

CONFESSION

# INSIGHTS

*The Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary*



SPRING 2010

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# INSIGHTS

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JESUS IN BANARAS

*Arun Jones*

# INTRODUCTION

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Every now and then, in congregations I have served, people have come to me to express a concern about the Confession and Pardon rite in our worship. “It’s out of date,” or “It’s a real downer,” many have said; “It makes people feel down on themselves.” Some have blamed the Confession of Sin as the reason that former members have left the church and joined another, presumably “anti-confession” church. Others have quarreled with the language of a particular Prayer of Confession, and have said such things as “I didn’t turn from my neighbors last week; and I didn’t pass by the hungry, the poor, and the oppressed.” These folks reflect a prominent train of thought in our culture—one which affirms that we all are happily enough self-actualized just as we are, and thus not really in need of ritually confronting such a negative concept as our personal or corporate “sin.”

Because there is such an enduring aversion to the role of Confession and Pardon in our world, it is a good thing that this issue of *Insights* examines deeply and thoughtfully this important rhythm, both liturgically and as a habit of the heart. In the pages to follow, Professor Allan Cole offers a splendid assessment of confession as a practice, exploring the theological, psychological, and spiritual benefits of it, as well as impediments to it. Allan’s contributions are followed by Michelle Gonzalez’ reflection upon the role of Confession in the ongoing conversion of the believer; Nico Koopman’s South African perspective on the way in which Confession opens doors to justice, reconciliation, and unity; Bonnie Miller-McLemore’s consideration of both the troubled history and present possibilities of one’s capacity to confess; and Paul Lakeland’s advocacy of a recovery of older traditions surrounding the sacrament of penance. This issue’s Pastors’ Panel features the practical reflections of three Austin Seminary alumni/ae—Britta Dukes and James Lee of Austin, and Dolly Hunt of Greensboro, North Carolina—as they assess both the values of and impediments to effective personal and corporate confession. Professor Gene March recommends Eboo Patel’s autobiography, *Acts of Faith*, and encourages it as a multi-generational read; and Professor Arun Jones shines light on the “Khris̄t Bhaktas” of Northern India in this issue’s Christianity and Culture column.

If you dive into this issue of *Insights*, you won’t be disappointed. Confession, after all, is hardly “out of date” but is instead a remarkably contemporary topic. As Professor Cole suggests, it is a profound experience of truth-telling in the context of relationship—with God, with our faith community, and with our own brokenness. I, for one, know of such truth-telling in the sanctity of trust with various other “confessors” across my life, and know as well, as I hope you do, of the release that comes when, as Professor Cole says, Christians conduct these conversations with one another “against the backdrop of God’s promises for forgiveness and redemption in Jesus Christ.”

Theodore J. Wardlaw  
*President, Austin Seminary*



# THE NEED TO CONFESS

ALLAN HUGH COLE JR.

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Confession is a conversion and a call to discipleship ...  
Genuine community is not established  
until confession takes place.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer  
*Broaching the Practice of Confession*<sup>1</sup>



When was the last time you confessed your sins? When did you last confess your sins to another person, face-to-face, in a private setting? If you are a professing Christian, when was the last time you confessed privately to your minister or to a member of your congregation?

Recently, I sent a questionnaire to 169 people exploring questions of confession.

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By confession I mean disclosing personal pain, and especially that associated with one's own transgressions, to God and to other persons. I asked recipients to respond to six sets of questions related to "disclosing something of significance to you—and something that was private, personal, awkward, or embarrassing—to another person (or persons)." The first question called for them to identify and explain what they disclosed. In subsequent questions I asked about the act of disclosing. Among other details, I wanted to know who people disclosed to and also how it felt, at the time and later, to have made the disclosure. Using an on-line research tool to distribute the survey, respondents' identities were unknown to me. They could be as honest and forthright as they wanted without feeling awkward about my linking particular disclosures to them.

I posed these questions to test a long-held belief. I believe that most people want and even need to disclose their personal pain, and especially their transgressions. To use biblical language, we have the desire and need to confess our sins, not only to God but also to other persons; and not confessing them proves painful and destructive. Perhaps we recognize the wisdom of Proverbs even if we do not always heed it, that "One who conceals ones sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy" (Prov. 28:13). To state it differently, we live with a desire and need to "come clean" and to aim differently in life when we have "missed the mark," the literal meaning of the word sin. Our desire and need persist even amid the most hurtful and egregious of our transgressions. When we confess our sins, whether to God or others, we experience relief, healing, grace, and gratefulness. As a result, we live less burdened lives, but we also experience a greater sense of accountability (to God and to other people) and a greater spiritual maturity. All of these observations inform one facet of the long-held belief that I wanted to test—that we have a need to confess our sins to other persons, and that doing so brings "God's benefits" (Ps.103:2).

On the other hand (and this gets us to a second facet of my belief), to the extent that they disclose personal pain and especially personal transgressions to others, many professing Christians do so more readily and frequently with their spouses, family members, close friends, or therapists, and less readily and frequently with their ministers or fellow church members. Furthermore, clergy rarely disclose to their colleagues, mentors, or judicatory-level spiritual advisors (e.g. bishops, district superintendents, or executive presbyters).

In my survey I intentionally did not ask directly about "confessing" or "confession." I wanted to see what types of responses would be offered to a more general request that did not come with particularly religious overtones.<sup>2</sup> I was interested, however, in learning whether any respondents, in identifying a particular disclosure, would use the language of "confess" or "confession," or the language of "sin." Whether they used any of this language or not, I wanted to know what informed their acts of disclosure, how it made them feel to make these disclosures, and, as significant as any of this, to whom they disclosed and why they chose the person or persons.

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## HOW WE CONFESS



Whereas some respondents reported the transgressions of others and how these had caused personal pain, more respondents identified their own transgressions and described the pain that these had caused themselves and others. Thus, the majority of respondents identified a personal sin that they confessed to another person and then described that experience.

I did not assume all responses would meet a definition of confession, but most did and a large number of responses also included the language of “confessing” or “confession.” Only a few responses, however, included the language of sin. Moreover, almost everyone who reported and reflected on a personal transgression also noted that the act of sharing helped them feel better, live differently, and move forward less burdened than they had been prior to making their confession. Most respondents also said that they would make the disclosure again to the same person in a similar manner. Several added that they only wish they had done so sooner. Confession proves helpful to many people.

At the same time, almost all respondents (82%) disclosed to a spouse, close friend, family member, or therapist. A relative few reported making disclosures to a minister (10%) or to a member of their faith community (6%). Note that “minister” here refers not only to one’s pastor but also to one’s clergy colleagues and supervisors, whether in local congregations or in institutional settings such as hospitals, and also to one’s spiritual director, which respondents defined in various ways. When we narrow the term “minister” to apply only to one’s pastor, barely 3% reported making their disclosure to him or her. As I expected, whereas many people reported disclosing their sins to other people and finding benefits with this, a relative few reported making disclosures to their pastors or siblings in faith.<sup>3</sup>

While people may confess to close associates, it has become a popular practice to “confess” anonymously at various websites. These include: Daily Confession.com or Group Hug (<http://confessions.grouphug.us>), or Secret Confessions (<http://www.secret-confessions.com>). It has also become popular to “confess” through postings on various social networks like Facebook, MySpace, or Twitter; or, in the case of celebrities, to confess through mass media. All of these approaches point to the fact that people want and need to confess. But these methods for maintaining anonymity remove some of the hard work and pain of confessing face-to-face to another human being and, consequently, remove some of the healing and character-building potential found in more personal acts of confession.

## A CALL TO CONFESSION



I am advocating for a broad-based approach to confession that includes private confession as well as corporate confession. This approach requires intentional efforts toward confessing our sins not only to God and not merely in the context of public worship, essential as these practices remain and which numerous Christian traditions rightfully embrace. We must also confess to other Christians, including our ministers, in both liturgical settings and in more intimate and even pri-

vate venues. For instance, we need confession in public worship, when many traditions of Christianity include corporate prayers of confession that worshippers recite together and then receive words of assurance that God has forgiven them their sins. We also need confession in one-on-one, face-to-face encounters between Christians, where liturgical forms (confessional acts, prayers, words of assurance) may or may not be included. The latter practice is sometimes referred to as “private confession.” Although less common in the Roman Catholic tradition since Vatican II, private confession nevertheless continues to be normative in Orthodox traditions. Rarely, however, do Protestant Christians embrace the practice of private confession, as suggested by responses to my survey.

Reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin, and more contemporary theologians such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, recognized the importance of so-called private confession along with public confession, and each urged that all Christians embrace and practice both forms. Calvin states beautifully the benefits of confessing with and to our fellow Christians when he writes, “We should lay our burdens on one another’s breasts, to receive among ourselves mutual counsel, mutual compassion, and mutual consolation,” and we should follow these efforts with prayer for one another.<sup>4</sup> With Calvin’s words in mind, I write particularly for Protestant Christians, the largest group within this publication’s readership and a group to which I belong, to encourage us to embrace what he, Luther, Bonhoeffer, and others have recognized as benefits for the faithful life, namely, the regular practice of confession broadly conceived.<sup>5</sup>

Calvin advocated for both public and private confession, but he explicitly ties the latter to “the cure of souls.” He notes that Scripture “approves two forms of private confession.”<sup>6</sup> The first is confession “made for our own sake,” as referred to in the Letter of James: “Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective” (Jam. 5:16). The second form of confession aims to assist our neighbor, “to appease him and to reconcile him to us if through fault of ours he has been in any way injured.”

