should not have been difficult for individuals who had received forgiveness for sins at baptism, to live sin-free lives until Christ comes again in glory. For the early church, there was no need to confess and seek forgiveness a second or even third time. As the days and years persisted, however, the need for more regular confession and forgiveness became necessary.

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22 Pastor of Hermas, Visions, 14, 41; Watkins, A History of Penance, vol. 1, 47.


24 Catechism of the Catholic Church, 414.

After confession, baptized individuals who were guilty of the more serious offences, such as homicide or idolatry, found that they were barred from partaking in the Eucharist with other Christians for the duration of their lives.26 The act of communion with fellow believers and the physical representation of Christ’s acts in his final days before his crucifixion were throughout history, and remain still, a tangible means by which Christ was and is present in the believers' lives. Such an act of worship was paramount to the life of a believer, and being banned from an ecclesial celebration of faith was to find one’s self essentially excommunicated from the Christian community.

With regard to fornication or uncleanness and the wide breadth of possible offences, distinctions were made regarding the type of grievance committed. Based on these distinctions, the point when the faith community would readmit the individual could vary.27 For some it was a matter of years before they were able to rejoin the faithful in the practice of worship or in sacramental celebration; for others it was longer. One may recognize, however, that in relationship with fellow humans the sin of homicide and sins of a sexual nature were perhaps the most detrimental acts that could take place among a people. Both homicide and acts of sexual sin included a victim as well as the one committing the sin, which meant at least two individuals within the community were affected by the individual’s sinful act. The effect of one’s sins would also carry further as it rippled through the community, thus impacting more than simply the individuals directly involved. One could, on the other hand, regard idolatry as that which heinously divides an individual from his or her God. Yet, as one hears the words of Scripture calling believers to forgive one another’s sins, one cannot help but question whether these

26 Marshall, The Penitential Discipline, 86.
27 Marshall, The Penitential Discipline, 86.
acts of transgression against God and community are unforgiveable. Should they be bound on earth by those called to follow Christ only to remain bound in heaven?

At the close of the second century, believers began to repeat the practice of public confession more than once after baptism, and this new practice of confession had a prominent place in the Western Christian Church. The Greek term for this practice is ἔξομολόγησις, which in its original form was regarded as simply “confession” or was sometimes emphasized to mean “utter confession” or “entire confession.” It is this practice of ἔξομολόγησις that came to include penance as well, and thus the connection between the two was established. Because the acts of confession and the act of penance are so closely tied together, it is unclear whether both acts were public when one reads of public ἔξομολόγησις taking place within the Church.

There was room for speculation regarding whether confession would take place privately before a priest or a bishop while the penance was performed in public. Demanding that the believer perform one aspect of ἔξομολόγησις (penance) in public without also performing the other aspect (confession) in public could possibly lead to greater humiliation by the penitent. It is therefore reasonable to state that, if the believer was to perform one in public, he or she would perform both in public. I will discuss the topic of public humiliation as a result of the confession of one’s sins in light of Scripture’s clear call that believers confess their sins before God and community in greater detail below. For the time being, it remained the desire of the Church that, despite

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possibly being seen as public humiliation, the event of public confession led to absolution and not further condemnation.  

Examining accounts from the Apostolic Father Tertullian, one sees that public ἐξομολογησις was the formal character of confession within the Church, despite its apparent severity and potential for humiliation of the guilty party.  

Due at times to the severity and the tendency to feel publically humiliated, believers who were guilty of transgressions against God and fellow believers were hesitant to partake in ἐξομολογησις and sought to avoid any such acts of faith that would lead to further humiliation, thus, they kept their sins hidden.

It would appear, however, that the early Church Fathers had little pity for those who feared the embarrassment of public ἐξομολογησις. Tertullian states that he gives “no place to bashfulness when I am a gainer by its loss” and that “while it [ἐξομολογησις] abases the man, it raises him up; while it covers him in squalor, it renders him more clean; while it accuses him, it excuses him; while it condemns him, it absolves him.”

Tertullian was primarily concerned with the serious or capital sins which some argued would cause one to lose grace. Yet the humiliation felt was not lost on Tertullian. He states, “you say, ‘It is a miserable thing thus to come to ἐξομολογησις’ yes, for evil does bring about misery.”

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36 Rahner, Penance in the Early Church, 126.
guilt associated with sin is an integral step toward reconciliation which flows from grace. The pain or embarrassment one may feel before his or her fellow believers is slight compared to the eternal weight of earthly sins retained in heaven. Tertullian goes on to state that, “where repentance is to be made, the misery ceases,” but also in an appeal to human hearts and minds he asks, “Is it better to be damned in secret than absolved in public?”

Such absolution would bring the believer back to a state similar to that directly following baptism. Despite the admitted tendency to regard public εἰσομολόγησις as an act of public humiliation, and that such an act would lead believers to avoid confession before the Church, it remained the practice of the Church that such events were done in public—but not permanently.

Toward the middle of the third century one could already start to see changes in the way confession and penance were practiced. The move from public confession to private confession before a “priest of the Lord” was becoming more common.

Confession before a “priest of the Lord” was not mandatory, however, as Cyprian points out. He writes, “For although in smaller sins sinners may do penance for a set time, and according to the rules of discipline come to public confession...” The believer would confess smaller sins, which would not incur the same sort of humiliation before the people, and he or she would confess greater sins, which could lead to larger and more

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public acts of penance and greater humiliation, in private. This change marked a major shift regarding the manner in which individual Christians would relate to one another.

In making public confession, the people of the Church represented the body of Christ. Through confession to a priest or bishop, the people of the Church were represented by a single individual. Thus the “priest of the Lord” stood not only for the people of the Church but, in representing them, also represented the body of Christ as a whole. It is easier to confess to one person than to a group, regardless of size. It was also the priest’s role to identify the penance which was to follow a given confession.42 This meant that upon hearing the confession of the sinner, the priest had the power to decide whether or not the sinful acts warranted public penance.43

As they began to assume a position that represented the body of Christ, there were strict requirements of the “priest of the Lord,” most important being that he “not be bound by sin.”44 Such an individual would seem difficult to find lest one forget that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Leviticus addresses the importance of the priest and his role in the act of atoning for one’s sins as well as acting on behalf of the community of faith. As a representative of the Hebrew people before God, it was important that the priest realize that his sins were understood as the people’s sins. Similarly, it was of the utmost importance that the priest seek atonement for himself before he represented the people. Scripture explicitly states, “If the anointed priest sins, bringing guilt on the people, he must bring to the Lord a young bull without defect as a sin offering for the sin he has committed” (Leviticus 4:3). Recognizing this Biblical fact,

assigned clergy were not required to live entirely sinless lives. Such a high expectation
would be impossible. Clergy, however, should never have committed the sins which were
addressed above as “mortal sins.”45 It was not that believers elevated the assigned hearers
of confession and those who assigned penance above all other believers, yet the office of
the hearer was still distinct.

The understanding of the commission spoken by Jesus in John 20:21-23 that the
disciples hear confession changed over time, and believers saw that the commission was
not spoken exclusively to the disciples but to the whole Church. If the whole church were
commissioned to hear one another’s confessions, why set aside certain individuals to for
such a purpose? If one meets the criteria that he or she is not guilty of homicide, idolatry,
or sexually unclean acts, why should he or she not qualify for hearing confession, similar
to the manner in which Hebrew priest administered God’s forgiveness on the Day of
Atonement? Perhaps this simply meant that those who would hear the confession of
another should not be in the midst of sin and must themselves have confessed and been
absolved.

It was likely that the change in who would hear confession influenced the act of
ἐξομολόγησις, slowly moving it from the public eye to the private sector of the individual
believer’s faith life. The practice would remain consistent in that, as a means of Church
discipline, the Church did not allow a believer to partake of the Eucharist if he or she had
not confessed or done proper penance.46 Removing confession from the public eye was
not the only problem in the latter third century that would prevent an individual from
rejoining the faith community. There emerged a tendency to express one’s sins to a

46 Cyprian The Epistles of Cyprian, 290.
member of the clergy and yet not adhere to the prescribed penance, especially those acts of confession and penance that required public witness. This failure to practice prescribed penance, combined with the overall avoidance of public \( \varepsilon \xi \omicron \omicron \omicron \lambda \omicron \omicron \gamma \sigma \varsigma \), was a driving force behind the move of confession and penance from public to private. This transition raises many questions. Could such private acts of confession and penance have the same result of absolution and forgiveness among the people of God? Would private \( \varepsilon \xi \omicron \omicron \omicron \lambda \omicron \omicron \gamma \sigma \varsigma \) bring about the same closure for the guilty as well as for those against whom the sins were perpetrated? Would the sinner truly accept what he or she had done to hurt his or her relationship with the community and with God, thus allowing the individual to truly repent and strive to live a sinless life?

Pope Leo I (ca. 400-461) addressed these questions on behalf of the Roman Church in his letter to the Bishops of Campania. In his letter he expressed that private confession was sufficient for absolution of the guilty, and thus there was no need for public expression or even the publication of sins confessed. In his letter, Leo stated that those called to the priesthood were called as individuals “fit” for the role of clergy. For others to hear confession, even in a public setting, would be to allow un-ordained individuals to have the power to bind or loose one’s sins. This move by Leo was not only a doctrinal establishment of how confession would grow to be practiced but also was the

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beginning of a shift in the way individuals would come to regard the clergy of the Church.

Individuals who were called to hear confessions were initially placed in this role as those who would stand in the place of the people of the Church in order to represent the body of Christ. Were one hesitant or even doubtful about confessing his or her sin, the priest would serve as a proper substitute by being capable of hearing confession in private and offering intercession or prayer on behalf of the sinner and also representing the congregation.\textsuperscript{51} By hearing confession, pronouncing forgiveness in the name of the Lord, and offering prayer, the priest truly represented the Church. Slowly, however, as time went on the priest was brought to the forefront of the penitential process, and the people of the Church were pushed farther into the background. The \textit{Catechism of the Catholic Church} states emphatically that God alone is able to forgive sins but goes on to state that, commissioned by Christ, the disciples were given the power to bind and loose believer’s sins and reconcile the penitent with God.\textsuperscript{52} At the very least, it would appear that the priest appeared as a means by which to reach God. By hearing confession privately, pronouncing the penance required, and offering the prayers that were once offered by the congregation, the people had no role other than that of the confessing sinner.

\textsuperscript{51} Marshall, \textit{The Penitential Discipline}, 106.

\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Catechism of the Catholic Church}, 402.
Chapter Four
The Theology of Public and Private Confession of Sins

For the decades and centuries that would follow, there would remain a persistent debate about how one should perform confession. Should it take place in public before the people who make up the body of Christ, or would private confession and absolution suffice? This debate, which began in the early years of the Church, would continue through the Protestant Reformation. Trends would arise in which public expression of sinful guilt would take place along with public penance, and at times only sins labeled “public sins” would call for public confession and public penance, while other times both confession and penance would take to private sectors. This discussion would cool down to a simmer as the church grew, faced persecution, and partook in crusades. It would be a few hundred years later that confession would again see major change in practice, as private confession before a priest would be addressed in the Reformation. Throughout the many years of change in the Church, and still today, it remains imperative that believers have a means by which they are empowered to receive the full measure of grace given to them by God while at the same time taking responsibility for sins that harm their relationship with God and with the community.

Seeking reformation in the Church, both Martin Luther and John Calvin influenced and introduced changes in the way Christianity was understood and practiced by the people as well as the role of the clergy. As one of the major transformative figures

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of the reformation, Martin Luther acknowledged the place of the clergy in the practice of confession. Luther felt that confessors should hear absolution proclaimed from the clergy as though from God. Luther believed that confession, along with baptism and the Eucharist, made up the three sacraments of the Church, as opposed to Roman Catholic Church's seven.

John Calvin, however, neither agreed with the Roman Catholic Church nor Martin Luther regarding the way believers are called to practice confession nor with the sacramental nature of confession. The reason behind Calvin's disagreement with Luther regarding the classification of confession as a sacrament was that it was too similar to that which transpired in the life of the believer during baptism. Baptism, according to Calvin, was the sacrament of penance while confession was an extension of the baptismal covenant. Similarly, confession accompanies the Eucharist as a liturgical event, yet the Lord's Supper was and is regarded as sacramental while confession is not. This was due to the fact that absolution for sins was received through grace prior to a believer's partaking in Communion and not in the act of confession. This meant that confession had neither solidified sacramental place in baptism nor in the Eucharistic celebration.

While seen as an important aspect of the Christian life, confession was not understood in

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3 Luther, Small Catechism, 44.
4 Thurian, Confession, 25.
5 Thurian, Confession, 25.
6 Calvin, Institutes, 4.15.4; 4.19.17
7 Catechism of the Catholic Church, 402; Fousek, The Church in a Changing World, 40-41.
the same high regard as baptism and the Eucharist; hence, confession was no longer labeled as an official sacrament by the Protestant Church.

Calvin, who employs the words of Chrysostom in his 1559 *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, addresses this topic by calling Christians to private confession within one’s soul rather than face a judgmental public, noting that God alone forgives so God alone is worthy of hearing one confess his or her sins.  