Calvin also advocated for Christians making particular appeals to their pastors to serve as confessors and for pastors to welcome this privilege. He writes, “We must also preferably choose pastors inasmuch as they should be judged especially qualified above the rest. Now I say that they are better fitted than the others because the Lord has appointed them by the very calling of the ministry to instruct us by word of mouth to overcome and correct our sins, and also to give us consolations through the assurance of pardon [Matt. 16:19, 18:18, John 20:23].” Making an even stronger appeal, Calvin adds: “Let every believer remember that, if he be privately troubled and afflicted with a sense of sins, so that without outside help he is unable to free himself from them, it is a part of his duty not to neglect what the Lord has offered to him by way of remedy. Namely, that, for his relief, he should use private confession to his own pastor; and for his solace, he should beg the private help of him whose duty it is, both publicly and privately, to comfort the people of God by the gospel teaching.”

For Calvin, private confession takes on the status of a duty. Christians have a duty to respond faithfully to what God has offered them—namely, the opportunity to confess to one another but also to hear one another’s confessions, and to dispense comfort

to one another by appealing to the gospel's promise of God's forgiveness. All Christians have these duties and responsibilities. However, pastors hold particular responsibilities in this regard by virtue of their calling and office to which "the Lord has appointed them." Calvin refers to pastors as "ordained witnesses and sponsors of [divine mercy] to assure our consciences of forgiveness of sins." To be sure, Calvin has a high view of the pastoral office and high expectations for pastors as curers of souls. In my estimate, the church does well to reclaim his view, particularly in the present age, and not simply for the purposes of confession but for the purposes of ministry more broadly conceived.

Calvin's thinking about confession may be traced to Luther, who suggested that Christians should confess three ways: in daily prayers to God, in public worship, and also in more intimate conversations with other Christians.<sup>7</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer largely concurred with Luther's and Calvin's thinking, referring to confession as "the heart of spiritual care." Bonhoeffer especially supported the practice of personal confession offered to other Christians, including pastors and fellow church members, recalling Luther's well-known statement from the Large Catechism: "When I exhort people to confession, I am exhorting them to be Christians."<sup>8</sup>

Luther, Calvin, and Bonhoeffer each recognized that Scripture pays a good deal of attention to the act of confession, which indicates its significance for people of faith. As the Psalmist declares, "For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,' and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them" (Ps. 32:4-6). Similarly, as the First Letter of John points out, "If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). Whereas we may regularly confess our sins publicly in Sunday worship, we may do so less regularly in more private or intimate settings. Yet the Bible tells us that the practice of confessing fulfills one's responsibility toward God, but that it also serves to ease one's burdens when one shares them with other people of faith: "confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed" (James 5:16).

### PRIVATE CONFESSION EASES BURDENS



How exactly does private confession ease burdens?<sup>9</sup> Confessing our sins aloud to another person helps us identify those sins with directness and honesty. This practice also encourages us to take greater ownership of our sins and greater responsibility for their effects precisely because we have shared them with others who may hold us accountable.

Several additional benefits may follow. As Bonhoeffer suggests, these benefits include deepened and new relationships, or what he calls "breakthroughs."<sup>10</sup> These include breakthroughs with the community of faith, which we recognize as a community of sinners in need of redemption but also of people like ourselves who will hear our confessions, which we value more than ever; breakthroughs with the cross of

Christ, which involves a deeper sharing in Christ's suffering and humiliation because we recognize our own complicity in sin as well as the complicity of others; breakthroughs in our new life in Christ, our discipleship, as we turn from a sinful past to follow Jesus (Bonhoeffer calls this conversion); and also breakthroughs relating to the profound assurance of our status as forgiven by God, which comes with certitude of God's love and which Christians may dispense to one another generously. Moreover, by helping us understand our experience of sin more deeply and authentically, confession made to other Christians fosters the breakthrough of learning to accept responsibility for our transgressions more readily by strengthening our resolve to go forward living differently than before—that is, in a different relationship to the sin or burden. This kind of resolve may lead to yet another benefit, namely, that our struggle holds less power in our life.

Openly acknowledging burdens (including sins) breeds courage. When we confess, we discover that although our struggles or transgressions may be significant and enduring, we can acknowledge them without being consumed by them. Acknowledging transgressions, especially to another person, often serves to remove the “suffering in suffering” that comes with denial or secrecy, both of which can lead to the assumption that we alone struggle and that we struggle alone.<sup>11</sup>

In light of these benefits, we need to reclaim private confession with a minister or sibling in faith. We must also engage the more common practice of corporate confession in worship, perhaps as we continue confessing to spouses, close friends, family members, therapists, and other close associates, too. Yet private confession should hold a central place in our lives of discipleship.

The basis for private confession lies not in the need to have a pastor or priest intercede for us before God or absolve our sins. Luther was correct in recognizing the theological error informing such a view of intercession. Rather, confessing verbally to another human being, and especially one who represents the Christian faith, involves a kind of intimacy and truth-telling that occurs against the backdrop of God's promises in Jesus Christ, which offer forgiveness, redemption, and peace.

Having our own truth-telling met by these promises enriches our relationships with God and the faith community, and it also changes our relationship to our sins. Specifically, this practice serves efforts to “bear one another's burdens” (Gal. 6:2) in ways that Scripture calls for, so that we no longer carry our sins alone. This practice also serves efforts to “externalize” what has been confessed.<sup>12</sup> By externalize I mean that we can, in a sense, objectify our sins by taking them out of us, examining them and relating to them in different, less destructive ways. In turn, we may recognize our sin as something that was once “in us” and destructive for us, but now is “outside us” (external to us) and holds less power over us. Similarly, we may view our sin as not essential to who we are—as not being definitive in our lives—but rather as a problem, burden, struggle, or evil that has affected us. Although this problem could affect us again, we see that it need not affect us in the same way, if it affects us at all.

This act of externalizing our sin (our problem) allows us also to work with it, and live with it, in new and presumably more faithful ways. One may learn to engage in an externalizing process through self-talk, meaning without speaking with another person.

However, externalization proves most effective when utilized in interpersonal conversations because others hear us, receive us in our brokenness, and yet hold us accountable as we seek to “sin no more.” Christians benefit from regularly conducting these conversations with one another against the backdrop of God’s promises for forgiveness and redemption in Jesus Christ.

The practice of confession is underutilized in Protestant faith communities. Although many traditions include a corporate prayer of confession in worship services, this alone proves insufficient for meeting many people’s needs to disclose sin and other personal pain. Further evidence for this underutilization may be found in the fact that many Protestant Christians look easily and regularly to therapists and counselors to serve as their confessors. This phenomenon certainly confirms the common need for one to disclose one’s struggles to another person, and I heartily endorse this practice. At the same time, this phenomenon raises questions regarding why comparatively few Protestant Christians think of their ministers or fellow church members as primary persons to whom personal pain, including sinfulness, may be disclosed.

### WHAT GETS IN THE WAY OF CONFESSION?



If disclosing our personal transgressions (sins) privately to our siblings in faith and especially to our ministers is both faithful and helpful, and yet proves difficult for many of us, especially as compared to reciting corporate prayers of confession during public worship services, then we do well to inquire further about some reasons for this difficulty. Although several reasons come to mind, I want to mention a few that may hold a particularly powerful influence and to suggest how we may move beyond their effects to embrace confession and its benefit in our lives.

First, people feel ashamed to disclose their transgressions to “church folks.”<sup>13</sup> This shame tends to link with assumptions, whether implicit or explicit, that one must be “good,” “pure,” or otherwise “have it all together” to go to church and take part in the faith community. These assumptions may prove especially influential when one’s experience in the church has been marked by hurtful criticism or judgment coming from church members or leaders. This is true when such criticism is aimed toward oneself, but also when it’s aimed toward others. In other words, when members of a faith community openly criticize, judge, or otherwise speak harshly of those who fall short of expectations for the Christian life—for those who commit sins—this criticism may make any who hear it more reluctant to share their own burdens tied to personal transgressions.

In this same vein, my own experiences, both as minister and church member, tell me that even the best intentioned congregations may not create as accepting an environment as they could to receive people with messy lives. I have in mind here an environment that invites people to “come as you are, especially as you struggle with imperfections and continue toward becoming the person God desires you to be.” In faith communities where such invitations remain absent or less obvious, people participate in church life most fully when they have it more or less “together,” a status that waxes and wanes for all of us, and these same people feel less inclined to share their struggles

with messiness (sin).

How might we do better in this regard? It takes concerted efforts by church leaders and church members alike to cultivate an ethos of hospitality toward sinners. By that I mean an ethos of “come as you are.” Fostering this ethos becomes especially difficult when one views it as possible only by not taking sin and its effects seriously. Congregations that seek to promote inclusiveness often get dubbed as endorsing an “anything goes” creed. But faith communities can take sin seriously, by which I mean recognizing its destruction and working with a commitment to condemn it and curb it, without becoming exclusive of those with messy lives (and we all have messy lives). We need look no farther than to Jesus for our cue here. He is the one who said to the woman caught in adultery, “Go your way, and from now on do not sin again” (John 8:11), but also the one who said to those who wished to stone this woman, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (John 8:7). Jesus made a similar observation to those who faulted him for eating with sinners and tax collectors, who represent in Scripture people with the messiest of lives: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners” (Mark. 2:17; see also Matt. 9:12 and Luke 5:31-32). Jesus took sin seriously and condemned it even as he continued to welcome sinners with open arms. Congregations that make this kind of hospitality explicit in their shared lives invite people of faith to confess their sins with the confidence that they do so among kindred souls, all of whom stand in need of the assurance of God’s forgiveness and redemption as promised by the gospel.

Ministers and other leaders may also foster a congregational ethos marked by Jesus’ example of hospitality as they have the courage to admit publicly their own mistakes, transgressions, struggles, or life’s messiness in appropriate ways. I say “appropriate” ways in that a line exists between sharing one’s shortcomings as an invitation for others to do the same while pointing to the grace and mercies of God, and sharing one’s shortcomings as a way merely to draw attention to oneself or one’s situation. I am advocating the former approach, for when ministers or other leaders become too much the focus of the sermon, the lesson, or another aspect of congregational life in which they disclose their transgressions, their disclosures draw attention away from others in the group and thereby carry less redemptive possibilities for them. As I often put it in class, “Better to bleed a little during an occasional Sunday’s sermon than to hemorrhage from the pulpit week after week.”

An ethos of hospitality also arises from ministers and church members squelching their own harsh judgments of “sinners” and as they challenge persons in their communities making similar judgments. Its one thing to recognize sin and to condemn it, It’s something much different to further humiliate or exclude those who have missed the mark, especially “since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23).

An ethos of hospitality also follows from congregations engaging ministries with individuals and groups of persons who have identified publicly that they don’t have it all together, that they have messy lives. Of course, if we attune ourselves to those we sit beside in our pews, or if we look into our mirrors, we’ll recognize messy lives there, too. But what I have in mind here includes ministry beyond one’s church doors, to persons

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who note their struggles with sins related to such things as addictions, poverty, racism, sexuality, mental illness, excess, or greed, all of which may be our own sins, too. I have in mind, further, ministries that entail more than simply financial support. I mean ministries that call us to sit face-to-face and arm-in-arm with those living messy lives, which we may discover resemble our own lives in certain ways. These ministries reflect faithfulness to Jesus' example and calling upon those who follow him. These ministries also serve to give us permission, and even courage, to address our own messes more directly and to be more inclined to journey with others through theirs', all of which may foster a greater propensity to share these messes with others in our faith communities. Extending hospitality encourages Christians to face our transgressions more intentionally and in solidarity precisely because we recognize that "all have sinned and fall short of the Glory of God" (Rom. 3:23).

There is nothing novel in what I suggest here. We find ample evidence in both Scripture and tradition for hospitality, particularly toward sinners, marking a faithful approach to following Jesus. Furthermore, many congregations already practice this kind of faithfulness to Jesus' example. Yet given the current attractions that large groups of Christians have to a gospel of success or the prosperity gospel, which perpetuates the idea that with God's love and favor comes various forms of inevitable success—financial, relational, spiritual, physical, or other—we need to hear louder, clearer, and more informed voices among those who understand and embrace a different approach to the Christian life because they hold to a different Good News.

Another reason for difficulty with private confession relates to ministers and church members not keeping sensitive information in their confidences, especially when this failure leads to destructive gossip. I have known ministers and church folks who have difficulties with this practice of keeping confidences. A result is that people feel reluctant to disclose their most personal experiences, particularly awkward or embarrassing ones, because they fear that these may become more widely known and also that others in the community may judge or criticize them. I have known ministers who were excellent preachers, teachers, and administrators, but their pastoral ministry was inevitably compromised because people in their care did not trust them to keep appropriate confidences. The same could be said about other people I have known in congregational life, and in seminary life, too. Perhaps this essay will prompt you to consider your own practices with keeping appropriate confidences and not engaging in destructive gossip.

So convinced am I that many of us need improvement with this practice of keeping confidences, in my introductory pastoral care and counseling courses I speak of it directly and repetitively. I underscore my belief that at the end of the day ministers (whether ordained or not) maintain their integrity by holding what others share with them as sacrosanct, which means that we view it as privileged information and that it does not become fodder for destructive gossip or other unnecessary discussion. Unfortunately, many church members perceive that sensitive information they share with others might not remain undisclosed.

A few simple practices encourage us to do better in this regard. One entails reminding ourselves of the privilege and responsibility tied to listening to another per-

son with pastoral ears. When someone opens his or her life to us, inviting us to share in its intimate details, we may simply say to ourselves (and maybe to the one who opens up to us) something like this: “I will treat this information as sacred and I am honored that you would entrust me with it.” And repeating this several times, at least to ourselves, may serve to help us internalize this practice. Another approach involves conveying this same value to the curious in our midst—clergy colleagues, church members, family members (whether our own or others’) who want to know the “scoop”—such that we indicate that we take our duties and responsibilities as “confessors” seriously because we recognize that these come from God. If we embrace a high view of the pastoral office, or a high view of the life of discipleship, we cannot discount the role of keeping confidences for maintaining Christian integrity and faithfulness.

### HOW WE MAY CONFESS



One’s approach to confessing with a minister or with siblings in faith may vary, and several approaches may prove fruitful. We may choose to meet informally with these persons and simply share from the heart what we need to share, such that no particular method is required. I encourage this approach, and you may feel most drawn to it, especially if you identify most closely and comfortably with a less liturgically-centered Christian tradition. Here, however, I want to suggest a way to practice private and corporate confession more intentionally while incorporating liturgical aids.<sup>14</sup> Specifically, I want to mention three rich examples of what may be termed “Confessional Liturgies” and to include one of these liturgies for your closer consideration. Space will not allow comment on them, but I urge you to consider making use of them in your own confessional practices.

The first liturgy, a rite called “The Reconciliation of a Penitent,” is found in the *Book of Common Prayer* of the Episcopal Church, in the section “Pastoral Offices.”<sup>15</sup> The second liturgy, called “Individual Confession and Forgiveness,” is found in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s *Lutheran Book of Worship*.<sup>16</sup>

A third liturgy, found in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s *Book of Common Worship*, is called “A Service of Repentance and Forgiveness for Use with a Penitent Individual.”<sup>17</sup> It has a rather cumbersome title but it offers a sound approach to private confession, with one’s minister and one’s siblings in faith. Here is the order of service.

#### **A Service of Repentance and Forgiveness for Use with a Penitent Individual<sup>18</sup>**

##### *Outline*

Invitation to Confession  
Prayer of Confession  
Declaration of Forgiveness  
The Peace

##### **Invitation to Confession**

*The minister ... or other member of the Christian community invites their confession of sin together, saying:*

If we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

N., join me in a prayer of confession.

### **Prayer of Confession**

*Prayed in unison*

Merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart and mind and strength; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves [particular sins may be named here]. In your mercy forgive what we have been, help us amend what we are, and direct what we shall be, so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways, to the glory of your holy name.

### **Declaration of Forgiveness**

*The assurance of God's forgiving grace is declared to the penitent in these or similar words.*

The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting. I declare to you, in the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven. May the God of mercy, who forgives all your sins, strengthen you in all goodness, and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep you in eternal life. Amen.

### **The Peace**

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your heart and your mind in Christ Jesus. Amen.

*A sign of peace may be shared here.*

## SERVING ONE ANOTHER



Above my desk in my office at Austin Seminary hangs a painting titled “Divine Servant.”<sup>19</sup> It depicts a scene from what we call Maundy Thursday, when Jesus met with his disciples on the night before he was killed and demonstrated his love and care for them through the humble act of washing their feet. While washing Peter’s feet and hearing his objections to this act, Jesus’ words to his disciples were: “If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (John 13:14-15).

While gazing upon that image, I realize that daring to confess our sins to one another, and holding this privilege as both sacred and beautiful, is to become divine servants. In this act we humbly demonstrate our love and care for one another, and our trust that God somehow takes part. We do so, moreover, as we journey together, fellow pilgrims in faith, seeking to serve God, one another, and the world in Jesus Christ, and to serve in all the togetherness and messiness joined to our journeys. Both of these acts,

washing feet, offering and hearing confessions, are sacred in that they foster what Calvin wanted for us and what I believe Jesus would want, too—namely, that “We should lay our burdens on one another’s breasts, to receive among ourselves mutual counsel, mutual compassion, and mutual consolation,” and we should follow these efforts with prayer for one another.<sup>20</sup>

Much is at stake when we broach the act of confession in ways that I have advocated. Confessing sins and serving as confessors requires courage, trust, and fidelity, to God and to one another. These confessional acts also require that we not misuse the power that persons inevitably give us when becoming vulnerable by disclosing their pain. And yet, a richer confessional life offers God’s benefits (Ps. 103:2). It fosters eagerness to serve one another in ways that the Gospel invites. It helps us relinquish some of the burdens that come with hiding our transgressions, so that we change our relationship to our sins in faithful ways. With a richer confessional life we may grow more and more into the hope, joy, and grace that is ours precisely because God has forgiven us and we may forgive one another in the name of Christ. ❧

## NOTES

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Spiritual Care*, trans. Jay C. Rochelle (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985), 63.

2. The large majority of recipients and respondents to the questionnaire identify as professing Christians, most of whom identify as Protestants.

3. It is possible, of course, that spouses, family members, and close friends would be siblings in faith (fellow church members), but presumably the determining factor in choosing to make a disclosure to these people was familial or filial relationships, not one’s status as a fellow church member, Christian, or believer. Respondents indicated that this is an accurate interpretation when detailing why they chose their particular confessors.

4. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1:630.

5. Note that I can only sketch ideas in this essay that are more fully developed along with additional claims in my forthcoming book, *I Must Confess: Disclosing Personal Sin and Finding Peace* (working title) (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans).

6. All of the citations from Calvin come from the *Institutes*. See John Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:636-637

7. Bonhoeffer, *Spiritual Care*, 60.

8. *Ibid.*, 61.

9. For a fuller discussion of the power of confession, see Allan Hugh Cole Jr., *Be Not Anxious: Pastoral Care of Disquieted Souls* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008), 210-213.

10. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together/Prayerbook of the Bible*, in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 5, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly; trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness; gen. editor, Wayne Whitson Floyd (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 108-118.

11. “Suffering in suffering” is Jürgen Moltmann’s phrase, see *The Crucified God* (1974; repr., Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 46.