Calvin states, “There [in Scripture] one method of confessing is prescribed; since it is the Lord who forgives, forgets, and wipes away sins, to him let us confess them, that we may obtain pardon.”

Calvin thereby states that the believer only needed to confess his or her sins to God directly. Neither the people of the Church nor the clergy needed to be present in the individual’s confession, regardless of their ecclesial role in representing God’s presence on earth. If the people were hurt by one’s sins, it appeared that these sinful transgressions were a matter that would remain between members of community. When it comes to failure to adhere to God’s will, confessing and admitting one’s sins remained between God and the individual believer without need for a mediator.

Proposing a paradigmatic shift in the practice of confession by stating that believers did not need a mediator between the individual and God, Calvin emphasized that Christians were not to dismiss confession entirely. In the life and practice of the believer at that time, there remained a strong call to confession. Calvin tells believers, “It is proper that, by confession of our misery, we should manifest the mercy of our God

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9 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.4.8.

10 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.4.9.

11 Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, 362.
both among ourselves and before the whole world.\footnote{12} If this act of confession was not to take place before clergy, what form was it to take? How would the sinner confess to God, and what was its true role of confession in the life of the believer? Calvin offers some guidance, stating, "It is proper that this mode of [public] confession should both be ordinary in the Church, and also be specially employed on extraordinary occasions, when the people in common happen to have falling into any fault."\footnote{13}

In spite of the differing interpretations regarding confession in the protestant Reformers, there were other reasons why confession moved from the realm of public or private practice to individual, silent confession. During the Reformation, confession, which the Roman Catholic Church continued to regard as a sacramental act, was still an important aspect of every Christian's life that had a physical manifestation in the life of the believer. Confession was seen as an activity that elicited a change in the individual's life, not a silent thought or prayer that the believer could utter in the midst of her or his daily chores. The sacrament of "Penance and Reconciliation" falls under the category of "the sacrament of conversion because it makes sacramentally present Jesus' call to conversion, the first step in returning to the Father from whom one has strayed in sin."\footnote{14}

This sacrament also regards the act of confession as part of reconciliation "since the disclosure or confessing of sins to a priest is an essential element of this sacrament. In a profound sense it is also a 'confession'—acknowledgement and praise—of the holiness of God and of his mercy toward sinful man."\footnote{15}

\footnote{12} Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, 3.4.10.

\footnote{13} Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, 3.4.11.

\footnote{14} \textit{Catechism of the Catholic Church}, 396-397.

\footnote{15} \textit{Catechism of the Catholic Church}, 397.
In the years following the Reformation, thanks in part to Calvin’s influence and in spite of the Roman Catholic and Luther’s understanding, confession was no longer regarded by all Christians as a sacrament and thus was not established as a part of every Christian’s spiritual life. In the years after Luther’s death, Lutherans would come to view confession differently than the Reformer. Killian McDonnell tells the “reason why penance did not qualify for sacramental status within Lutheranism: there is no divinely instituted sign. Penance has a promise, but no outward visible sign.”\textsuperscript{16} It was expected that, upon confessing one’s sins and returning to fellowship with God, a noticeable change in the believer’s behavior would emerge, yet such a change was not always visible. Confession as an act that would lead to the conversion of the believer back to Christ was not accepted by all as evident, and thus it was not recognized as an “outward visible sign.” Lacking the presence of an “outward sign,” confession held a specific roll in liturgy, but the Reformed branch of the Church would never again regard it as a sacrament.\textsuperscript{17}

It should be noted however, that, along with the Reformed tradition, the Roman Catholic Church continues to recognize the liturgical aspect of confession, and thus they hold strongly to the need for an ecclesial and public manifestation. However, there was an additional component in the act confession in the Roman Catholic Church. For the Roman Catholic Church, the emphasis of confession remained sacramental. Even today this designation continues to keep the Catholic and Reformed practices to some extent separate.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{16} McDonnell, “Luther and Trent on Penance,” 264.

\textsuperscript{17} Peter Fink, “The Sacrament of Penance as a Liturgical Event,” \textit{Liturgy Notes} (Fall 2004): 214.
In response to the changes in the way individuals understood the practice of confession emerging from the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church was compelled to address the topic. This was done during the Council of Trent. The nineteenth ecumenical council which took place in the Austrian city of Trent from December 1545 to December 1563 addressed the doctrines of the Church and responded to the “heresies” of the Protestant church.\(^\text{19}\) The Council of Trent was also called to respond to Martin Luther and other reformers and their claims of abuses performed by the Catholic Church. One of the main emphases behind the Council of Trent’s words regarding confession was that the clergy are the ones who the Roman Catholic Church regards as possessing the keys to the kingdom, and thus they possess the power to pronounce forgiveness. In order to do so, the clergy would need to know the acts committed by the sinner.\(^\text{20}\) This tends to once more portray the believer as an individual in need of a mediator between the believer and God, and the hearer of one’s confession, entrusted by Christ to bind and lose, must pronounce forgiveness.

The Council of Trent states that general confession, or confessing one’s \textit{sin} (not \textit{sins}), does not suffice for the same reasons stated above: the clergy cannot properly pronounce forgiveness without knowledge of the specific acts.\(^\text{21}\) The documents describe hiding one’s sins from the clergy like that of a wounded individual hiding one’s wound from a physician.\(^\text{22}\) The physician is not able to assess the situation nor is he or she able

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\item[\textsuperscript{18}] Fink, “The Sacrament of Penance as a Liturgical Event,” 214.
\item[\textsuperscript{19}] \textit{The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Ecumenical Council of Trent}, 1-11.
\item[\textsuperscript{20}] \textit{The Canons and Decrees of Trent}, 97.
\item[\textsuperscript{21}] \textit{The Canons and Decrees of Trent}, 97.
\item[\textsuperscript{22}] \textit{The Canons and Decrees of Trent}, 98.
\end{itemize}
to properly tend to the well-being of the person if the physician does not fully understand the nature of the harm done to the individual’s body. Similarly, sins that harm the believer in ways that may not appear bodily present still must be addressed by the believer, lest they go unattended and lead to further infection of the believer. Moreover, one could take this analogy one step further and point out the dangers of going to an individual who does not have the medical education necessary to assess one’s needs or properly treat the individual’s wounds. Such misguided care could only lead to greater danger and have a potentially more deadly outcome than the original wound. From the perspective of the Council of Trent, then, it is imperative that one confess one’s sins before trained clergy in order that the believer’s sins are addressed completely and properly and also that the believer may move beyond his or her sins.

The Council of Trent reinforced the practice of private confession while at the same time acknowledged the historical practice of public confession. Both practices were deemed appropriate in bringing the penitent believer closer to reconciliation; however if a believer had to confess in private it was to be to a priest and only a priest. Regardless of the manner in which one confessed, either privately to a member of the clergy or publicly before the ecclesial body, a believer was to practice confession annually, most often during the Church season of Lent.

One can see that the Reformers and the Roman Catholic Church did not agree upon who should hear the confessions of believers or how confession should take place. However, what was agreed upon was that confession was and is an important part of the...
believer's life and faith. Biblically and historically, confession of sins by believers was and is integral in the acceptance of grace and the subsequent embracing of the reconciliation found in Christ. Despite all the practical changes that took place throughout history, confession remains a fundamental tenet of Christianity today. It was, in the past and is today, a necessity for every believer in his or her life and relationship with God and the Christian community. Confession continues to be a means by which one may recognize sins and accept grace. It is grace that bridges the gap between God and humans, thus confession serves to help the sinner move beyond his or her acts, allowing the believer to instead focus on God’s grace.

The first step toward reconciliation is that the sinner acknowledges, through confession, the harmful acts that have been committed, thus, helping the believer to move beyond the pollution and guilt which arise from sin and harm the believer’s faith. Sin separates the Christian from God and the faith community while grace forgives. Confession is the means by which the believer moves toward acceptance of forgiveness through grace and re-admittance into the People of God. This movement from sin through grace to acceptance flows from God, through Scripture, and into the life of the believer:

As the paschal mystery unfolds within the sacrament of penance and reconciliation, each of these four liturgical pieces is given specific shape. God’s assessment of sin and forgiveness is expressed in the Scriptures. Through acknowledgement of sin, the Christian links himself or herself with Christ as he or she surrenders all. Then God speaks a new transformation as words of absolution are proclaimed. As a result, Christians are reconciled with each other as they are reconciled with God.26

Tertullian states that, when “you cast yourself at the brethren’s knees, you are handling Christ, you are entreating Christ. In like manner, when they shed tears over you,

it is Christ who suffers, Christ who prays to the father for mercy."

Confession to another believer, done within a faithful community, is practiced as though one is confessing to Christ, and Christ is the one whom believers should seek as hearer of their confession. The Roman Catholic Church reminds, "During his public life, Jesus not only forgave sins, but also made plain the effect of this forgiveness: he reintegrated forgiven sinners into the community of the People of God from which sin had alienated or even excluded them." Just as Christ’s pronounced forgiveness to individuals and demonstrated the reconciliation of the sinner with God, so too did Christ’s grace act as reconciliation to the individual’s community. Having been reconciled, one may move beyond the guilt of sin and know that he or she is no longer regarded as an enemy of God.

As stated above and as historically present throughout the church, following his resurrection and ascension, it is not solely Christ Jesus who is called to hear the confession of sins reconciling humankind to Christ and community. Again, the Roman Catholic Church reminds, "In imparting to his apostles his own power to forgive sins the Lord gives them the authority to reconcile sinners with the Church." It must be noted however, that the office of hearer of confession was not bestowed upon just anyone at first, but to the Apostles and those with authority in the Church. With such a commission from Christ, one is therefore assured that the call is not only for the believer to confess


28 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 402.

29 Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 579.

30 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 402.
but also for the one who hears confession and stands as the physical representation of God’s grace present in the world to share in the believer’s faith and dependence on God.

Confession not only serves the individual’s relationship with God and community but also seeks to better the individual in multiple ways for the days, years, and even eternity to come. For instance, “The confession (or disclosure) of sins, even from a simply human point of view, frees us and facilitates our reconciliation with others. Through such an admission man looks squarely at the sins, takes responsibility for them, and thereby opens himself again to God and to the communion of the Church in order to make a new future possible.” Here, it is safe to say Luther would agree; however, he adds that one also needs to confess in a manner that acknowledges the guilt of all sins. This is not limited to the sins of which the believer is aware but includes those of which the believer is unaware.

One of the strongest texts supporting the theological argument for mutual confession of sins found in James 5:16: “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.” The Greek word for the phrase “each other” in this passage is ἀλλὰ λοις which directs us to confess to one another “mutually” or “by turns” or also “reciprocally.” Based on each of these definitions, one may recognize that the call to confession is a mutual call to both parties to express their solidarity in dependence upon God and one another. With this sense of a mutual call to confession and reciprocity, each

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31 Catechism of the Catholic Church, 405.
32 Luther, Small Catechism, 44.
person may humbly confess his or her sins honestly, without facing ridicule or judgment. This reciprocity seeks to remove any apprehension to approach another in Christian community.\textsuperscript{34}

Here, we may begin to further understand the Reformer John Calvin’s objection to the sacrament of confession practiced in the Roman Catholic Church: “but those only can confess reciprocally who are fit to hear confession.”\textsuperscript{35} If one does not confess to a fellow believer, one should not hear another confess. Had the practice that the one listening to a confessor also sought reconciliation through the act of mutual confession traditionally been part of the Roman Catholic Church, such reciprocity would exist today. The practice among the Roman Catholic Church, however, remained one-sided and thus perpetuated an ecclesial hierarchy, raising one individual above another. This was due to the fact that the bishop was considered the visible head of the church and, as such, remains the one who principally has the power to pronounce forgiveness through Christ’s commission to the Apostles.\textsuperscript{36} Priests are the bishop’s “collaborators” in so far as they receive their commission either from the bishop or from the Pope, the Bishop of Rome, according to Church law.\textsuperscript{37}

Theologically speaking, the confession of one’s sins is simply a necessity in one’s relationship with God and with his or her own faith community. As none are worthy of the grace bestowed upon them, each believer should strive to live a life free from sin, as stated above. Such a life truly represents God’s will actualized on earth. Whether this is

\begin{quotation}
\textsuperscript{34} Presbyterian Book of Order, W 6.3009.
\textsuperscript{35} Calvin, Institutes, 3.4.6.
\textsuperscript{36} Catechism of the Catholic Church, 408.
\textsuperscript{37} Catechism of the Catholic Church, 408.
\end{quotation}
possible for the believer or not, it remains the goal of each Christian. The way in which one may move beyond sin is to recognize sin’s presence in his or her life and to confess sin aloud so that it may no longer remain hidden.

Confession calls the individual to accept that his or her sins are a violation of God’s will. Confession calls the individual to accountability in his or her community. Confession calls the sinner to expose that which has perhaps been self-justified and negotiated to the point that sins are no longer regarded by the individual as sins. Through negotiation and self-justification, individuals begin to attribute worth to sins, making one sin worse or less harmful than another. This gradation of sin offers solace to the sinner in that his or her sins are not as bad as another’s sins; thus his or her sins are not worthy of the guilt he or she may otherwise feel and, therefore, not worthy of being confessed before community or worse yet, before God. This is perhaps a lingering result of the first few centuries during which the three capital sins of idolatry, murder, and sexual sins, were not proclaimed forgiven by the ecclesial body. When an individual begins to see his or her sins as less serious than a neighbor’s sins, the believer has fallen into a dangerous spiral of ignoring sins and even accepting sins as inescapable. Knowing that grace will abound, such logic gives the sinner no reason to move beyond a sinful act into repentance and reconciliation.