12. Here I appeal to a concept of narrative therapy, “externalizing the problem,” which was identified and first developed by Michael White and David Epston in the 1980s and early 1990s

and was influenced by the thought of Michel Foucault. See Michael White and David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990); Alan Parry and Robert E. Doan, *Story Re-Visions: Narrative Therapy in the Postmodern World* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1994); and Michael White, *Maps of Narrative Practice* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007)

13. I especially have in mind here church experiences informed by what Donald Capps has termed “shame-based theologies.” These fail to distinguish between feelings of guilt linked to “what we have done or not done,” which are more easily dealt with, and feelings of shame linked to “who I am,” which often prove more difficult and even destructive. Shame-based theologies inform and perpetuate experiences of self-estrangement, self-deficiency, and self-depletion. See Donald Capps, *The Depleted Self: Sin in a Narcissistic Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

14. I have written more extensively about the benefits of incorporating liturgical resources for the life of prayer, and similar benefits apply to the practice of confession. See Allan Hugh Cole Jr., *The Life of Prayer: Mind, Body, and Soul* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), esp. 101-111.

15. An online version may be found at <http://www.bcponline.org>, accessed 12.30.09. See also *Book of Common Prayer* (Seabury Press, 1979), 446-452.

16. *Lutheran Book of Worship, Minister’s Desk Edition* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House; Philadelphia: Board of Publication, Lutheran Church in America, 1978; repr. 2001) 322-323.

17. In a separate survey, I asked 100 people, most of who identify as members of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (57%), about their familiarity with this particular service. Although 30% of respondents were familiar with the service, only 5% had participated in one (this includes all the Presbyterians who responded). However, with regard to “services of wholeness and healing,” 87% of respondents were familiar with these, and 84% had participated in one. Thirty-five percent of respondents had participated in such a service ten times or more.

18. *Book of Common Worship*, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 1023-1024. Used by permission. Note that “A Service for Wholeness For Use with an Individual” may be utilized in conjunction with the Service for Repentance and Forgiveness.” See pp. 1018-1022.

19. The work of this Texas artist Max Greiner Jr. encompasses religious themes.

20. John Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:630.

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*Coming in the Fall 2010 issue:*  
**PROFESSOR WHIT BODMAN**  
**ON READING THE SCRIPTURES OF OTHER FAITHS**

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## ALLAN HUGH COLE JR.: CONFESSION: TOWARD INTIMACY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

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### **In a nutshell, what is it that private confession offers that corporate confession doesn't?**

I think we hear ourselves speak differently one-on-one than we do in public settings. We speak more intimately. We're accountable to one other in unique ways. When I confess something important to you about my life—whether it is a sin or something else—the act of doing that helps me understand, own, and maybe even atone for what it is I have done.

I also don't take lightly the biblical charge to confess to one another as brothers and sisters in faith, as fellow Christians on the way. Private confession is faithful to God, faithful to one another, and faithful to the lives of discipleship we are all embracing.

This isn't to say that publicly confessing together is unimportant. But private confession is as essential as public confession and—in my experience and my tradition—is oftentimes not attended to.

### **Why do you think we've been negligent in this area in the Presbyterian Church and other mainline denominations?**

We can trace one reason back to Luther's emphasis on "the priesthood of all believers." Luther tried to correct what he understood to be a theological error in the church by noting that we really don't need other human beings to intercede before God on our behalf. Each of us has, if you will, an opportunity to address God directly. I think he's right about this. But theologians such as Luther, Calvin, and Bonhoeffer never argue to get rid of so-called private confession in order to embrace public confession. They want a both/and scenario.

### **How much of our reticence to engage in the practice of private confession has to do with our cultural milieu and values?**

Many cultural norms, I think, enter into play. Not the least of these is a kind of prizing of religious privatization. Contemporary Protestants seem to think that religious faith is about my personal relationship with God, or my spirituality. Oftentimes this is reflected in comments such as: "I'm not religious but I'm spiritual." What this seems to mean is, "I'm very private in my understanding of faith," or "My business is my business, whether it's financial, religious, spiritual, parenting, whatever."

I think it is also important to recognize the churches' responsibility in this. I'm talking about the practice of keeping confidences. Folks have to know that if and when they do disclose to their clergy—and also their other siblings in faith—that this dislo-



I ALSO DON'T TAKE LIGHTLY THE BIBLICAL CHARGE TO CONFESS TO ONE ANOTHER AS BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN FAITH, AS FELLOW CHRISTIANS ON THE WAY. PRIVATE CONFESSION IS FAITHFUL TO GOD, FAITHFUL TO ONE ANOTHER, AND FAITHFUL TO THE LIVES OF DISCIPLESHIP WE ARE ALL EMBRACING. THIS ISN'T TO SAY THAT PUBLICLY CONFESSING TOGETHER IS UNIMPORTANT. BUT PRIVATE CONFESSION IS AS ESSENTIAL AS PUBLIC CONFESSION AND—IN MY EXPERIENCE AND MY TRADITION—IS OFTENTIMES NOT ATTENDED TO.

sure will be held as sacred information and treated appropriately.

We should also be careful not to present the church as a place where those who “have it together” live and dwell; a place where you have to have your best face on and your best clothes ironed if you want to be part of us. This is, of course, in direct contrast to the biblical witness to the purpose for “church,” and particularly to Jesus’ words that “Those who are well have no need of the physician, but rather those who are sick.” I think “sick” is a metaphor that has to do with all of us, since all of us have messiness in our lives.

**What does power have to do with private confessing and keeping confidences?**

Confession is a vulnerable act. And any time we’re vulnerable we yield some measure of power to those we’re vulnerable to. This is, in part, because knowledge is power. If I know something about you—particularly something that’s sensitive, awkward, embarrassing—I have a kind of power over you, because I can choose how, or how not, to use that kind of knowledge. I don’t think there’s any way of getting around that entirely. And frankly, I don’t think we need to get around it entirely. I think one of the reasons confession is edifying is because it calls us to vulnerability in ways we aren’t typically called to.

But what it means, I think, is that those who hear confessions (and I mean particularly clergy here, but not exclusively clergy) have to be disciplined and faithful with regard to what they do with this kind of information. We need to maintain integrity. The more we practice such integrity, the more it becomes a habit that forms us and shapes the way we interact with people, so that we're not constantly thinking about it and reminding ourselves of it. Rather, it simply becomes more internally a part of who we are. The best pastors and the best leaders in faith communities, I think, are those who have a way of conveying to people that who you are and what you share with me is sacred. And that goes a long way, I think, toward establishing the kind of ethos I'm wanting all of us to embrace.

**It seems to me that many of us are uncomfortable receiving confessions. It's hard to bear the burden of knowing the details of someone else's sin.**

I think that's absolutely right. And I think it's not only hearing confessions that's difficult for many of us, it's hearing pain—whether it's experiences of loss or infidelity or dreams that have gone unfulfilled, or other kinds of failures. Hearing these things is difficult because intimacy is difficult for many of us. We talk, in pastoral care courses, about ways of tuning in to your own anxiety around these things. I teach students that, when they notice themselves getting anxious about what they're hearing, to remind themselves not to cut the person off, not to minimize what they're saying or dismiss it out of their own discomfort, but to try to find ways to sit with the discomfort such that the experience will be meaningful for both of you, but particularly for the person who is needing to share something difficult.

A concrete example that I often use with students is people who are uncomfortable going to visit someone in the hospital. What I say to folks is, "It's wonderful that you are aware of all this discomfort, stay aware of it. But make yourself go and visit anyway." And over time my experience has been that, although you may never become completely comfortable, you will be more comfortable and have fewer obstacles in the way of ministering to people. Practices that are done over the long haul, I believe, really do become inseparable from who we are.

**What words of wisdom do you have for those who don't like the corporate prayer of confession because they feel it's too negative?**

I heard these concerns when I was a pastor. People would complain that "right out of the gate we're confessing our sins" and putting "a negative bent on our worship service." What I want to say to folks about this is: to proclaim redemption without paying attention to what is in need of being redeemed is to sort of miss out on half of the Gospel story. What is Easter without Good Friday? What is the resurrection without the cross? What is redemption without a recognition, acknowledgment, confession of our sins? And I think that's as important a theological question to dig in on today as maybe it's ever been, certainly in my lifetime, particularly in light of what I refer to in the essay as "the Gospel of Prosperity." As followers of Jesus Christ, we need to attend to more than only the positive and generous aspects of our lives.

I think another way of saying what I'm trying to say here is I think that we need a strong theology of the cross. And a focus on confession helps us strengthen this theology.

**Many people reading your article are on Facebook and/or Twitter several times a day; they probably also watch at least some reality television. Are not all of these, in one sense, public forums for private confession? How does our engagement with social networking impact the way we think about private and corporate confession, and particularly about the distinction between them?**

I think of Facebook as an in-between space. It's both pseudo public and pseudo intimate. You really don't have the kind of accountability when posting something on Facebook that you or I have sitting across from one another face-to-face.

If I disclose something on Facebook, something different is going on vis-à-vis accountability, ownership, intimacy, and looking at my transgressions in direct kinds of ways. There's an emotional distancing that happens inevitably, I think, in cyberspace. I hear many people offering the reminder that, "We've never been more connected than we are now." And I think on one level that's true. We are more connected via technology with people we grew up with or family members or colleagues than we've ever been.

But I'd also argue that I think there's erosion going on. The more connected we become in these ways, this less intimate we may become in others. This is because less is at stake when I'm sitting in front of a keyboard confessing to you, and you're hearing my confession on the other end, than when we're sitting across from one another eye-to-eye, face-to-face, and being vulnerable with one another in that kind of way. I don't want to devalue the merits of Facebook, but I do want to insist we need more than Facebook confessions. We need more than anonymous confessions. We need more than corporate confessions in the context of worship. And maybe what I'm suggesting is an addition that will prove faithful and fruitful. ✦

## THE LOST ART OF CONFESSION A CATHOLIC REFLECTION

PAUL LAKELAND

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My earliest memories of confession, back in the 'fifties, are good ones. In Catholic elementary school we were led to church to go to confession once a week, but this was fine with us because gentle old Fr. Anselm always gave each of us a light penance and, simultaneously, a handful of candy pushed under the grille that separated us from him. However, good memories or not, Catholic people in general don't "go to confession" any more. While larger (but not large) numbers of Catholics avail themselves of spiritual direction than in years gone by, the long lines outside "the box" every Saturday afternoon are a thing of the past. They may return, though I doubt it, and yet it is unlikely that people are sinning less than they did in the pre-Vatican II church. So what do they do with their sin these days, when the blessed release of sacramental absolution is no longer sought? Whatever there is to the charge that such a mechanical approach to forgiving sin deserved to die, there was nothing like that feeling, emerging from the confessional, that it was spring again and anything was possible. Even though you were probably going to be back in a week or two with the same woeful catalogue of personal failings.

After the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) the Catholic Church set out to replace the old style confessional, with the anonymity of the screen between penitent and priest, with a face-to-face encounter in a "reconciliation room." Confession was renamed, with impeccable theological sensitivity, "the sacrament of reconciliation." Penitents were encouraged to abandon the laundry list of sins, with a precise count of each ("Father, I broke the library rules thirteen times and I was uncharitable five times") and substitute a narrative report of how the Spirit was at work in their lives and how



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they were dealing with their particular weaknesses. It all seemed such a healthy and sensitive reformation.

But nobody came. They abandoned the old-style, mysterious confessional, but they didn't take to the warm and welcoming reconciliation room in which they would sit face-to-face with the priest. There surely isn't a single Catholic book or movie written before 1970 in which the confessional doesn't figure prominently. Indeed, the time-warp that Hollywood is in as far as the Catholic Church is concerned means that most Catholic-themed movies even today include at least a glimpse of the box. But very few even of devout Catholics have much to do, any more, with confessional or reconciliation room. People will say quite correctly, of course, that they don't need to confess to a priest, that they can talk directly to God and be forgiven. But just as I don't need to go to the gym to stay healthy, the routine may help my weak will; so, too, the ritual of confession may help to concretize our good intentions to seek God's forgiveness. Without it, we may find ourselves forgetting our sinfulness or, even worse, forgiving ourselves.

So we seem to be faced with at least a couple of questions. In the first place, just what was it that took the steam out of the Catholic will to participate in a rite of penance at the precise moment when its name changed from "confession" to "reconciliation"? Was it the name-change itself, or something a little more elusive? And second, how come confession or reconciliation is so unfashionable at a time when memoir has seemingly become what everyone wants to write and self-revelation on TV is a new sport (even, on shows like Jerry Springer, a contact sport)? If we are scripting ourselves for a particular kind of celebrity that goes with sharing your shame with millions, why are we so reluctant to let God in on the story?

A backward look would rapidly alert us that confession predates the therapeutic generation by a couple of millennia, and so perhaps we should ask ourselves if the problem might be that in the well-intentioned effort to make confession therapeutic we removed the very thing that made it so satisfying to many generations of past Catholics. Confession was a way of managing guilt, after all. That's why the birds were always singing after you left the confessional, however rainy the day. Confession, week in and week out, was a reminder that I am a sinner and this is a condition that cannot be cured. Sure, absolution meant reconciliation with God, especially if the sin had been grave ("mortal," we called them, serious sins like murder, rape, and missing Mass on Sunday). But this was the routine reconciliation, as everyday as the sins themselves, and in the regularity of sin/confession/sin/confession nestled the important religious message that we are *simul iustus et peccator*, that we are always sinners and always already forgiven.

Building a reconciliation room and staffing it with a priest who would look you in the eye and who wanted to help was a signal that Catholics needed something less routine, less mechanical than the weekly or bi-weekly shuffle through the line of penitents and the catalogue of sins muttered to a priest behind a screen who, one sometimes suspected, was reading the sports page and not listening all that carefully. Inasmuch as this signaled the need for spiritual direction it was entirely timely. But unintentionally no doubt it may have introduced the notion of progress into the sacrament. Go less fre-

quently, place your sinfulness in the context of “all that is going on in your life,” and maybe, just maybe, you’ll become holier or more together. We run the danger of forgetting that sacraments ritualize some element of our relationship to God when we personalize it too much. The presider at the Eucharist who puts too much of his or her personality into the liturgy occludes the clarity of the empty space within which God comes to us. Similarly, the substitution of the therapist for the confessor makes the sacrament of penance a good deal more about where I go from here and too little about the essential nature of the God/human person relationship. In confession I am not here to placate God and I am certainly not here to take a small step towards sanctity. I am here to recognize my sinfulness in the confidence that I am already forgiven and, indeed, already holy.

So here is a liberal Catholic theologian advocating a return to a more routinized sacrament of penance. It won’t and shouldn’t replace spiritual direction and it must not be mistaken for therapy. But it will be a salutary reminder that we are all sinners and so that we are all already forgiven. It is a supremely healthy spiritual practice and a remedy for self-righteousness. The world could use more of it. ❧

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## “I CONFESS ...”

MICHELLE A. GONZALEZ

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I confess that I lied during my first confession. I was a young child, and as I sat among my catechism classmates in a row on the wooden pews of our rather cold and stark Catholic church, I panicked. I had very few sins to recount, and I was worried that the priest would think I was lying about my lack of sin. So to avoid the accusation of lying about sins I had committed, I instead lied about sins I had not committed. The priest accepted the real and fake sins with the same nod and grunt. I knew quite well the sins of childhood: a stolen piece of gum, a fight with a sibling, disobedience of one's parents. Like a pro, I rattled off lies and was absolved for the things I did not commit. Yet the sin of lying remained unabsolved, even to this day. And so began my ambiguous and rocky history with the sacrament of reconciliation, a central sacrament within Roman Catholicism throughout the globe.

I have thought a lot about why I lied that day. And while we could disregard the sin that continues to taint my soul as childhood fear and foolishness, I think my need to lie, my need to be more sinful than I really was at the young age of eight, reveals something deeper about Roman Catholic anthropology and guilt. I was not sinful enough for the perception of humanity transmitted to me as a child in my Catholic Sunday school class (known as CCD). There a picture of humanity constantly falling into temptation, seduced by various desires, essentially sinful, plagued our childhood imaginations. And today, as an adult, as a theologian, I often wonder if the image of humanity today embraced by the church is so different from the fear of God (literally) instilled in me as a child.

Catholic theology teaches us that we are created in the image of God, yet that



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image has been tainted and sullied by the sin of our first parents, Adam and Eve. Though Catholicism today does not claim that Adam and Eve were historical figures, nonetheless the essential message of the story remains true. We are created by God. As part of God's creation we are good. God gave us the gift of free will. However, humanity, based on our arrogance and pride, turned away from God and sin entered into this world. That sin is described in many terms, but for me, I am most comfortable describing it as alienation from God and consequently alienation from our fellow human being. This alienation becomes the state in which humanity comes into existence, described in the theological category of original sin.

Original sin defines the human being as existing in a corrupted state, where the image of God is clouded within us. While that image is healed through God's grace, the mark of that alienation continues to challenge us throughout our lives. This defective human nature often leads us to turn away from God and mistakenly believe that we can find our true destiny apart from a life directed toward the sacred. We are constantly struggling against concupiscence, misguided lust, and desire. Through God's grace we are reoriented back to God, we reject those things that impede our relationship with our Creator. Ultimately sin is a grave offense against God. It damages our communion with God, with each other, and with the church. The gravity of sin can become a destructive force in our lives, one that can be healed through the sacrament of confession.

Reconciliation is one of two sacraments of healing, the other being the anointing of the sick. The anointing of the sick is intended to bring spiritual comfort to the sick, and is not exclusively a last rite on one's death bed. For non-Catholics, the rite of confession is one that often evokes the most incredulity and wonder. Protestant colleagues wonder why one cannot confess one's sins to God and be directly forgiven by God. The role of the priest in this ritual is often misunderstood. Within the sacrament of reconciliation the priest is the intermediary between believers and God. The foundation of this sacrament is found in the gospel of John, where Jesus proclaims: "Those whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven. Those whose sins you shall retain, they are retained." (John 20:23). The sacrament of confession is grounded in the belief that God's grace and forgiveness must be encountered in the church. Our sinful state not only alienates us from God but also from the church. Through Penance we are reconciled with God and the church.

Through confession, also known as penance or reconciliation, we begin our journey to respond to Jesus' call to conversion to a life centered on the Christian God. This is a conversion of the heart and soul, and cannot be faked or merely a façade of outward appearances. It is a return to God, a return to our authentic path in communion with the sacred, a path that is constantly tested by the (original) sin that dwells within us. Through the act of confessing to a priest, God's ultimate love and forgiving heart is revealed, and we are thus reconciled with God. While ultimately only God forgives sin, Jesus gave this power to the clergy to forgive sin in his name.

As a child I learned about the mortal and venial sins, knowing that a mortal sin (theft, murder, bearing false witness) demanded an immediate confession. The confes-

sion of venial (everyday) sins contributes to the growth of our conscience and is strongly encouraged. These everyday sins wound our relationship with God, the church, and each other. It is those sins that I lacked in my first confession. Today, as an adult, as a scholar, when I think of sins that need to be confessed I often think of social, structural sins: racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia. Yet the Catholic Church, while recognizing social sin, does not have a confessional big enough to fill those who communally promote injustice. It seems a shame that the guilt imposed on young minds for often innocent “sinful” acts, that sense of our limitations and the ease in which we can turn away from God, cannot be more explicitly incorporated into the way we as societies, cultures, and businesses collectively sin and alienate ourselves from God. ❧

# ON CONFESSING FAITH AND HOPE, SIN AND GUILT IN PUBLIC AND PERSONAL LIFE

NICO KOOPMAN

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The struggle against apartheid was not only a political struggle. It was also a theological and confessional struggle. This was the case because apartheid was portrayed by some South African Christians as God's blueprint for dealing with the complex diversity in South African society. The pseudo-gospel that was proclaimed brought the news that God's way of dealing with diversity is to divide. It proclaimed that people from different ethnic, cultural, and even economic backgrounds are irreconcilable. The best way to keep the peace was to separate these people.