By contrast, when the words of confession flow from the sinner’s mouth, they are revealed to another believer seeking God’s grace and thus revealed to the world for what they are. One’s sins are no longer hidden, and, having been exposed, the believer addresses them, thus reconciling the individual to his or her community. Sin no longer enslaves the believer because “Sin that has been spoken and confessed has lost all of its
power.” If sin is the bondage by which humankind is enslaved, silence will never lead to freedom. The only means by which to break the hold sin has on an individual, even the individual who lives under God’s grace, is to confess so that he or she may move forward, beyond that which has held them in captivity and despair. Confession, therefore, is necessary for all people, and to avoid humiliation, confession should take place within a loving Christian community between believers. By giving voice to one’s sins and seeing the listener hear the words confessed, the sinner visibly sees the impact his or her sins have on creation, community, and, through the earthly representation found in the body of Christ made up by the Church, on God. We turn to the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: “The sins that were acknowledged helped the sinner find true community with other believers in Jesus Christ.” The individual has true community in two ways: one, as a sinner among other sinners and, two, as a sinner who is forgiven by God’s grace among other forgiven sinners.

The question then arises from Bonhoeffer: “Why is it often easier for us to acknowledge our sins before God than before another believer? ... another Christian is sinful, as are we, knowing from personal experience the night of secret sin. Should we not find it easier to go to one another than to the holy God?” In other words, should confession not flow more freely from one sinner to another than to God who alone is sinless? Should individuals not seek solace in the comfort of our fellow human beings

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38 Bonhoeffer, Life Together, 110.

39 Barth, CD, IV/1, 578-579

40 Bonhoeffer, Life Together, 110.

41 Bonhoeffer, Life Together, 112.
who share in our same fallen nature? Why then do believers fear to bring their sins humbly to another, yet so willingly enter into a time of silent prayer before God?

Bonhoeffer suggests, "We must ask ourselves whether we often have not been deluding ourselves about our confession of sin to God—whether we have not instead been confessing our sins to ourselves and also forgiving ourselves." If one only confesses to him or herself, no reconciliation takes place because neither is there anyone in the community to pronounce forgiveness nor is anyone present to acknowledge any divine forgiveness. The sinner remains bound in his or her sin, which very likely stems from the idea that redemption is itself an internal aspect of the believer and that God’s redemptive work in the world is private. The confession of one’s sins calls the believer to admit to the world, and to the believer him or herself, that he or she is in need of God and the community.

There are times in the life of the believer that one finds self-denial present. Through one’s own self-denial, the believer seeks to negotiate that which is actually sin and that which is not. The danger of mistaking one’s sins as having no significance renders the sinful acts not confessed and, therefore, retained not only by the sinner but also by the community. If one has denied that his or her acts are sinful, or if one has forgiven one’s self, the sinner sees no need for confession and has, in essence, forgiven him or herself. Self-forgiveness never breaks the believer free from her or his bondage to sin, leaving the sinner bound. The confession of one’s specific sins eliminates any self-

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42 Bonhoeffer, Life Together, 113.


44 Barth, CD, IV/1, 579.
denial, self-forgiveness, and even self-justification that may exist. Self-confession and self-justification can neither lead the believer to reconciliation with his or her community nor will it help the sinner move beyond transgression to embracing forgiveness. The ability to move on and subsequently overcome one's sinfulness is prevented by the sinner's desire to negotiate each violation against God's will and regard the sin as something less than what it is. This act of negotiation, in turn, makes it easy to deny the need for reconciliation, or worse yet, deny the need for grace and reject God's gift of grace.45

Mutual confession of one's sins to a fellow believer or believers, then, prevents such self-justification and self-confession, while at the same time preventing an ecclesial hierarchy from coming into play. It is again the ἀλληλούς that brings about reconciliation in the midst of community. When both parties confess mutually to one another, one cannot hold another in higher regard than him or herself. Both humbly admit his or her sinful nature to the other only to hear the transgressions of a fellow sinner. Two aspects must be acknowledged: one, that all people sin and fall short of the glory God (Romans 3:23) and, two, that there is no gradation of sin (Matthew 3:29).46 Thus, any sin, of which none are free from committing, is damaging to the believer's relationship with God. These two aspects combine to guard the confessor from any apprehension about confession to a fellow believer. One cannot in honesty and in knowing one's self, stand in judgment of another after participating in mutual confession. All people have the need to

45 Barth, _CD_, II/2 449-450.

46 Matthew (12:31-32), Luke (12:10), and Mark (3:29) speak of the "unforgivable sin" of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. According to Scripture all other sins and violations of God's will, save this one, are therefore regarded as beyond the scope of human forgiveness. See also Karl Barth, _Church Dogmatics_, II/2 204; IV/2 322; also II/2 458-506 regarding the death and sin of the individual Judas Iscariot. See also _Catechism of the Catholic Church_ which states, "There is no offense, however serious, that the Church cannot forgive" 278.
confess, and, with the ever present grace of God, all people may seek reconciliation with one’s own community through confession and thus strive toward overcoming a life of repeating the same sins again and again. Knowing this, one no longer needs to fear public humiliation by standing before his or her own community confessing his or her sins.

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47 Barth, CD, II/2 449-450.
Chapter Five

Pride and Humiliation as the Prevention of the Confession of Sins

One of the most prevalent dangers plaguing confession throughout history, and which has consequently participated in the misunderstanding of the theology behind the confession of sins, is the fear of humiliation. Fearing how others will view the believer once the sins are made known, he or she hesitates to engage in confession. This is because individuals fear that confession will plunge the sinner into feelings of humiliation or shame from the guilt of having committed the sinful acts. Fear of humiliation therefore prevents the believer from venturing to utter her or his confession. This fear prevents the believer from admitting his or her sins and, through confession, letting loose the grip of sin and empowering the penitent individual to accept the grace of reconciliation from God and from one’s community. The question that one must address is: what is humiliation and how does one overcome the fear of humiliation so that he or she may participate in the theologically essential practice of public confession?

Humiliation, as defined by *Webster’s New World Dictionary*, is “to hurt the pride or dignity or by causing to be or seem foolish.”\(^1\) Similarly, shame is defined as “a painful feeling of having lost the respect of others because of the improper behavior or incompetence, etc. of oneself or of someone that is close to or associated with.”\(^2\)

Humiliation and shame, rooted in pride, are each the result of the individual feeling

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\(^1\) *Webster’s New World Dictionary*, ed. Michael Anges (Cleveland, OH: Wiley Publishing Inc, 2009), 695.

\(^2\) *Webster’s New World Dictionary*, 1317
completely physically or emotionally exposed to the world. The Christian may experience shame and humiliation when the sinful acts of his or her past become apparent to a fellow believer or to God. This is most often due to the fact that the individual is not ready for others to know the details of the events or the nature of the sinful acts at that particular time. This is a dangerous excuse for any believer because there is a distinct possibility that she or he may wish that the information is never made known. He or she may prefer that all parties, including the believer him or herself, forget any and all knowledge of sins.

Feelings of humiliation could emerge from three points of origin. Humiliation may stem from the guilt of the acts themselves, from the sins being revealed by an outside party or witness, or it may come about from the believer verbalizing the sinful deeds. Regardless, once the sins have been exposed, the sinner may feel a sense of humiliation. Could one’s practice of confession, for instance private confession as opposed to public confession, lead to less humiliation for the believer? Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book *Life Together* admits that, “Confession in the presence of another believer is the most profound kind of humiliation.” To stand before another and confess one’s sins is humiliating, and this profound kind of humiliation can inflict pain upon the believer. It is a pain that emerges from the unadulterated honesty of one believer.

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5 Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 111.
confessing to another, both parties knowing what is expected by God.⁶ Such pain is often times avoided.⁷

Studies have sought to identify the stage at which individuals first feel shame.⁸ Many times the individual attributes the shame felt later in life to an experience when the individual first realized that his or her body is exposed to the world when societal expectations require covering.⁹ Examining this, one cannot help but see the significance of the fall narrative found in Genesis. At the end of creation, both man and woman stand before one another and the world, neither person being clothed but not feeling any shame or humiliation (Genesis 2:25). It was after the woman’s dialogue with the serpent, and after she, along with the man, had partaken in the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, that shame first enters into human conscience (Genesis 3:1-7). Realizing that they are naked, the man and woman attempt to hide and cover their nakedness. It is after understanding that they are naked that the woman and man regard themselves as exposed or vulnerable, and only after they realize that they are naked do they find it necessary to hide themselves (Genesis 3:10). In essence, they attempt to hide an element of God’s good creation, their naked bodies, from the view of the world around them, but they also seek to hide themselves from God.

The shame and humiliation felt does not come from the fact that the two are naked; it emerges from the realization that they are naked. The pair attempt to conceal

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⁶ Micah 6:8; Matthew 22:36-39.
⁷ Bonhoeffer, Life Together, 111.
what they perceive as the source of their humiliation, their nakedness, even though it is an apparent symptom of the sinful acts, not the cause. One may very well see the similarities in hiding his or her nakedness from fellow human beings, who all have the potential at one time or another to be naked, and one's attempt to hide his or her sinful acts from fellow sinners.\(^\text{10}\) I will discuss this in greater detail below, however, before doing so I will discuss a few more thoughts on the role of shame and humiliation in the life of the believer.

The root of humiliation is difficult to pinpoint because it is not a feeling that emerges without a real or perceived cause. Humiliation and shame come about when some aspect of the individual’s being—physical, mental, or emotional—is exposed.\(^\text{11}\) This is true even when feelings of humiliation or shame are unwarranted, like the man and the woman being naked in the Genesis passage. Such feelings of shame remain the result of that which was hidden or unrecognized by one’s fellow human beings becoming revealed.\(^\text{12}\) Social Psychologist Erik Erikson notes that there has been insufficient study of shame and humiliation due to the close link between the two with feelings of guilt.\(^\text{13}\)

When an individual is guilty of an act, he or she may demonstrate feelings of shame or humiliation, yet shame is not limited to the guilty alone. Some individuals feel a sense of shame even when there is no guilt present. Shame and humiliation are therefore ambiguous because, as one may be very distinctly either guilty or not in the eye of

\(^\text{10}\) Binau, ""Holding on and Letting Go,"" 25.


\(^\text{12}\) Donald Capps, \textit{Agents of Hope: A Pastoral Psychology}, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 125.

society or societal law, there is no set social distinction regarding when a person should feel humiliated or not.\textsuperscript{14} Such ambiguity demonstrates that individuals risk feelings of humiliation when such feelings are not warranted.

Humiliation, in a sense, causes the believer to feel subhuman, yet historically, feeling less than another in a social environment was not always detrimental to the human psyche.\textsuperscript{15} It was through the mid-eighteenth century that the term "humiliation" simply meant to hold another down to a lower social status.\textsuperscript{16} It was after the mid 1700's, however, that the term began to describe a violation of one's dignity.\textsuperscript{17} Prior to this, being treated as though one were inferior was normal given the hierarchy of society. Very few questioned the social order, let alone one's place within the established social order.\textsuperscript{18} As an underling within human interaction, an individual was subject to certain treatment which at times sought to hold one down in his or her place in society.\textsuperscript{19} Even if those of lower status were to rise up and overthrow those in power, the hierarchy remained because one role in the social strata was simply replaced by another.\textsuperscript{20} Similarly, with regards to faith, one may see the Creator-creature relationship as one of hierarchy in which humankind has its place in relation with the divine. Humans are inferior to God, and it is imperative for the relationship between God and humanity that humankind not

\textsuperscript{14} Loder, \textit{The Logic of the Spirit}, 148 n17.


\textsuperscript{16} Lindner, "Why There Can Be No Conflict Resolution," 165.

\textsuperscript{17} Lindner, "Why There Can Be No Conflict Resolution," 165; Capps, \textit{Agents of Hope}, 125.

\textsuperscript{18} Lindner, "Why There Can Be No Conflict Resolution," 166.

\textsuperscript{19} Lindner, "Why There Can Be No Conflict Resolution," 166.

\textsuperscript{20} Lindner, "Why There Can Be No Conflict Resolution," 166.
attempt to attain equality with God. A fundamental difference is that, while inferior to God, humans are not derided or humiliated by God.

It was after the 1750s that the type of humiliation which strips a human of his or her dignity became more common. This was because the role of individuals and the adherence to hierarchy had shifted, and individuals were no longer permanently relegated to one specific place in society. Interacting with individuals as though each person belonged in a specific place in society was not universally accepted as before, and individuals were recognized as fellow humans. Humiliation therefore became less an element of hierarchy and started to manifest as more dehumanizing behavior. It is this type of humiliation, making the individual to feel less human than all others, that would prevent the believer from confessing his or her sins before God or before the community of fellow believers. Humiliation makes the believer feel both inadequate before God and that the believer pales in comparison to those around her or him.

To a more extreme degree, according to Erickson, the humiliation or shame felt by an individual is the result of one’s feelings of rage toward one’s own self. Many times it is thought that humiliation is the result of someone proud who, upon having his or her acts exposed, falls from grace. According to Erickson and other social psychologists, this could not be further from the truth. Shame and humiliation are the result of the individual’s lack of ability to love his or her self once one’s the sinful deeds have been made known. The sinner is not proud and shamed but is rather self-conscious.

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of his or her acts. 25 These feelings are the result of the individual recognizing that which exists within his or her being that is “evil” in the sight of God or in the eyes of those in society. Realizing that evil exists within the individual and manifests itself in sinful behavior, the believer feels anger toward him or herself.

Encountering the theories of these social psychologists, one may ask whether it is the evil that is present in the individual that brings about shame and humiliation or whether the believer is humiliated when the manifestation of the evil through the individual’s sins are exposed to the world. It would appear that the latter is true. It is not the realization of evil or the sins that demonstrate the evil present within humans themselves but the revealing of the sinful act that elicits feelings of humiliation. 26 By revealing one’s sins, the believer demonstrates that he or she acknowledges what he or she truly is to God and to those in the community. Sin is revealed to the community and admitted by the believer to him or herself as well as to God. Recognition and admission of one’s sinful state is difficult for the believer to accept, especially when she or he is called to perfection (Matthew 5:48). The recognition that the he or she is anything but perfect, thanks to his or her sins, forces the believer to realize that he or she will not live up to what the believer may hope. 27

It is important that the believer understand that, while created in God’s image and beloved, humanity as a whole falls victim to its own sinful tendencies. Recognizing this fact is humbling but doing so also ensures that the believer is honest with him or herself.

25 Erikson, Childhood and Society, 252.
26 Loder, 143; B. B. Cunningham, “The Will to Forgive: A Pastoral Theological View of Forgiving,” Journal of Pastoral Care 39, no. 2 (June 1985): 144
27 Capps, Agents of Hope, 123.
Only when the believer is honest with him or herself can he or she be honest with others, whether in the community or before God. Sadly, however, humility is not always as liberating as it should be.

Realizing that one is prone to evil and, due to this evil, that one is unable to live a life free from sin, individuals choose to hide or internalize their sins in attempt to avoid humiliation. To avoid humiliation is neither the denial of the evil that is an element of the individual’s being nor an attempt to repress evil; it is a denial of the sinful acts which emerge from the evil. Again, one may recall Paul’s words in Scripture that no individual is free from sin, save Christ alone (Romans 2:23). No one is able to boast of living a sinless life due to the evil within the believer, and the same evil is present in one’s sinful deeds. What then is left to hide? The sinner mistakenly attempts to deny that which has taken place in his or her life that would divide him or her from God or from the community. The denial of these sinful acts simply means that the sinner attempts to cover them with excuses or keep them inside his or her conscience rather than releasing or “loosing” sins.

By internalizing one’s sinful deeds, one in essence demonstrates that the individual sees her or himself different than all other humans. The sinner falsely believes that he or she is alone as a sinner and that no other human will understand the sinner’s predicament. When his or her sins are revealed, the believer fears that others will either judge the sinner or that they will simply be unable to relate. Sadly, the internalization or retention of sins does not help the sinner reconcile him or herself with God, with the community, or, as one may now see, with the sinner him or herself.

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28 Cunningham, “The Will to Forgive,” 144.
When one retains his or her own sins, he or she cannot recognize the forgiveness present in God’s grace and in the community of God’s people. Thus, the fear of humiliation or a sense of shame prevents the individual from being able to move beyond his or her sinful acts to see the grace which is abundant to God’s beloved.  

Failing to embrace grace thrusts the sinner into greater attempts to hide what he or she truly is in the hopes of further avoiding the potential humiliation. Here, we see how twisted one’s logic may become when dealing with one’s own sin. Humiliation and shame are not about the sinner, however, but rather about the sinful act itself. As noted above in the Genesis account of creation, it was not the man and the woman’s naked state that caused them shame or humiliation, it was the sinful defiance of God’s will that brought about the shame. The instant they realized that they were naked, they felt the need to cover themselves, but the realization was the result of defying God’s command that they not eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Such is the humiliation felt when one sins; one seeks to cover one’s deeds or even one’s self from exposure, but when the sin is made known to the world, the sinner experiences feelings of humiliation.

Recognizing the impact humiliation has on the sinner, one cannot help but wonder if the act of confession has been forced to bear the burden of humiliation by mistake for hundreds of years. It is not the confession of sins that causes humiliation but rather the sinful acts themselves. The act of confession reveals the deeds which have been done or left undone as sin; however, confession liberates the believer from the humiliating acts. Confession, therefore, does not shame the sinner; confession liberates the believer.

Misplacing the blame of sin has caused believers to shy away from confessing their sins.

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not only before the community but also before God. It is necessary to correct this misunderstanding if sinners are to comprehend and embrace that the confession of sins, whether private or public, is liberating, not humiliating. In order to do so, the believer must acknowledge that liberation is rooted in humiliation.

The element of humiliation upon which the liberation of the sinner exists is the humiliation of Jesus Christ on behalf of the sinner. The words of Isaiah 53 prophesy the atoning work of Christ in one of the most public and humiliating means of execution. He was one “despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted” (Isaiah 53:3-4). The public rejection and the humiliation of the crucifixion described by the Prophet demonstrate that the humiliation experienced by the suffering servant is done so that the people whom the servant loves will not have to suffer humiliation. The prophet goes on, “But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:5-6).

The believer, who recognizes the atoning acts and Christ’s suffering done on behalf of the individual for the sins he or she is called to confess, understands that Christ suffered humiliation on humankind’s behalf. This is demonstrated in the words of the Heidelberg Catechism on the Lord’s Day 15 which points out that Christ suffered God’s

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anger, which was directed at humanity during his life but “especially at the end.” The writer of Acts tells us that “In his humiliation he was deprived of justice” (Acts 8:33). Scripture also states, “And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:8). This was done so that the believer, in exposing that which separates him or her from God, would not need to feel humiliated but rather that the individual would be able to reestablish a loving relationship with God. It was not Christ’s place to do so, but it was only the sinless incarnation of God, who was both fully human and fully God, who could accomplish such salvific acts. The humiliation experienced by Christ, just or not, is what empowers the believer to stand before God and before the faithful community in confession.

Christ’s humiliation on behalf of the sinner and his or her sins demonstrates that the believer does not ever need to ever feel humiliation when his or her sins are confessed or exposed.

While humiliation may be linked to the acts of sin through the atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross, one cannot forget that confession must not lead to the sinner’s spiritual demise, being distanced from God forever. The Lord’s Days 2 and 3 of the Heidelberg Catechism state explicitly that the believer lives in misery, which is the result of the sinner’s tendency to hate God and neighbor. Thus one asks, is this miserable state one of humiliation or one of humility?

Humility is not the same as humiliation, despite the misconception that it relegates individuals to an inferior role. While it may appear this way to some, humility

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32 Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions, 28.

33 Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions, 14-15.
is the acceptance of one's own imperfections. The definition of humility is “the quality or state of being humble,” while humble is defined as acting in a manner that is not haughty, proud, or arrogant. When one confesses out of humility as opposed to humiliation, the believer faces who he or she truly is. The element of understanding who one truly is has strong implications for the believer, reminding him or her of God’s presence and the individual’s place in relationship with God.

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” writes the Psalmist (Psalm 110:10). The believer, in relation with God, is subject to God’s divine judgment. The fear of God that the believer experiences is not a cowering fear of a sinner awaiting her or his death sentence; rather, it is a fear that recognizes who God is in relation to the sinner and the harm done to the divine-human relationship. Knowing his or her deeds even before confession, the believer recognizes that justice calls for consequences to follow the sinful acts committed. The believer, recognizing God’s great love, fears causing further division between her or himself and God. Fear of God is healthy in the life of a sinner, as it is the fear that compels the sinner to confess and to turn away from sin.

35 Furey, So I’m Not Perfect, 7.
36 Webster’s New World Dictionary, 696.
37 Webster’s New World Dictionary, 695.
38 Bowman, The Dynamics of Confession, 71.
39 Baur, Frequent Confession, 174.
40 Baur, Frequent Confession, 174-175.
41 Baur, Frequent Confession, 177.
42 Baur, Frequent Confession, 175.
The Divine-human relationship is not one of humiliation or degradation; it is a relationship of humility and humble, loving worship. The believer must take caution to never elevate him or herself beyond that of a fallen creature, however. While there is reason to rejoice in God’s grace, the believer, even at his or her best, is never more than a ransomed sinner. This must serve as a reminder that the believer must guard against pride, as pride may cause the individual to overlook or neglect to confess one or many sins.

Scripture seeks to remind the believer that it is through humility and a humble heart that the believer is freed from that which might have at one time led to humiliation. Scripture states “For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (Matthew 23:12; also Luke 14:11; 18:14). These words are echoed in the books of James and 1 Peter: “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up” (James 4:10) and “Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time” (1 Peter 5:6). Each of these verses informs the believer that it is to her or his benefit to be humble before the Lord. Such humility demonstrates that the believer not only accepts his or her place subordinate to God but also that his or her sins are an additional element which divides God from God’s people. The humble sinner is in need of being lifted up, but it is God who will lift the humble sinner up by grace. The writer of James states, “But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble’” (James 4:6).

Humility is the demonstration of a well-examined conscience and the motivation of the contrite sinner’s desire for reconciliation with God and the community. Through

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humility, the individual is able to move closer to God. Humility not only benefits the believer who seeks relationship with God but also with the entire community surrounding the believer. The humility of a believer calls her or him to recognize her or his place in relation with God. Similarly, humility calls the believer to recognize her or his place along with and alongside, not above or below, others. While pride and humiliation both place the focus on the individual, humility focuses the individual’s attention on “the other.” The epistle to the church at Ephesus adds this reminder: “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love” (Ephesians 4:2).

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44 Furey, So I'm Not Perfect, 7.


46 Wengst, Humility: Solidarity of the Humiliated, 53.
Chapter Six

The Rhetoric of the Confession of Sins

The goal of a believer’s humble confession of sins before God and one’s fellow believers should be to aspire to nothing less than complete reconciliation—reconciliation with God, who is Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, and with the ecclesial community. Arguments that public confession is harmful to the believer’s faith due to humiliation misinterpret the true intention of the act and, in so doing, remove an important element of the believer’s faith. Confession, both public and private, should strengthen the believer, not render him or her humiliated before God or neighbor. While intended by the Church as a practical element in the life of a faithful believer, confession is deeply rooted in both Scripture and in theology. Due to this intimate connection, how the believer enters into confession and what is said during confession is significant to the reconciliation of one’s faith and relationship with God and the body of Christ present in one’s ecclesial community. When confession is done before a fellow believer, the body of Christ is present, and where the body of Christ is present, so too is God.\(^1\) As one confesses his or her sins before God through a fellow believer, sin is not allowed to hide within the human heart or conscience. In confession, the believer acts in confidence and freedom in relation with God and community.\(^2\) Doing so, the penitent sinner is empowered to accept the full measure of grace necessary for reconciliation with God and with the sinner’s fellow human beings.

\(^1\) Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 110.

While some aspects of life do not take much thought to complete, like brushing one’s teeth, one should not enter into confession lightly (or any faith practice for that matter) but instead with proper preparation and intent. Confession of one’s sins should become a habit among all Christians; however, it must never become an act that is performed without thought or awareness of that which is taking place. Confession must be an intentional act of faith. Confession must never simply be a random recitation of what the believer recalls as sinful behavior (or simply what the believer is willing to admit). The believer is called to a lifelong practice of participation in the confession of his or her sins, each time giving proper effort in the preparation prior to confessing. The believer must always practice such a process with God and God’s people at the center of his or her confession and with the heartfelt desire for reconciliation.

The act of confession itself contains three stages. Each stage contains theologically important steps in examining one’s role as a believer who is divided from God and one’s community by sin, yet seeking reconciliation with both. In the first stage, the believer’s focus is on his or her act or acts of sin against God and, in many instances, against one’s community. This includes examination of one’s conscience and recognition of the attitudes and events that compel the individual to confess his or her sins. Following the believer’s self-examination of sin, he or she admits the wrong or wrongs done through confession. Finally, having admitted one’s sins within his or her conscience and heart and having confessed them aloud before God and the community, the believer is free to go forth and demonstrate his or her intent to live a life free of sin.

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3 Baur, *Frequent Confession*, 23

Before one steps forward to engage in confessing his or her sins, the believer must examine him or herself by taking stock of what has transpired in his or her life that has left the divine-human relationship rent. The reason for this is simple. The believer has transgressed against God, and many times the community as well, and while God has bridged the divide created by human sin through grace, the sinner must recall that which has transpired through the acts of sin to fully understand the need for grace and thus accept it. If the sinner seeks true reconciliation with God and with his or her community, he or she must leave no sin hidden from confession, for even a single sin has the power to distance the believer from God. Christ states in the Gospel of Luke that it does not matter the type or number of sins; unless all repent for all sins, they will perish (Luke 13:4-5). Full disclosure of one’s sins may appear difficult, if not impossible, but it is important for the believer to recognize and confess any and all transgressions that he or she can honestly and humbly identify. Thus, not only is the need for confession of importance to the believer’s faith and reconciliation, but in order to identify all of one’s sins, the believer must diligently examine his or herself prior to the act of confession.