This theological justification of apartheid posed a threat to the heart of the gospel of reconciliation in Jesus Christ. International church bodies like the Lutheran World Federation and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches formulated a *status confessionis* in 1977 and 1982 respectively. They stated that the theological legitimation of apartheid constituted a state or situation of confession. In this situation of threat to the essence of Christian faith, faith had to be confessed afresh. In South Africa the former Dutch Reformed Mission Church also declared a *status confessionis* in 1982. This church, which merged with the major part of the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa in 1994 to form the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, formulated the Belhar Confession which was formally adopted in 1986.

The Confession of Belhar proclaims faith in the triune God who brings compassionate justice to his people (article 3), who reconciles seemingly irreconcilable ones with God and with each other (article 2), and who brings visible unity and solidarity amongst his people (article 1). It is a confession of what we might call *teo-vision*. Teo-vision refers to our vision or understanding of God. It also refers to God's vision and dream for his world. Teo-vision refers to God's good and redemptive plans for his



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world. Belhar, we might say, is therefore a confession of faith in the triune God and of hope for a new world.

This confession of faith and hope paves the way for confession of sin and guilt. Belhar reminds us of God's vision of a society of justice, reconciliation, and unity. Belhar challenges us to confess our individual and communal guilt because our society, i.e. apartheid South Africa then and democratic South Africa now, reflects so little of this justice, reconciliation, and unity.

Despite the good progress that we do make in addressing poverty, South Africa is still the society with the biggest gap between rich and poor in the world. Despite the progress that we indeed do make regarding reconciliation, we still have unacceptably high levels of alienating racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, handicapism, ageism, and even enmity between humans and the natural environment, i.e. ecocide. Despite closer collaboration amongst people from a variety of backgrounds we still experience high levels of segregation and inadequate solidarity and empathy across ethnic, socio-economic, and cultural boundaries. Even churches within the same confessional tradition, like the so-called family of Dutch Reformed Churches, remain divided and separated along colour and racial lines.

Confession of faith in the God of justice, reconciliation, and unity opens the door to practices of individual, communal, and representative confession of guilt in societies of injustice, alienation, and dis-involvement with the other. Because God brings justification for sinners and justice in the world, we receive courage to confess our own practices of injustice, and our indirect involvement in the perpetuation of unjust structures in society. Because God forgives and reconciles us in Jesus Christ with himself, with each other, with ourselves, and with nature, we receive strength to confess our own alienating and polarising conduct in the world. Because God's forgiveness implies restoration to a life of unity and communion with himself and his people, we receive the grace to confess our exhaustion and passivity with regard to unity quests.

So, to take the words of Belhar on our lips is to confess faith and hope, as well as sin and guilt. The faith and hope, sin and guilt that we confess in the Belhar Confession impacts the justice, reconciliation, and unity discourses in various spheres of life, from the most global to the most personal.

This confession of faith and hope, sin and guilt contributed to the Accra Declaration of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches that was formally adopted in Ghana in 2005. Amidst the almost overwhelming challenges posed by economic, political, and cultural globalisation, Reformed Christians, in collaboration with churches from other traditions, confess and strive to embody global justice, global reconciliation, and global unity and solidarity. This embodiment of justice, reconciliation, and unity occurs through the various forms of the church, i.e. local congregations with their variety of redemptive practices, denominations, ecumenical bodies, individual Christians in their normal daily roles, and individual Christians in various voluntary organisations. And this embodiment is strived for in all spheres of life on local, regional, and global levels. The faith and hope, sin and guilt that is confessed in Belhar plays an increasingly significant role in South Africa and the rest of our continent. African societies hunger for continental justice, continental reconciliation, and continental unity and solidarity.

Renewed confession and embodiment of the Belhar vision will appropriately take forward the attempts of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, under leadership of Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, to enhance forgiveness, truth, reconciliation, and restitution.

And in churches of the Dutch Reformed tradition in South Africa, the faith and hope, sin and guilt that is confessed in Belhar calls for renewed confession and embodiment. Although this was not exclusively so, it was especially churches in this tradition that were responsible for the theological legitimation of apartheid. The mainly white Dutch Reformed Church, the mainly black and coloured Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, the mainly black Dutch Reformed Church in Africa, and the mainly Indian Reformed Church in Africa, do have a special calling to confess and embody afresh the vision of justice, reconciliation, and unity. Although formal structural re-unification still seems far-off, the many courageous and visionary attempts by members and bodies in these churches to collaborate for the sake of re-unification is a crucial source of hope.

Lastly, where injustices, alienation, and disunity manifest on the most personal level, amongst others in the context of marriage, family life, circle of friends, and the workplace, we confront these challenges with the confession of faith and hope, sin and guilt in our hearts. Even a painful divorce is not carried out with concession but with confession, i.e. confession of sin and guilt because we could not keep the marital vows and we were forced to choose for the lesser of two evils, for an unavoidable evil. For Christians a divorce takes place with confession of faith and hope in the God of justice, reconciliation, and unity who will open and actualise new possibilities for us.

As Christians in Africa we participate in the journey of confessing and embodying justice, reconciliation and unity in all walks of life. And we travel in the knowledge that the God of justice, reconciliation, and unity calls, assembles, and cares for his people (introduction of the Belhar Confession), and in the knowledge that Jesus Christ is the Lord who reigns and who is worthy of our highest loyalty (conclusion of Belhar). ❖

*Editor's Note:* A special committee authorized by the 218th General Assembly (2008) has announced that it will recommend to next summer's 219th Assembly that the Belhar Confession be added to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s *Book of Confessions*. The full text is available here: <http://www.pcusa.org/theologyandworship/confession.htm>

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# CONFESSION:

## GOOD FOR THE SOUL, HARD FOR THE HEART, AND A MARK OF MATURITY

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BONNIE J. MILLER-MCLEMORE

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“You never say you’re wrong.” There they were. Words of accusation flung across the room like a dare in the waning heat of an argument. I had heard them before. And I knew their truth. I do not like to say I am wrong.

Rationally people know the importance of acknowledging the harm and hurt we inflict. But we resist. We do not like to disclose our faults or declare our sins. It goes against our deepest inclinations, like running against the wind. Confession is a basic psychological and spiritual good. But it is so hard for the pinched and narrow heart.

### *Hard for the heart: live life with no regrets*

Flipping through a holiday catalogue, I saw the words neatly inscribed on sterling silver, the “Live Life with No Regrets Bracelet,” available for only \$69.95. The blurb promised, “You can read these words in two ways: Don’t waste precious time looking back, and do things today you’ll be proud of tomorrow.” No one can argue with the second tip. But is looking back such a waste? “The new generation of Germans,” I heard a churchman announce at a conference, “no longer feel they have to apologize for the Holocaust.” No longer feel the need to apologize? Can shared history be so easily let go? Can Americans escape the scar of decimating a native people or South Africans, the lingering impact of apartheid? No history, personal or communal, stands untouched by failure and atrocity. One need not be a professing Christian to admit this.

Why then is confession so hard? One reason is that it bears witness to our precarious purchase on life. The posture of contrition is inevitably one of vulnerability. Not only does confession attest to the fleeting nature of our existence. It also reveals that as we move forward in time, we unavoidably create pain and leave a mess in our wake.



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Why would anyone want to attend to this manure-making aspect of life?

The practice of confession also has a troubled history. People in early, medieval, Reformation, and modern times have debated its location, its motivation, and its need. Should confession happen privately or in community? Is it the law or God's love that allows us to see sin? Is sin a particular act or a general condition of alienation? Is it merely personal or does one need to consider social sins (racism, war, etc.)?<sup>1</sup> Moreover, every era and tradition has seen the practice tarnished and corrupted. The medieval church preyed on people's pocketbooks and fears in an elaborate system of penance. Reformers rejected the sacrament as a compulsory act of the parishioner overseen by a priest in favor of general congregational confession. But the centuries that followed saw the practice wane. Of the primary functions of pastoral care identified by historians William A. Clebsch and Charles Jaeckle, reconciliation is the most eroded today. "There is no place in the structure and rhythm of the life of modern congregations where a serious discussion concerning the state of one's soul is expected."<sup>2</sup> Although some churches include confession and absolution in worship, many congregations rarely do. Traditions like my own Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) that imitate early worship practices of "teaching and fellowship ... the breaking of bread and prayer" (Acts 2: 42) remain unsure about when, where, and how often to include confession. But what do we miss when we come and go from worship each week without its practice?

***Good for the soul: a matter of emotional honesty and religious habit***

Modern psychology and age-old religion know confession is good for the soul. Contemporary forms of therapy, from Freud's first "talking cure" to marriage counseling and self-help groups, actually resemble the confessional and in effect perform a service once provided by the church. Some psychologists even see failure as essential to development and healing. A parent's non-traumatic failure to respond adequately to a child impels the child to assume emotional roles of soothing, affirming, and valuing previously played by parents. The most important moment in therapy, according to twentieth-century analyst Heinz Kohut, occurs when client and therapist strive to understand the "break" or "wound" caused by the therapist's lack of empathy.<sup>3</sup> Family systems theory reveals the destructive affect of secrets on the health of extended systems. Families who hide abuse, addiction, suicide, and illness in the face of social pressure and public shame often do so to their detriment.<sup>4</sup> John Gottman, a marriage therapy guru and psychology professor who studies communication and behavior among couples, names the "four horsemen of the apocalypse" that most reliably predict divorce—criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling.<sup>5</sup> These patterns stand in direct opposition to the stance of confession. In short, psychologists know confession cures.