For this examination to lead to confession, it is imperative that the believer do so with a contrite heart. A contrite heart is one that recognizes the individual’s acts for what they are and feels genuine sorrow for his or her acts.\(^5\) Contrition means “that we are horrified at the extent to which we are alienated from God through our own sins.”\(^6\) Such a humble state is necessary in one’s confession because it demonstrates the motivation of the believer.\(^7\) To seek reconciliation for any other reason than the fact that harm has been

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\(^5\) Weinandy, *Be Reconciled To God*, 64.

\(^6\) Speyr, *Confession*, 145.
done to one's relationship with God or community is to place the believer's needs above these relationships and above God's will. The one who confesses out of obligation as though the act itself is something of a chore rather than a true spiritual experience does not fully grasp the significance of confession in his or her faith relationship. When done without proper thought and consideration, one does not recognize the full affect of one's actions before he or she ventures into confession.

It is through true contrition that a believer finds him or herself humble enough to honestly admit that which has separated him or her from God and community. As frightening as this may be to even the most devout Christian, complete honesty with one's self before God and fellow believers is imperative when seeking reconciliation. Without such honesty, one fails to fully embrace the seriousness of his or her acts and thus does not truly understand the impact sin has on one's relationships. This misunderstanding causes the believer to lose sight of that which he or she is called to do when the relationship is fractured, which is to move toward reconciliation.

While forgiveness for committed sins comes from God's grace, peace and acceptance of grace is recognized in the sinner's humble confession of his or her sins.\(^8\) Were the sinner not fully aware of that for which she or he is forgiven, the full capacity of grace goes unseen. The peace that accompanies grace is no mere trinket handed out at no cost. The grace that is received by each repentant human is costly grace. Bonhoeffer, in his work *The Cost of Discipleship*, reminds believers just how costly grace is. Grace is costly for no other reason than because it cost God the life of God's only Son, Jesus.\(^9\)

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\(^7\) Ross, *Hearing Confessions*, 13; Baur, *Frequent Confession*, 36.

\(^8\) Weinandy, *Be Reconciled To God*, 64.
Where one spec of sin remains hidden in the sinner not confessed, grace, while freely given, is not fully recognized.

Being sinful creatures, is true contrition and a full examination of one’s sins possible for humankind? One could argue that true contrition is not possible due to the fact that sinfulness, to some extent, permeates all that humans do. Calvin regards this as the total depravity of humankind. Because every element of humanity is tainted by sin, one is not able to truly examine one’s own conscience to the full extent necessary, as the conscience itself is influenced by sin. This limits the sinner’s ability to honestly see, understand, or convey that which has truly harmed the believer’s relationship. Either through pride or fear, one cannot see all that he or she has done to divide him or herself from God and the community.

The believer must trust that Christ does not call him or her to do that which is impossible, thus the believer is left to regard him or herself as capable enough. God ordains human creatures capable of speaking about and praising God, even in their fallen state. By God’s grace one must therefore understand that, where contrition is limited by the fallen human conscience, God ordains the penitent examination of the human heart capable enough to truly humble the believer in hopes of reconciliation through the power of the Holy Spirit. Through contrite examination, one finds that the conscience that is ordained capable and motivated by the Holy Spirit is the compelling agent in confession. This fact places a great responsibility on the confessing believer because the hearer

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10 Thurian, *Confession*, 27.


cannot truly judge whether the individual who is confessing is being genuine and honest or not. It is necessary that confession emerge from the believer’s conscience and that it is the conscience that compels the believer to seek reconciliation.

It is nearly impossible to determine the validity of one’s confession as a listener, yet it is imperative that one understand that simply saying words or listing off one’s past actions does not constitute confession. For confession to benefit the faith-life of a believer, something internal must compel the individual to confess rather than simply go through the motions. The guilt felt by an individual is most often the recognition that one has committed an act of sin.\(^{13}\) There are instances in which the individual feels unnecessarily guilty for an act that is, in reality not sin. In this case, confession helps the believer to address this guilt and identify it as unwarranted. However, warranted guilt—that which is felt as the result of having transgressed against God and community—is an effective means by which one may gauge his or her need to confess. True feelings of guilt are the result of having committed an act of transgression, which in turn harms one’s relationship with God and community.\(^{14}\)

In examination of one’s self prior to confession, one does rely on her or his conscience to understand when guilt is the result of sins that require confession. One must note, however, that examination and reliance upon one’s conscience is only valid when the individual possesses an informed conscience.\(^{15}\) Individually speaking, one could in good conscience, discern what is, in his or her understanding, the “right” thing to do. For example, one may feel that it is allowable that he speed while driving his car

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\(^{13}\) Bowman, *Dynamics of Confession*, 55.

\(^{14}\) Bowman, *Dynamics of Confession*, 59.

\(^{15}\) Bausch, *It Is The Lord*, 68.
because he feels that he is an excellent driver. The individual may feel that he is in better control at the higher speed, but in reality, his response time is shortened when faced with the need to make quick reactions, thus endangering the lives of those around him. When the individual does this, he does so without feeling any guilt due to the fact that his conscience has misled him. The believer must be able to examine his or herself with an element of humility, but one must also be strict. The believer must be humble in the sense that he or she recognizes his or her humanity, yet he or she must have the discipline to be honest with him or herself, with God, and with the ecclesial community. Thorough examination of his or her conscience helps the sinner to realize that he or she is not an exception to the rule. The understanding that a certain behavior is allowable for specific individuals because they feel it is allowable is the product of an uneducated or misinformed conscience. A believer listening to an uneducated or misinformed conscience only divides the individual further from God.

What does it mean to have an educated or informed conscience? An informed conscience is that which one has taken the time to educate with regards to what is right and wrong behavior. To some, this means one has educated him or herself in the laws of society. Within the realm of Christian belief, it means that one faithfully seeks to understand that which is taught throughout the history of Christianity. In other words, the believer should turn to Scripture. One may pay specific attention to the Ten Commandments or read the Sermon on the Mount to begin to grasp the way in which a believer is called to behave, speak, and think. These two areas are solid ground upon which to begin, yet once the believer establishes what is expected or prohibited in a life

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16 Speyr, *Confession*, 141.

of faith, he or she must dig deeper.\textsuperscript{18} For the believer, the education of one’s conscience goes beyond the words of Scripture to the realm of creator-creature and creature-creation. One must rely on the presence of the Holy Spirit as he or she seeks to discern what is right and wrong as humans in this world.\textsuperscript{19} Through prayer, one seeks to open one’s self to the presence of God’s revelation though the third person of the one Triune God.\textsuperscript{20} Similarly, the believer looks to the community rooted in Christ’s teaching.\textsuperscript{21}

This may mean that individuals with an educated conscience must still make difficult decisions that may lead to sinful acts. Usually this is only in extreme and rare cases, but one finds that some instances exist in which a devout believer has no choice but to participate in sin. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, known for his pacifism but also for his role in conspiring to overthrow the Third Reich, discusses extreme cases in his \textit{Ethics}.\textsuperscript{22} Bonhoeffer goes to great lengths to ensure that the believer understands that one must only commit a sinful act when it is the only option.\textsuperscript{23} If there are any other options available that do not harm one’s relationship with God, the believer must choose that option instead.\textsuperscript{24} Taking a life, for instance, must never exist as one of many options or

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\item \textsuperscript{18} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Life Together}, 110.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Bausch, \textit{It Is The Lord}, 69.
\item \textsuperscript{20} For reading on the Holy Spirit in revelation see Alvin Plantinga, \textit{Warranted Christian Belief} (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000); Barth, \textit{CD, I/1}; Calvin \textit{Institutes} (specifically writing on the \textit{Divinitatus sensum}).
\item \textsuperscript{21} Bausch, \textit{It Is The Lord}, 69.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Ethics}, 189-190.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Ethics}, 189-190.
\end{itemize}
even the best option. When one chooses to end the life of another, whether merciful or through an act of violence, it must be the only option, insists Bonhoeffer.\textsuperscript{25} This is an important distinction to make as the sinful option is often the easier of the two, which leads to the believer feeling that such an option is "right for him or her."

Historically, early Christians who faced persecution, torture, and death encountered this type of difficult decision. In the face of death, many Christians would renounce their faith and escape death.\textsuperscript{26} Upon being released, the same individual would seek to return to one’s ecclesial group and rejoin the celebration of the Eucharist.\textsuperscript{27} Such a return would perplex the individual’s fellow believers who heard the imprisoned Christian denounce his or her belief in Christ. To see them return as though nothing had happened made the faithful wonder if the returning individual’s faith was so weak that, faced with any peril, he or she would abandon Christ. Could they welcome such a person back to the Lord’s Table? This is especially valid in that, by denying one’s Christian faith, the believer would instead honor another god or gods. Idolatry, as addressed above, is one of the three sins which were not forgiven upon confession in the first centuries of the Christian Church.\textsuperscript{28} One cannot truly understand what takes place in the heart or mind of a believer in such a situation, nor can one speculate whether or not God would forgive the believer for sinful acts in such a state. One may recall that, in spite of his denial of Christ three times (Matthew 26:75; Mark 14:71; Luke 22:61; John 13:38), Peter was still the one called by Christ to feed Christ’s sheep (John 21:15-20). Seeking reconciliation,

\textsuperscript{25} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Ethics}, 190.

\textsuperscript{26} Knight, \textit{Confession Can Change Your Life}, 24.

\textsuperscript{27} Knight, \textit{Confession Can Change Your Life}, 24.

\textsuperscript{28} See this work, pages 21-25.
individuals must confess all sins before God and the community once examined by his or her educated conscience, regardless of the circumstances that led up to them.

Having examined one’s conscience, one understands what it is that brought the believer to confession. One then asks whether or not the believer, approaching the body of Christ, is seeking reconciliation with God and with the community because he or she is truly repentant of his or her deeds. In other words, is there a genuine desire to change one’s life, or does one engage in confession because of his or her fear of being caught and punished? Is the believer confessing because that is what he or she has been taught to do, or is confession done with little thought or regard for the end goal? This is the final result of the well-examined and educated conscience. The wrong motivations can make confession an empty practice in which one is simply going through the motions.\(^{29}\) When a believer does not seek reconciliation, he or she cannot achieve reconciliation.

Once one has examined and indentified the source of his or her guilt, the ax must be put to the root of the issue by the believer addressing his or her sins and taking responsibility for any acts that had incurred guilt.\(^{30}\) Performed humbly and delicately, confession is one step in taking responsibility for one’s sins. While consequences still exist for one’s acts, acknowledging the individual transgressions demonstrates a willingness to face the consequences and move beyond the sinful acts and their affects. Just as a confessed murderer still faces the penalty for his crime, the sinner may pay a penalty. This is what makes confession just one step toward reconciliation. One must not forget however, that confession and any consequences that may follow one’s sins are not the means by which one is forgiven or reconciled. Forgiveness comes from God alone.

\(^{29}\) Baur, *Frequent Confession*, 26.

\(^{30}\) Bowman, *Dynamics of Confession*, 59.
through the once-and-for-all act of Christ upon the cross and the resurrection (Hebrews 10:1-18).

The believer is called to confess with specificity the sins that have been committed. While a general confession of sin is a start in the process, for confession to be truly fruitful, one must identify one’s harmful acts as explicitly as possible. Specific sins may be acknowledged in three overarching categories: sins that are both intentional and unintentional of which one is conscious of having committed, sins of omission or deeds left undone, and the sins committed by the believer of which he or she is completely unaware.

The first category of transgressions that one is called to confess includes the sins that he or she has actively and consciously committed since his or her last confession. Perhaps this seems obvious to even the nonbeliever, but one must understand sins actively committed versus the acts that the sinner has left undone. It is also perhaps frightening for a sinner to attempt to identify and admit all of the sinful acts he or she has done. Confession of all that an individual has done, demonstrating the believer’s fallen state, exposes precisely how sinful he or she has been. Compelled by the words of Scripture, the believer confesses his or her transgressions to the Lord, lest his or her bones waste away from keeping silent (Psalm 32:3-5). Giving voice to the acts that were once hidden may seem self-deprecating, but it is through this act that the believer not only recognizes one’s need for God but proclaims the need for God and God’s grace. One


32 Luther, *Smaller Catechism*, 218; Weinandy, *Be Reconciled to God*, 66;
must not take this for granted, for it is in confession that the idols of human action are unmasked and are seen for what they truly are—sin.\textsuperscript{33}

Not all acts of sin are as blatantly and explicitly idolatrous as individuals bowing down before graven images. Some idols are less obvious in form, but they are just as dangerous. That which has taken precedence over one’s relationship with God and with others is recognized as the believer’s focus of worship and praise. The Lord’s Day 95 of the Heidelberg Catechism defines idolatry as “having or inventing something in which one trusts in place of or long side of the only true God who has revealed himself in his Word.”\textsuperscript{34} These are the sinful acts that have hindered one’s relationship with God and with others. Thus one confesses all that is sinful in the eye of the Lord. In doing so, one seeks to get to the crux of that which has been said or done that divides humans from God and from one another.\textsuperscript{35}

One can further break down the first category of confessing the sins one has actively and consciously committed into two parts consisting of the sins one has committed intentionally and those which are committed unintentionally.\textsuperscript{36} To acknowledge the difference, the believer must not only have an awareness of his or her actions, examined by a well informed conscience, but the believing individual must also have a firm grasp of his or her place in community. By understanding one’s role as a person functioning within community, the believer sees how even the unintended acts of

\textsuperscript{33} Jennings, \textit{The Liturgy of Liberation}, 74.

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions}, 57.

\textsuperscript{35} Knight, \textit{Confession Can Change Your Life}, 19.

\textsuperscript{36} Knight, \textit{Confession Can Change Your Life}, 23; Weinandy, \textit{Be Reconciled To God}, 64; Baur, \textit{Frequent Confession}, 30-33.
sin can harm his or her relationship with the community and with the body of Christ that make up the Church.

At first glance, the sins one has committed intentionally would perhaps seem the most harmful to God and others who are impacted by these sins. It is possible that this is due to the fact that intentionality tends to portray malice or premeditation. This interpretation of intentional sin paints the sinner as one who is plotting against God or the community. Not only is he or she plotting, but the sinner is also aware of the acts one is about to commit and subsequently aware of the consequences of his or her actions. In spite of this knowledge, the sinner still intends to sin against God and the community. Without the ability to examine one’s attitudes or motives, the possibility of an individual plotting his or her sins may very well take place. Yet as individuals who are taught what is and what is not required of humanity through Scripture, each act of sin committed with an awareness of one’s deeds is intentional even if one does not comprehend the full extent of its outcome or even if one does not necessarily plan the act itself. Thus, when one is aware that his or her deed may potentially be regarded as sinful based on the objective standard of the law, it is an act of intentional sin and should be confessed.

Confessing the sins which were committed intentionally calls the believer to focus on his or her sinful acts rather than the situation or events which may have surrounded them.37 By focusing one’s attention on the events which surround the individual’s act of sin, the sinner loses sight of what he or she is truly called to confess. A shift in focus from one’s sins to the events which surround the sins offer the believer excuses as to why he or she intentionally sinned against God and the community.38 The sinner finds that he

37 Speyr, Confession, 159,
or she identifies with Paul’s internal struggle described in his letter to the Romans (Romans 7:14-23). If one is able to examine him or herself in a way that removes one’s self from the situation and any attachment to the situation and thus from bias toward him or herself in the situation, he or she is able to better understand his or her role in human and human-divine interactions. By being honest with and about oneself, an unbiased examination of the individual’s past acts enables the believer to see how she or he has sinned. One again sees the importance of honest and humble examination of his or herself prior to confession so that the believer may focus on his or her sins rather than what causes the sinful acts or possibly shifting the blame.

The acts one commits unintentionally also impact the community and the believer’s relationship with God. Intentionality or forethought does not make a sin a sin. Here one sees the distinction between intentional sin and weakness.\(^{39}\) Compared to intent and premeditation, a sin committed in weakness may be the result of passion or of negligence. Thus, one may understand weakness as the inability of one’s will to combat sin. The same understanding is present in the United States Court System in the way crimes are weighed by intent or premeditation. One finds that the degrees of murder or the categorization of crime are broken into those which are premeditated versus those which are the result of negligence or passion.\(^{40}\) Yet one must not forget that one is guilty of a crime even when unintended. Thus, when one commits sins which are unintentional, the affects of the sins are still present and impact the sinner’s relationships, both divine and interpersonally. One needs to simply turn to the fourth and fifth chapters of the book

\(^{38}\) Speyr, *Confession*, 159.

\(^{39}\) Thurian, *Confession*, 125.

\(^{40}\) Baur, *Frequent Confession*, 30, 33-34.
of Leviticus to see how a party was considered guilty for sins even when they were done unintentionally or unwittingly. Present in Scripture, such expectations are a high standard which believers are called to uphold regarding the identification and confession of sins that have been committed.

Take for example an instance in which an individual sees what he believes to be an abandoned or lost laptop computer sitting on a park bench. Thinking it is lost or perhaps unwanted, the gentleman picks it up, thinking he will put it to good use. What the individual does not realize is that the woman who left the laptop there has simply stood up and walked over to a trash can to dispose of her lunch sack. While not intending to, the man has stolen the laptop from the young woman. As she runs after him in order that she might have the laptop returned, the man becomes aware of his sin. Upon this awareness, the believer is now compelled to confess that which he has unintentionally done, which is to steal a woman's laptop computer.

The sinner often finds it easier confess unintentional acts because he or she had not intended to deceive or cause harm or because the acts themselves were the result of an accident. He or she may even consider the unintended sin to have resulted from circumstances beyond his or her control. Understandably, it is less humiliating for the sinner to admit that he or she simply made a mistake, and thus he or she confesses the unintended sins more easily before God and the community. However, sins resulting from accidents or situations beyond the believer's control can instead be some of the most difficult for the believer to allow grace to penetrate. Take for example the young woman who meets an engaging young man in a café. The two hit it off, and in a short time they are enjoying dinner together several times a week. It is not long before the two
are out on a date and the happy couple is confronted by another woman who proclaims that this engaging young man is actually her husband. The young woman, having been deceived into believing that the man was single, has actually been an unknowing participant in an act of adultery. Such a sin is one for which the potential of reconciliation exists, but to what extent does the woman retain her sins, opposed to releasing them or having her sins “loosed,” once the community and God have pronounced grace and reconciliation? In addition, unintended sins have the potential to offer the believer excuses for his or her acts. Excuses, like the act itself being an innocent mistake, allow the sinner to negotiate whether or not the sinful acts are really sinful or instead the result of a specific situation. In either case, confession aloud before God and the community offers the believer more than the grace pronounced and reconciliation but also accountability, catharsis, and the ability to forgive one’s self.

Some may regard the requirement to confess that which has been done unintentionally as unnecessary or harsh and overbearing, yet such regard is one of the dangers of failing to recognize sin as a violation of the Divine-human relationship due to the uneducated conscience. By neglecting to identify acts or behaviors as sin, one fails to see what it is that he or she has done to violate God’s will, and thus the sin is retained within the individual, rather than “loosed” through contrite confession, preventing true or complete reconciliation with the community and with God.

In addition to one’s confession of sins which the believer has committed intentionally or unintentionally, the second category of sins that require confession are those that the believer has not done, or the sins of omission. Here, one is called to recognize the instances in life when the believer could have or should have acted but
chose instead not to act. The consciences of many throughout history have been heavy with the acts left undone or with the words left unspoken in the face of evil. The educated conscience plays an important role in the examination of the believer as he or she looks back on what could have been done versus that which actually transpired.

The question arises, can one be held responsible for acts that he or she has not done? The answer is a resounding, “Yes!” Not only are Christians called to abstain from certain activities such as murder, idolatry, etc., but as people of faith, they are given explicit instructions regarding the ways in which they are to behave. This includes calling the believer to act at certain times in certain situations. One simply examines the Decalogue to see that not all of the commandments are negative commandments. In addition to the negative commandments “do not steal” and “do not commit adultery,” one reads the commandment to “honor one’s father and mother.” Such a commandment requires not only that the believer “honors” his or her parents but also that parents should behave in an honorable manner. In either case, as parent or child, the believer is compelled to behave in accordance with the positive commandment. Similarly, the greatest commandment of the Christian faith is to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:36-40). One does not read Christ’s words to see a list of behaviors which are prohibited but rather a positive commandment stating the two greatest behaviors a

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41 Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 394; Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, 7-8. See also Exodus 34; Leviticus 19; and Deuteronomy 14 for additional examples of positive and negative elements of the law and commandments present in Scripture.

believer can enact. Thus, when one fails to behave in such a way, one is responsible for his or her sinful act of not loving God with his or her whole heart, mind, or strength, or when one fails to love one's neighbor as one's self. Recognizing what could have been done or should have been done, the believer vocally confesses.\(^43\)

The third and final category of sins encompasses the acts which have been committed against God or another of which the believer is unaware. This is perhaps the grayest of areas regarding what one is to confess; after all, how can a believer confess something of which he or she is unaware? Lack of knowledge is not an excuse. When a driver is pulled over for speeding because she did not realize she entered a school zone and the speed limit decreased, she is guilty of speeding. Her failure to notice that the speed limit changed does not change the fact that, while once adhering to the posted speed limit, she crossed into a zone where the law stated she must decrease her speed for the safety of the school children. The same may be said for the individual who, by his or her actions or words, sins against God or violates a fellow human being. Whether the believer is fully aware or completely unaware, sin is sin and should be confessed.

In order to confess that which is unknown, one must be willing to demonstrate a true sense of humility by being open to the observations of others. The believer him or herself, being unaware of sins that have taken place, turns to the trusted eye of the community and listens to the instances in which the community has witnessed the believer violate God's will or transgress against the community. While perhaps difficult to hear another's accusations of sin, the sinner must not see this as judgment. The repentant sinner must humbly accept the honest and caring observations of the

\(^{43}\) The Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 34 – Lord's Day 44 offer examples of the positive and negative application of each of the 10 Commandments. *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, 57-67.
community and allow for the release of his or her sins, which were once unknown or unrecognized, even by the sinner him or herself. In addition to the observations of others, a contrite sinner should also include a confession of the sins that remain unknown, trusting that God, who sees all and knows all, has already shed grace upon the believer and, while known to God alone, the believer is liberated from even the unknown or unrecognized sins.

Confession seeks to liberate the sinner from the burden of his or her sins or any guilt associated with the sinful acts, whether they were committed intentionally or unintentionally and whether the believer was aware of the sin or not. In every instance, confession seeks to release the sinner from the sins that cling to him or her and, in so doing, restrict the believer from embracing grace and being reconciled with God and the community. This is especially prevalent when the believer has justified his or her acts of sin and no longer sees his or her sins as evil. The sinner who surrenders his or her hold on sinful deeds in confidence and humility is liberated from any and all self-denial or self-justification.\(^4^4\) The significance of examining one’s self through the lens of an educated conscience is that the sinner is brought to the point that her or his sins are verbalized before another believer.

As a representative of the body of Christ, and as one who aids the sinner in revealing his or her sins, the part played by the hearer is of great significance as well. As the hearer of one’s confession, the fellow sinner acts as a representative of God and the greater community but must not forget his or her fallen human state. Humbly taking on this threefold responsibility, representing to community and the divine yet remaining a

\(^{44}\) Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 110.
sinner, the listener of one’s confessions may also serve the purpose of holding the believer accountable for true examination of his or herself.

The listener’s role, assisting the believer in discerning whether or not she or he has truly sinned, is of the utmost importance. It is therefore integral to public confession that the one or ones hearing another’s confession also have a significant awareness of what God’s Word states in Scripture. Realistic, versus unrealistic guilt, is difficult to identify until the individual has confessed his or her sins vocally. Not every wrong-doing committed by an individual is a sin. Acts which are harmful to a relationship are perhaps correctly identified as wrong, but to identify them as sinful may require further examination of the individual’s intentions.

If the person were to willingly participate in an act that would harm one’s relationship with God or with one’s community, one may accurately label it as sin. If it is trivial and does not impact one’s relationship with God or the community, the sinner and the community should not dwell upon it. To dwell on acts that are not sins as though they are could draw one’s focus away from the thoughts, words, or deeds which truly are sins. Take for example, the student who confesses that he has not completed his homework. The student has not sinned, but he feels guilty of doing something wrong. These acts are often confessed as sins because, in spite of the feelings they may bring about, they do not incur guilt. It is far easier to confess that which, in reality, does not

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48 Speyr, *Confession*, 141.
constitute any wrong-doing. While easy, by confessing acts that are not sins, the believer remains unable to release the true sins which have hold of his or her being.

Another major problem that has the potential to plague confession is confessing "just enough." When one confesses to appease a guilty conscience, he or she tends to confess the symptoms of one’s sin or simply confess “just enough” to enable the sinner to rejoin society, feeling as though he or she has completed the faithful duty of confessing. Perhaps one confesses that which is already well-known in the community, such as an individual’s tendency to overindulge in alcohol and fight with his spouse. The families in surrounding homes are aware of the individual’s actions, and so, the sinner goes to confession and admits to his drinking and subsequent familial arguments. Having done so, his conscience is appeased, and he is free from guilt, only to partake in the same behavior the next weekend which is followed by a return to confession. Other times, individuals may simply confess in general or they may simply acknowledge that they have sinned, without giving any specific account of sins committed in an attempt to feel justified. This does little to reveal to the individual who is confessing, or the hearer, the specific and extreme need for grace and reconciliation. The seemingly endless cycle repeats with no change in the confession or the believer.

One needs to confess more than “just enough” when recounting one’s sins. Confessing “just enough” is when the one confessing only reveals part of his or her sinful acts opposed to full disclosure. By revealing his or her sins in part, the believer hears the words of grace and forgiveness pronounced and walks away feeling justified. The sins

49 Knight, *Confession Can Change Your Life*, 15.
that have not been confessed, however, remain in the believer's heart and conscience and he or she does not feel liberation from the bond of the sins which are not confessed. "Just enough" is never enough. One must confess everything that one has done in the hopes of identifying that which lay at the root of habitual sinful behavior. By doing this, the believer moves beyond confessing the sins which are known and obvious, or the sins of which he or she believes every other person is also guilty, eliciting a genuine change in the life of the believer.