So do congregations and ministers. Confession is both a prelude to grace and yet only possible in the context of God's love. For centuries, Christianity has linked confession with companion practices of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation.<sup>6</sup> The detailed penitential manuals of the fifth-century allowed the repentant to relieve guilt and enact a change of heart through specific acts. The sixteenth-century Reformation

and the twentieth-century Second Vatican Council sought to resurrect corporate confession and affirm the significance of communal support and formation. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission knew little progress in race relations would occur without truth telling. Strong religious leaders know confession is good for a community's health despite its difficulty. Pastors, such as the Episcopalian priest in Gail Godwin's novel *Evensong*, prepare their offices with a "makeshift confessional" in case the person who comes to talk chooses "to go that route."<sup>7</sup> In all these instances, habits of confession shaped within religious communities over long periods of time have an amazing power to form and reform us as participants in the practice of God's love. Wallowing in regret helps no one. But recognizing responsibility for shared failure creates space for compensation and transformation.

***A mark of spiritual maturity: become like animals and children***

Ultimately, the capacity to confess is a mark of spiritual maturity. Church institutions have honed it through personal and communal ritual. But in the end, the posture of confession is a grace bestowed. When one stops to consider where such maturity most readily appears, children and animals come to mind.

Most of us like to think of wisdom as acquired chronologically with age. But spirituality does not always follow natural patterns of physical development.<sup>8</sup> The capacity to confess is as likely to be lost with maturity as gained. Children and animals, by contrast, wear their vulnerability on their sleeve. So it should not surprise us that they have a keen ability to know their faults and seek amends. Although we should take care not to romanticize and trivialize either children or animals, we can still appreciate the graced ease with which they acknowledge failings and give up grievances. Following the priestly mediation of animal and childlike example offers the perspective and grace needed to let go and admit wrong. So the next time you struggle to do so, regard the children and animals among us and become more like them. ❧

**NOTES**

1. See G. McCarron, "Penance, Sacrament of (Sacrament of Reconciliation)" in Rodney Hunter, Gen. Ed., *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990, 2005), 878-880.

2. Charles Jaeckle and William A. Clebsch, *Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1964), 66.

3. Heinz Kohut, *How Does Analysis Cure?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

4. Monica McGoldrick, *You Can Go Home Again: Reconnecting with Your Family* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), chapter 3.

5. John Gottman, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail: And How to Make Yours Last* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995).

6. J. G. Emerson, "Repentance and Confession," in Rodney Hunter, Gen. Ed., *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990, 2005), 1071.

7. Gail Godwin, *Evensong* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999), p. 242.

8. See Gareth B. Matthews, *The Philosophy of Childhood* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 16-18.

*We asked church leaders to reflect on the role, practice, and challenge of confession today. Here is what they told us:*

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## **What role does confession play in Christian life?**

BRITTA DUKES, *Associate Pastor of Families and Children, Shepherd of the Hills Presbyterian Church, Austin, Texas*

Confession is our opportunity to restore our relationship with God to the fullness God intended. Intimate relationships that are healthy and thriving require authenticity, trust, unconditional love, and forgiveness. Our relationship with God is no different. Being able to be our authentic, fallible selves before God, we experience the unconditional love and forgiveness God has offered us in Jesus Christ each and every time we confess. Grace is guaranteed. And once we come to realize and grasp the gift of this, our best response is one of gratitude—we worship! With all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, we worship our trustworthy and ever merciful Lord and Savior.

DOLLY CAMPBELL HUNT, *Associate Pastor for Discipleship, First Presbyterian Church, Greensboro, North Carolina*

The role of confession is integral to a growing disciple of Jesus Christ. Reformed theology reminds us that we can do nothing to earn God's love or salvation, that it is a freely given gift. While we are saved by grace through faith, deep in the core of who we are as Christians, following Jesus does not mean we have an "anything goes" relationship with our Lord and Savior. If we yearn for a deeper connection to the living God, we must honestly confess those events, thoughts, and actions that keep us from being in God's presence completely. Personal prayer and times of honest confession are powerful for those who are open to such vulnerable moments with Jesus. I have found the Holy Spirit most tangible when I have dropped to my knees in intercessory prayer or confession. As a member of the "frozen chosen" these touchy, "feel good" moments have deepened my ability to embrace the triune God.

JAMES LEE, *Pastor, New Covenant Presbyterian Church, Austin*

As a pastor, I relish the call to confession in our worship services. It is not that I am a glutton for punishment; it is because I believe that the liberty we are called to experience in our Christian life comes from knowing ourselves, knowing our shortcomings, and most importantly, knowing that God through Jesus Christ has paid the price for us all. I believe that in confessing our sins we begin to acknowledge that if it were not for the grace and mercy of God, we would have no hope for living. It is in receiving and accepting God's forgiveness that we are capable of being more humane Christians with one another. It is easier to show compassion to others if we have experienced it ourselves.

**What are some things that prevent Christians from practicing confession?**

JAMES LEE

Being vulnerable with another person and/or God means taking a chance on being betrayed or hurt again. When we confess our faults as Scripture exhorts us to do, we take the chance of someone else sharing our dirt with other people or even the public. Another deterrent for practicing confession is that often times we are trying to convince others and ourselves that we have it all together. Of course, if we are perfect and have our stuff together, there is not a need to practice making confessions and more tragically, not a need for Jesus Christ in our lives.

DOLLY CAMPBELL HUNT

One of the growing edges for our denomination is to educate our congregants in the rituals of spiritual disciplines such as confession. The Roman Catholic Church, through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, transmits the hows and whys of ancient disciplines like confession. We Protestants shy away from practices like confessing or fasting because they seem foreign, archaic, or too “Catholic.” Sometimes, we ministers do not allow ourselves to live into our role of “priest,” offering confession because we are afraid we will come across as Roman Catholic in our practices. The few times I have been invited into the lives of the faithful who are seeking a safe place to “confess,” I have been humbled by their vulnerability and honesty. We both come away from the experience praising God for the ability to be washed clean and reclaim the name “child of God” once again.

BRITTA DUKES

I think it really comes down to is our unwillingness to articulate what is so difficult to admit—the impurities of our hearts, the iniquitous thoughts of our minds, the ignoble actions of our daily being—because as soon as they escape our lips to be uttered aloud, the ugliness becomes real.

Recently during the time of confession, I shared with my congregation that our two-year-old daughter had decided to forego parental instruction during the previous week ... repeatedly! In fact, she so blatantly disregarded the boundaries and limitations we set for her protection and safety that her daddy had to sit her in a chair to talk through the potential danger of her behavior. Even though this was done in the most loving tone and manner possible, she would not allow herself to make eye contact with him. She alternated between turning her head aside in pride and turning it down in shame. My husband continued to talk to her, inviting her to look him in the eye and say she understood, but for two very long minutes, she could not. She would not. Then, finally, she did. She slowly lifted her eyes to look at him and whispered a faint “I’m sorry.” Before the apology was even out of her mouth, he was enveloping her in a big hug, and she slumped comfortably into the embrace. As I was marveling at the moments of discomfort she put herself through simply because she couldn’t lift her eyes and utter either an admission of guilt or an apology, I realized that most of us do the same on a pretty regular basis. We subject ourselves to isolation and pain, when, in actuality, we could be slumping into the loving embrace of grace.

## **How do you understand the difference between corporate and personal confession?**

DOLLY CAMPBELL HUNT

When I engage in conversations with members and visitors who attend FPC Greensboro, they often ask about the corporate confession of sins. They confess after worship that they wouldn't pray the prayer during the "Confession of Sins" liturgy because they have not committed a particular sin mentioned in the prayer.

My greatest joy is to allow that conversation to be a teachable moment where we talk about how we are a part of the faith community and corporate confession offers us the opportunity to reflect and be honest in the ways we as a church need to grow in our actions and attempts to be the hands and feet of Christ to our broken world.

Amazingly, I have also found that many worshippers take the prayers of confession home for use in their personal prayers. While corporate and personal confessions are different in theory, the notion of confessing our sins through prayer can easily be translated through the words used.

JAMES LEE

Our corporate confession makes it is easier to value the practice of confessing; however, I remember growing up saying to myself, "I didn't commit that sin!" Why should I confess a sin that I didn't commit? Over time, however, I realized that we are all culpable for what takes place in our nation, states, cities, churches, and homes. It is when we confess corporately on behalf of our various spheres of influence that we are in position to intercede on behalf of humanity before God and seek God's mercy and forgiveness.

I am blessed to have friends and a brother who "tolerate me," but more importantly hold me accountable and pray for me. As a pretty stubborn, opinionated person, it's a task having a "come to Jesus" meeting with me. But, like John C. Maxwell writes, "people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." I am most able to practice confessing to someone who expresses that they understand my circumstances; it's out of that context that I believe they are best able to confront and/or console me.

BRITTA DUKES

Via public admission, we recognize that we live, move, and breathe in a world full of systems, not all of which are good. As the Body of Christ in the world, we take ownership for the evil and wrongdoing that occurs within these systemic structures. After confessing, we experience together God's abounding grace and the assurance of pardon that in Jesus Christ we are forgiven. Thanks to God's merciful nature, our hearts and minds have been prepared to most readily hear the proclamation of God's Word, which typically follows in the Reformed Order of Worship.

Personal confession is acknowledging before God my own sinful behavior. It is taking responsibility and ownership for the things in my daily life that separate me from God and keep me from enjoying the fullness of life God offers. It is my ability, after whatever amount of time has passed, to look up into my Loving Parent's eyes and say, "I'm sorry." It is allowing God to envelop me in such immensity of unconditional love and grace that I slump comfortably into God's embrace where I belong. It is accepting that in Jesus Christ, I am forgiven.