When a believer hopes to identify how they might confess more than "just enough," he or she again seeks the advice of others in his or her self-examination, such as that of one to whom he or she truly confesses—the listener. Once again, it is integral to the practice of public confession that those hearing another's confession have a significant awareness of what God's Word states in Scripture. By seeking the advice of a trusted and aware listener, the believer not only begins to see the impact his or her sins have on the community but also to understand and indentify the actions which are sins versus those which are not. Similarly, the believer sees that he or she is not alone but is a member of a community, and as such, he or she begins to see that he or she should not seek reconciliation with God alone but with the entire body of Christ. The listener is able to see the sins from the outside of the sinner and is therefore able to ask questions that get to the heart of the sins. Seeking support from a listener or member of one's community is also beneficial because the sinner begins to identify that which underlies his or her acts and thus discern the attitude behind the sins. By doing so, the Christian community helps

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52 Knight, Confession Can Change Your Life, 19; Baur, Frequent Confession, 29.

53 Knight, Confession Can Change Your Life, 18.
the repentant sinner to attempt to go forth after confession and live a life which “bears good fruit.”

In order to arrive at the point at which one may “bear good fruit” and purge his or her being from sinful transgressions that separate the believer from God and the community, one should not simply confess his or her sins in general but should instead seek to confess aloud all of his or her thoughts, words, or deeds that have harmed one’s relationship with God or the community. A general prayer of confession, in which one confesses one’s sin or one’s state as a sinful being, is sufficient to the extent that the believer sees his or her fallen state. In this way, general prayers of confession spoken aloud with the ecclesial body in a liturgy are not pointless in the life of the believer; however, they do not always lead to full reconciliation with God or with the community. The benefit of corporate, liturgical prayers, in which the individual admits his or her state as a sinner, is that he or she is one step closer to reconciliation. Corporate prayers of confession do not go beyond this point and are therefore insufficient with regards to confessing the actual acts which have demonstrated the Christian’s fallen state. While the believer may find it comforting to simply admit that he or she has transgressed against God and the community, ceasing to confess any further, what the one confessing has actually done is push the sinful acts deeper beneath the surface. Reluctance to address specific sins means that the sinner cannot confront them. This may manifest itself in the concrete confession of one’s sins, but it may also take discernment and focus to understand how deep one’s actions have impacted those who surround the believer.

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54 Knight, *Confession Can Change Your Life*, 14.
It is only through true confrontation that one may humbly accept the forgiveness that comes from God alone, through the grace of Jesus Christ. Once exposed through confession, sins are revealed as what they truly are, and one may begin to understand not only the impact that his or her acts have on his or her relationship with God but also how one's deeds affect the community. As one works toward reconciliation, verbalizing one's confession is powerful. This is especially true when confession is prayer aloud rather than praying one's confession silently, which is often the case in corporate, general prayers of confession. The act of vocalizing one's transgressions benefits the believer in that he or she hears the words emerge from his or her lips, thus actively communicating one's guilt to another party. As difficult as this may be, the liberation from guilt far outweighs any humiliation one may feel.

Too often, the sinner represses his or her sins, which leads to more pain for the sinner as he or she seeks to keep it hidden or wrestles with the guilt of having committed certain deeds. Similarly, the pain inflicted upon others by the sinner's acts, both in the realm of the believer's community and also with God, remains present when not addressed openly by the sinner. The retention of one's sins by either party does nothing but harm the believer's relationships; but by confessing, one seeks to release that which was once retained and moves toward repentant reconciliation. Perhaps the most important aspect of verbally confessing one's sins publically is that the believer is called to bear

56 Bowman, *Dynamics of Confession*, 40.

57 Corporate/unison prayers of confession in which the believers confess sin in general or that they as creatures are sinful, are a part of many protestant worship services—specifically in the Presbyterian Church (USA), Cumberland Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church to name a few.

58 Bowman, *Dynamics of Confession*, 43; Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 110

59 Bowman, *Dynamics of Confession*, 43.
witness to the fact that he or she is a fallen human amongst other fallen human beings.\textsuperscript{60} The believer is not alone when he or she sins and need not feel as though he or she is singled out as a sinner among saints.

As feelings of catharsis emerge, the sinner needs to continue to address his or her sins so that they are not simply addressed in part but so that they are fully understood. As stated above, the believer benefits from digging deep enough to identify the attitudes that lay beneath the sins, as well as the sins themselves. Much like the physician seeks to identify the cause of the infection so that he can treat the infection rather than simply care for the symptoms, the sinner and the hearer seek to identify the cause of the sinful acts so that he or she can prevent them from happening again.

The focus of confession is not the sinful acts of the individual but rather the believer’s desire for reconciliation, and subsequently, for spiritual growth.\textsuperscript{61} The sins are the evidence of the individual’s sinful state—a state that divides the individual from God and others. If one remains wrapped up in his or her sins once they have been confessed, he or she is not able to move beyond the sins and accept forgiveness and be reconciled with those harmed. A reconnection with those who were once alienated by sin is the result of the sinner having let go of his or her offences through confession and can bring about feelings of relief. The relief from guilt, while positive, is not the most important aspect of confession either.\textsuperscript{62} Confession does not only cause relief, it liberates the believer and instills new energy for one’s existence as a person of faith, and it also

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[60]{Bowman, \textit{Dynamics of Confession}, 43; Bonhoeffer, \textit{Life Together}, 110}
\footnotetext[61]{Knight, \textit{Confession Can Change Your Life}, 7.}
\footnotetext[62]{Bowman, \textit{Dynamics of Confession}, 44.}
\end{footnotes}
inspires growth. Often, the simple act of revealing that which the believer once attempted to hide provides catharsis for the believer. This state of self-acceptance and catharsis is helpful in the believer’s ability to move beyond the acts of sin and into acceptance of grace. Acceptance of God’s grace and reconciliation with God and the ecclesial community is by far the greatest benefit of confession, both for the sinner and the community. Again, one is reminded that grace comes from God alone, through the atoning acts of Christ and that, while confession does not bring about forgiveness, it is through confession that one acknowledges one’s need for the atoning once-and-for-all work of Christ as well as acceptance of the grace of God which emerges from God through Christ.

Confession does not always directly bring about catharsis, nor does confession automatically lead to one’s ability to accept the grace freely given by God or by the surrounding community. Guilt may exist beyond confession. Hearing the words emerge from the believer’s mouth may cause the contrite believer to relive the acts in which harm was inflicted. By reliving the events, the guilt associated with the acts rises to the surface, making the individual feel as though they have committed the act once more. While this is a danger, it should not hinder the individual from confessing. Instances in which confession may bring about feelings of guilt need to be nurtured by the hearer delicately but not avoided. Confession is still a means by which the believer may feel cleansed of the guilt associated with sinful acts. Avoiding even the most difficult confessions may

63 Knight, *Confession Can Change Your Life*, 7.

64 Bowman, *Dynamics of Confession*, 44-45.

65 Bowman, *Dynamics of Confession*, 45.

66 Bowman, *Dynamics of Confession*, 45.
only lead to further feelings of guilt and, in turn, propel the believer away from reconciliation rather than toward it.
Chapter Seven

What Is the Believer to Do? How to Confess One’s Sins

One may ask: might an individual feel the need or even the desire to confess his or her sins today, or has the practice of confession become passé? Has the public confession of sins become an unnecessary element relegated to religious history with no place in modern society? To answer this, one turns to technology. If one were to enter the word “confession” into a simple online search engine, one would find the numerous online confession sites and see the vast scope of confessions present.\(^1\) Quite often, the online forum is created by a church or denomination so that the members of the church are able to confess their sins without having to endure the humiliation of seeing a pastor or even knowing that another individual is hearing their sins recounted.\(^2\) In this case it would appear that the idea of creating a new setting in which one may publically confess his or her sins has emerged in order to care for the sinner. This is demonstrative of the

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\(^1\) The list of “Confession” websites is numerous, there are some that attempt to mimic an ecclesial setting in which one may confess his or her sins while other websites simply provide a forum within which one may express one’s sinful transgressions or feelings of inadequacy. Some of which are: http://grouphug.us/; www.dailyconfession.com; www.droppedthebomb.com; http://e-admit.com; http://li-confess.net/; www.unburdened.net; www.experienceproject.com/confessions.php; www.absolution-online.com/confessional; http://tellthe.net/confess; www.ule.net/index.php?page=confession; www.ourchurch.com/view/?pageID=302788. Others websites still are not confession websites but are rather an online arena where writers may tell secrets such as http://postsecret.blogspot.com and the publication of these secrets recorded in the books by the same name, all of which are by author Frank Warren: PostSecret; A Lifetime of Secret; My Secret: A PostSecret Book; The Secret Lives of Men and Women: A PostSecret Book; PostSecret: Confessions on Life, Death, and God. In addition to the online resources, one may also see the desire to confess one’s sins present in the art project of Jennifer Lopez who created a confessional booth out of the pages of confessions she received from her fellow students at Dartmouth (Frank Santo, “Lopez ’08 Creates Confession Booth,” The Dartmouth, 14 February 2008; available at http://thedartmouth.com/2008/02/14/news/confession, accessed January 2010). Regardless of the individual’s intentions or the content of the “confession,” the fact remains that individuals are willing to express their confessions in a manner that is both private while at the same time essentially public.

\(^2\) Banerjee, “Intimate Confessions Pour Out onto Church’s Website” and Barovick, “When Confession Takes Place Online.”
need for individuals to have a means by which they can release the sins that they find bound to them, and in turn, find the strength and liberty to accept the grace of reconciliation from God and their community. Recognizing the need for the sinner to publically confess, while also understanding that it is fear and humiliation that prevents the believer from doing so, individuals have been presented with a new option.

While seeking to offer believers a new option, online confession of sins lacks many of the necessary elements of confession that allow for a complete release of an individual’s sins, as well as a full acceptance of God’s grace. One of the problems with online confession is whether or not all of the confessions are true. Assuming that at least some of the confessions are true, it is clear that there is a desire, if not a recognized need, by believers to confess their sins. Another problem would appear to be the potentially voyeuristic element of one’s confessions being posted in a public forum. It is one thing for the one confessing to stand before the ecclesial body of his or her beloved fellow believers who gather for the sake of the sinner, but it is a far different endeavor for an individual to sit alone and read other people’s confessions for personal enjoyment. Many online websites boast of millions of viewers each month. These are not all individuals who are posting and confessing their sins. Many times these individuals are simply reading about other people’s sins. Also, the permanence of information on the internet and the ability for users to recall items long after they have been originally shared have the potential to hinder the believer’s ability to feel liberated, as confessed sins are continually accessed and read or relived.

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3 Banerjee, “Intimate Confessions Pour Out onto Church’s Website.”

4 Barovick, “When Confession Takes Place Online.”
Something that is unique about the online setting is that the believer is attempting to confess his or her sins in a way that is private, by the use of a screen name or by simply remaining anonymous, and yet, at the same time, confess in a public domain, thus making it to a limited extent a public confession. Individuals feel comfortable and safe, which helps the believer find the courage to humbly verbalize that which he or she has, up to the point of confession, internalized. The individual also experiences a sense of community, recognizing that she or he is not alone. The disclosure of one’s sins, found in the words he or she presents in the online forum, are similar to the sins confessed before one’s fellow believer, both of which seek to create an environment free from judgment. This judgment-free space in which others have already humbled themselves before the believer invites him or her to share in the liberation of confession. The individual is therefore able to both satisfy her or his need to confess the sins that have separated her or him from God and the community and, at the same time, avoid humiliation. This feeling of confessing in a welcoming and non-judgmental environment provides what the sinner should feel if he or she were to stand before God and the community. However, in spite of the similarities, the practice appears more therapeutic than sacramental.

Questions arise regarding whether this modern application satisfies the need for the believer to confess her or his sins. Does confession via an online website allow the individual to truly express his or her humility, and in so doing, does the believer truly accept responsibility for the sinful acts and move toward reconciliation with God and the community? While it would appear that any confession of one’s sins would be a positive element in the life of the sinner, the attempts made by confessing one’s sins online fall

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5 Barovick, “When Confession Takes Place Online.”
short. The sinner is unable to express true contrition and whether his or her conscience has been thoroughly examined, but more importantly, the sinner is unable to confess his or her sins before the representative of God present in members of the clergy or the body of Christ in the church. Similarly, the believer is unable to ensure that those individuals who will read her or his online confession make up the ecclesial body that is empowered by God to bind and loose sins. These fellow redeemed sinners are the desired audience of confession so that the sinner may experience true reconciliation.

Paul writes in his first letter to the church at Corinth that if one part of the body of Christ suffers, all suffer along with it (1 Corinthians 12:26). One way to cure this suffering is by purging the Church of that which separates the members from God and one another, no matter the cost. This does not mean excommunication; rather it calls all believers to humble, honest, and complete confession. Seeking unity, and for the sake of the body of Christ, believers are called to confess their sins before God and before one another. By doing so, the believer demonstrates that he or she is not seeking an easy way out or attempting to cheapen God’s gift of grace. To do so is frightening, even to the most devout and dedicated believer. However, one must remember that the reason for confession is not to humiliate the individual but to free the believer from his or her sins, and thus the Church, from being bound by the sins of its members. Confession is done so that the believer is no longer separated from God and God’s community.⁶

Furthermore, there is a need for the sinner to confess her or his acts of sinful transgression simply because they are true accounts of deeds that have taken place in the life of the believer.⁷ There are many who do not confess or who do so in a manner that

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⁶ Jennings, *The Liturgy of Liberation*, 70.
does not accomplish that which confession is meant to accomplish, that is, to recognize the grace of God which liberated the sinner from his or her sin. While effective to some extent, confession may not be fully complete if it is only done to a member of the clergy, only to a fellow Christian believer, or silently to God alone. While the confession of one’s sins to God alone or to a representative of God present on earth is sufficient for the believer to begin to comprehend and accept God’s grace, it does not serve to reconcile the believer with the body of Christ.

Take the husband who, in a moment of uncontrolled frustration or anger, strikes his wife or child, for example. For the sake of this example, assume that this is the one and only time in which this act occurs so that true repentance is present in the sinner, and thus, the contrite individual enters into confession humbly seeking reconciliation. The husband places himself before an individual to whom he may confess and who also represents God. The physical, emotional, and mental toll this sin puts upon the sinner is expressed in confession before a member of the clergy. Humbly professing that he has examined his conscience, the sinner confesses verbally that which he has done to harm his relationship with his wife or child and how such acts have distanced him from God. In so doing, he is able to hear the words of God’s grace pronounced, and he may emerge from confession recognizing that he is forgiven by God. This act of confession helps the husband recognize that, by grace he is reconciled with God, and he is empowered to recognize and receive the grace from God. The act of confession, then, done with the intention of reconciliation, has therefore been effective in the believer’s life, but only in part. While the believer and even the hearer of his sins celebrate that he recognizes God’s

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7 Jennings, *The Liturgy of Liberation*, 70.
grace and is reconciled with God, the sinner has not sought reconciliation with the sinner's community, who in this case is his wife or child.

It is necessary for confession to be complete, which means that one should not only confess before God or in the presence of a representative of God but before the community as well. Whether the community is the entire body of the Church or any community to which the sinner is called to confess, including those directly impacted by one's sins, an aspect of the community should be present. It is difficult for the sinner to realize how deep his or her sins penetrate the surrounding community or to what extent the individuals are affected. Because of this, the believer must be willing to humble him or herself before his or her fellow sinners in order to seek reconciliation with as many members of the community as possible.

No matter who is hearing confession, whether a member of the clergy or members of the ecclesial body, there is a responsibility that rests upon the hearer not to betray the trust of the one confessing.\(^8\) Within the topic of confessing the most dreadful activities of one's past, this should be self-evident. The believer must feel a sense of responsibility within him or herself when confessing that is strong enough in faith to elicit confession, but the hearer must also feel a sense of responsibility to be humble enough to hear the confession without judgment and without the potential for gossip or judgment. If one does not trust the members of his or her own community, the believer will not feel comfortable publically confessing. When a single hearer fails to take this responsibility seriously, he or she fails to recognize the role that each hearer plays in the act of confession and in representing God. Failure to take this responsibility seriously could potentially harm the faith and personal well-being of the one confessing.

\(^8\) Murray, *The Dynamics of Confession*, 80.
The hearers are not only there to pronounce the forgiveness that comes from God’s grace, loosing that which the hearer has the power to “loose” as stated in Scripture, but the hearer also represents the greater body of Christ. It is a responsibility that no believer should take lightly, but it is also a role that must not overshadow the true nature of the individual. The hearer must not forget that he or she is a human being and, as such, is also a fallen creature who is subject to sin and divine judgment. The sins of the one who hears confession are of the same nature as any sins that he or she may hear during another believer’s confession. The one who hears confession must therefore stand as a fellow sinner who has confessed or who is willing to confess his or her sins, similarly seeking to recognize God’s grace and achieve reconciliation.

Public confession must not simply consist of an accountability group that is removed from worship. In an accountability group setting, each sinner confesses his or her sins to the group in turn. This environment serves as a reminder to the sinner that, in the ecclesial setting, he or she is surrounded by fellow fallen humans. There is, however, a negative side to this model. Such a setting is dependent on the honesty of the entire group. If one were only comfortable sharing part of his or her sins, the sins that were not confessed would remain internalized. While it is comforting for the believer to be surrounded by a trusted community, the role of the community as hearer of confession is not only to comfort but also to convey God’s grace and forgiveness. What may tend to happen in this situation is that sinners will not only find comfort in knowing that others will join them in confession, but they may also find comfort in their past sins.

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9 Murray, *The Dynamics of Confession*, 81.
10 Murray, *The Dynamics of Confession*, 82.
This could arise from a believer hearing that another individual has experienced similar temptations and felt the guilt of similar sins and may provide members of a group the tendency to misunderstand his or her confession. Instead of striving to avoid future sins of the same nature, one finds that he or she is not alone in temptation or in his or her sin. There is potential that, upon hearing that others in the group share a similar pattern of sin, each member will recognize that he or she is possibly not alone in his or her current struggle. Knowing that others may also struggle, instead of sharing in grace and reconciliation by striving to overcome present and future tendencies, the sinner knows that he or she can simply confess in the group once more, possibly even hearing that others have again fallen into the same sin again as well. The responsibility of the hearers of confession includes a responsibility to the confessing sinner that insures that the sinner does not find any solace in sin but rather finds comfort and strength in grace and reconciliation to move beyond his or her sins and to strive to never again fall into sin.

Recognizing that by humbly confessing one’s sins before a responsible group of fellow believers, one need not fear humiliation, why, then, do believers remain uncomfortable confessing before the community? Again, we turn to the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who points out that Christians have a tendency to more willingly confess their sins before God than before fellow believers. If believers were to fear confession before any being it would seem that believers should fear confession to God and instead find solace in confession before those whom the believer knows are as fallen as he or she. Believers should be able to confess before his or her fellow sinners, knowing that they too, while forgiven, are not free from sin. It should be before God that the sinner is truly humbled in knowing that God is sinless and that the sinful act has harmed his or her

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11 Bonhoeffer, Life Together, 112.
relationship with God. It would appear that the sinner has either failed to realize the cost of his or her forgiveness and the sacrifice by God on her or his account, or the sinner, out of fear of humiliation, chooses to ignore the cost of grace. Acknowledging this, Bonhoeffer asks a final question: is the sinner, in his or her confession to God alone, actually confessing to his or her own self?\textsuperscript{12}

The believer needs his or her fellow sinners to listen to confession. It is the common bond of having sinned against God and God’s people that allows for the believer’s honesty before his or her fellow human beings. The individual does not just stand before others as a sinner confessing his or her sins, but, as a member of Christ’s body in the Church, the one confessing also stands before forgiven sinners. By confessing to another believer, the sinner experiences the liberation of exposing that which has divided him or her from God, purging the sins from the individual’s conscience. Here, in the face of fellow believers, the one confessing sees the presence of God’s grace in the person listening and, while not elevating or degrading either party, the one confessing is able to see him or herself as both sinner and saved.\textsuperscript{13} It would therefore seem that the only way in which an individual could truly understand the liberation of confession, as well as begin to understand the reconciliation that comes about through grace, would be if he or she sought to confess her or his sins publically.

The act of confession, however, is meant to strengthen the believer’s faith and not hinder it. The faith of the believer is built upon a foundation of her or his relationship with God and with those in the ecclesial community. This means that, when the believer finds that he or she cannot bring him or herself to humble confession before the entire

\textsuperscript{12} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Life Together}, 113

\textsuperscript{13} Jennings, \textit{The Liturgy of Liberation}, 70-72.
community of believers, the Church or clergy must not demand it. Church leaders should strongly encourage, if not require, that those who are capable stand before God and the community and confess their sins publically. It should be the goal of each believer to live a life so that confession before his or her fellow believers is done without shame and is accomplished humbly in order that the believer may seek reconciliation with God and the community. However, given the human tendency to fear judgment from one’s peers and confession’s history involving the humiliation of the believer, public or semi-public confession cannot exist as the only option.

An option of private confession could be made available for those who are unable to confess before another for various reasons. It would have to take place at the discretion of the presiding clergy would have to discern this on a case-by-case basis, while at all times encouraging humble public confession. This means that one must distinguish between those who are unable versus those who are simply unwilling. This should be done by one who is capable of truly assessing the individual and his or her need for an alternative to public confession done directly before those whom he or she has hurt, as well as before God. This will ensure that the believer is not simply seeking an easy way out of confessing her or his sins. Such unwillingness to confess is to seek an easy way out and again, run the risk of mistaking God’s grace for cheap grace. The sinner’s inability, however, means that, for the specific believer, confession of his or her sins before the body of Christ would cause harm to the believer’s psyche or faith. In such instances, one possible means of confession may take place before a smaller group representing the body of Christ, as well as to a representative of God. Confession before a smaller representative body would require the presence of the members who had experienced the
direct affects of the sinner’s acts. In the above example of the husband who strikes his wife or child, it would be imperative that the man’s wife or child hear his confession. The obligation to forgive would rest upon the spouse or child, just as grace and forgiveness comes from God, but in order for reconciliation to take place, the parties who are harmed must be present during confession. By including all parties who are impacted by one’s sins, whether they are one’s fellow humans in a community setting or God, the believer, by confessing, overcomes that which once divided him or her from so many and is empowered to accept the grace of God already present. This is the true intent of public confession and, when done publically, it ensures that the sinner may find reconciliation with the full scope of those affected.
Chapter Eight

Conclusion

Historically, scripturally, and theologically, confession has had a significant role in the practice of Christianity, but not without diligent examination and debate about how precisely believers should practice the act. The Apostles heard the words of Christ, which proclaimed that all believers have the power to "bind and loose"—binding those sins which the believers feel necessary to bind or retain and loosing those sins which the believers feel necessary to loose or forgive (Matthew 16:19). This is the call to Christ’s people to forgive or retain one another’s sins, and it remains true today. The high call to Christ’s followers to hear one another’s confessions and, empowered by Christ, to pronounce forgiveness through God’s grace has been practiced amongst the faithful for centuries. In the earliest days of the Christian Church, individuals would gather together and seek reconciliation by confessing publically to one another. It is this same practice that Christians should humbly seek to perform as well today. While there are some who feel that this practice should take place in the privacy of a confessional, in a room alone with a member of the clergy or silently to God alone, public confession before God and one’s community is necessary in order to expose the breadth of one’s sins, and thus the believer is able to embrace reconciliation.

Many may also argue that the practice of public confession has led, not to the healing of the believer by allowing the individual to seek reconciliation, but to humiliation, and it has therefore caused more harm. By focusing on the humiliation of the sinner rather than the sins which have brought the individual to the lowly state, the
believer’s attention is taken away from the harm that has been done to his or her relationship with God and the community. By neglecting to see one’s sins or by avoiding admitting one’s sins through confession out of fear, one is not able to allow the community of believers to “loose” his or her sins, nor is the individual able to recognize her or his need for God’s grace. Failure to recognize God’s grace makes it nearly impossible for the individual to accept God’s grace, whether it comes from reconciliation with one’s fellow human being or from God.

In spite of the arguments, public confession has been and must continue to be a fundamental tenet of the practice of the Christian faith. Through diligent examination of one’s conscience, one is able to identify that which has taken place in the believer’s life that would be regarded as sin. By focusing on the sinful acts one has committed against God and one’s community, the believer is humbled. In this humble state, the believer is able to see exactly how he or she has harmed God and the surrounding ecclesial community through her or his thoughts, words, or deeds. A realization such as this compels the believer to reconcile with both God and the community by admitting all that has separated the individual from those he or she has harmed through thought, word, or deed. In order for full reconciliation with one’s community, all who are affected by a believer’s sinful acts should be present to witness his or her confession and pronounce forgiveness. This means that, at times, the believer must confess publically or before a given number of believers. It is the responsibility of the Church to foster an environment in which confession may take place without harm coming to the community or the individual so that growth and grace may abound.
The physical act of speaking one's sins to another—not only hearing one's own words aloud but also seeing the other person present—offers concrete evidence that another is listening to and understanding the one confessing. When one does not speak the words aloud or see the other person who is listening, one may not fully recognize the impact of his or her sins on the community, as well on God. To forget that one is called to confess one's sins to God as well as to the community, and that this community is called to hear one's confession, may lead to the believer disregarding the act entirely.

As frightening as it may appear at times, confession is liberating for the believer and is not meant to be detrimental to one's faith in any way. It is liberation from that which had once hindered relationships. It is liberation from bondage to sin. While forgiveness comes from God alone through the atoning work of Christ, confession verbalizes the believer's need and desire for grace and reconciliation, allowing grace to serve as the active agent of liberation from sin. Liberation such as this, thanks to God's grace, should outweigh the believer's desire to protect his or her self-esteem; thus he or she should not avoid public confession but instead celebrate it.
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Literature Crusade, 1980.