## REQUIRED READING

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### *Books recommended by Austin Seminary faculty*

**ACTS OF FAITH: THE STORY OF AN AMERICAN MUSLIM, THE STRUGGLE FOR THE SOUL OF A GENERATION, by Eboo Patel.** Boston: Beacon Press, 2007. 189 pages, \$13. *Reviewed by Eugene March, Jean Brown Visiting Scholar, Austin Seminary*

Terrorists are in the news daily, trying to destroy planes loaded with innocent passengers, driving car bombs into crowds of unsuspecting bystanders, attacking the Pope in the midst of a Christmas celebration. They include some who have been caught up in the “Christian Identity” movement like Eric Rudolph, the 1996 Olympic Games bomber. They include some Muslim youths like Hasib Hussain and his three friends who bombed several London busses and trains in 2005. They are often motivated by their “faith,” but they take a radical turn away from what the majority of Christians and Muslims do. They are mostly young men, though of late young women have joined the ranks.

Why do so many youth simply drop out of our churches, synagogues, and mosques? Why do some young people become zealots of hate and others proponents of tolerance? This book is about us, and, as Patel tells us, it is “about how some young people become champions of religious pluralism while others become the foot soldiers of religious totalitarianism. Its thesis is simple: influences matter, programs count, mentors make a difference, institutions leave their mark” (xvi).

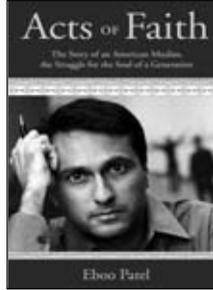
Eboo Patel is an American Muslim born in India who has authored this very timely and important book. *Acts of Faith* is a reflective autobiography. Patel shares his struggle as a high school and college student to find his place as a person of color and difference, an Indian Muslim in a predominantly white, Christian nation. He tells his story in an engaging, easy to read style. For the extraordinary manner in which he articulates what it will mean for American

society to become genuinely pluralistic, Patel has been named winner of the prestigious Grawemeyer Award in Religion for 2010. In 1998 he established the Interfaith Youth Core in Chicago to challenge college-age young people with his vision of a society where religious pluralism and cooperation are the norm. This is his story.

The book covers only a relatively few years in Patel’s life, but they are crucial years, from adolescence to young adulthood. He demonstrates by events in his own life the way in which influences, programs, mentors, and institutions did in fact have a profound effect on him. Patel recognized that young adults are seeking their own clear identity; that they want to make a powerful impact on society. Yet as he observed early on, “The faces of the religious fanatics were young; the faces of interfaith cooperation were old. Something had to change.” (xviii)

From his own family to people he never met (e.g. Mahatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King Jr), to mentors who met him where he was (e.g. the Dalai Lama) and recognized a potential he had not yet come to understand, from organizations like Dorothy Day’s Catholic Worker to Jewish identity programs, Patel leads the reader through a series of life-changing successes and, quite importantly, some failures as well. His story, while perhaps more dramatic than that of many, is nonetheless very familiar. It is about growing up and leaving the security of what others have told us, about finding our own way amidst the complexities of a diverse society. In short, it is about developing one’s own faith, the vision by which one will live!

Along the journey of Patel’s life he came to a profound understanding. There needed to be a place where young adults could work in a setting of intentional religious diversity and reflect together on the significance of faith and action with a conscious commitment to diversity, tolerance, and inclusiveness. To enable this to become reality, Patel founded the Interfaith Youth Core, now on over



seventy college campuses where it is beginning to have an impact.

I wholeheartedly commend this book to your reading. As a pastor, educator, youth leader, church officer, parent, or, yes, even a YOUTH, you will find much here to encourage and challenge the way we go about transmitting our faith from one generation to

the next. The question is not mainly one of church statistics, though such are not unimportant. The issue is the life and soul of our young people, who they will become, and their capacity to explain that to themselves and to others. This book can help individuals and groups reflect on these important matters. It is worth a read. 

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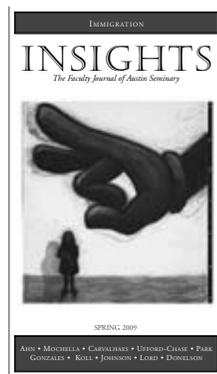
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Mathew Schmalz

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## JESUS IN BANARAS'

ARUN JONES

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**A** good friend of mine, doing doctoral research in Banaras—arguably the holiest city for Hindus in North India—writes the following about the group of people that has captured his personal and scholarly interest:

On the second Saturday of every month they come to the [Roman Catholic] ashram in the hundreds. Devotees flock to the dais of the open-air pavilion to thank Prabhu (the Lord) in [the local languages of] Bhojpuri and Hindi for the healing of cancer, for an end to spousal abuse, for money alleviating a family squabble, for peace of mind. Three hours into this mela [festival], a bearded, saffron-clad priest wends his way through the crowd bearing a holy image. The people—the majority of whom are women—are eager to take *darsan*



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[view the image] and are thus warned by microphone not to crowd in. More *bhajans* [songs] are sung; more speakers step to the dais. Nearby, vendors sell icons, Hindi-language tracts, and compact discs. The scene continues for another three hours. This is Varanasi, the heart of Hindu India, and by the looks of it these hundreds are Hindus. Yet they are worshipping Yisu—that is, Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>2</sup>

These Jesus worshipers call themselves “Khrist Bhaktas,” which can be translated as “devotees of Christ.” They trace their origins to a small house prayer meeting in the late 1980s held by Roman Catholic priests from South India who were heavily influenced by the Second Vatican Council and its call for enculturating Christianity. Today the community consists of thousands of mostly low caste Hindus in the region of Banaras. Only a few in this community have been baptized, for reasons that are complicated. Rather, they exist at the margins of the Hindu and Christian communities, creating and occupying a space that implicitly challenges the neat and tidy conceptual frameworks of both religious leaders and scholars of religion. Interestingly, in a part of the world that has seen its share of religious violence recently, these Khrist Bhaktas have not stirred up any antagonism among the more militant Hindu groups against Christianity. Perhaps that is because they are completely acceptable and understandable within the context of Hinduism as it is practiced today. For example, at least some of the Khrist Bhaktas do not deny the existence of other gods: they simply claim Jesus as their *istadevata*, or personal supreme god.

There are some aspects of this Khrist Bhakta movement that I would like to highlight. The first is the socially marginal status of the worshipers. As the quote above notes, the Khrist Bhaktas are predominantly from the lower castes of Hindu society, and are predominantly women. Some of the women, for example, are from the Chamar caste.<sup>3</sup> According to tradition, Chamars are tanners of leather, a highly (religiously) polluting profession since it entails handling the carcasses of dead animals. Chamars eat the meat of these dead animals, which only adds to their pollution. Chamars also work as indentured laborers in agriculture, and are paid extremely meager wages—customarily, for a day’s work they have received a kilogram of animal feed rather than grain for human consumption. Chamar women have served as midwives, caring for pregnant women and cutting the umbilical cord of newborns. They also looked after the mother for twelve days after birth, making sure that the fire in the delivery room was constantly burning. Their service included “disposing of the feces of the mother by hand after she had defecated into a clay pot.”<sup>4</sup> After years of such service, a Chamar midwife would reek of human excrement.<sup>5</sup> So these are the kind of people that gather at the Roman Catholic ashram outside Banaras to worship Jesus and give thanks to him for “the healing of a cancer, for an end to spousal abuse, for money alleviating a family squabble, for peace of mind.”

The second characteristic of the Jesus Devotees we should note is that unlike the approximately four hundred hungry and homeless persons that gather outside University United Methodist Church in Austin every Saturday for free meals and clothing, the Khrist Bhaktas belong to readily identifiable, structured, and historic communities popularly termed castes. Persons even in low castes have customs and traditions that

give rhythm, meaning, and purpose to life: they celebrate religious festivals and family events, they readily gather together as community to rejoice or mourn with each other, they unite for political action, they tell stories about their own self worth and the depravity of the upper castes that oppress them. In other words, despite their economic, social, and religious marginality, they are not a people completely adrift in the world. One reason that baptism is a complicated issue for Khrist Bhaktas is that it would entail a psychological and social movement from one community, characterized by relative stability and tradition, to another community, the North Indian Christian one, that is less stable and still in the process of establishing its traditions and place in society.

The third distinguishing feature of the Khrist Bhaktas that I would like to point out is that they are deeply religious. It is this religiosity that has brought them to Jesus Christ, and this religiosity that keeps them devoted to him. In fact the Roman Catholic priests and nuns who work with the Khrist Bhaktas do not encourage them to convert to Christianity. For one thing, the Khrist Bhaktas could easily provide an excuse for Hindu militants to persecute the tiny and vulnerable Roman Catholic community in the Banaras Diocese. For another, the material, social, psychological, and religious needs of these Bhaktas would be great, were they to leave their communities and become "Christian," and the already overworked priests and nuns would be pressed into meeting these needs.

Thus the devotion of the Jesus Devotees is not actively promoted by the church; rather, the devotion is, for the most part, a result of initiative and energy emanating from the Khrist Bhaktas themselves.

This last observation brings me to reflect upon the relationship of Christianity and culture. Ever since Gentiles started to enter the Jewish Jesus movement as recorded in the book of Acts, Christians have been thinking about the relationship between the church and its cultural milieu. Any culture has several dimensions to it, and religion or at least religiousness is one of the most important dimensions. Just how Christians ought to think about the general religiosity pervading culture has been a perpetual problematic question.<sup>6</sup> Over the course of the twentieth century, Protestants have given a variety of answers. In the beginning of the century, John Nicol Farquhar published *The Crown of Hinduism* where he argued that Christ was the fulfillment of the religious hopes of all people. Farquhar, reflecting one important Protestant perspective, saw religion as something positive, as a step toward Christ. In mid-century, H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* had a more neutral view of religion in culture: Christians of different traditions could see Christ working in culture in a number of different ways. Towards the end of the century the influential missiologist and theologian Lesslie Newbigin, in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, warned Christians in the West about the dangers of religion embedded in culture, and admonished Christians to protect their faith from the temptations of cultural religiosity.

While the Roman Catholic priests and nuns in Banaras are naturally concerned about the relationship between the church and the religious Khrist Bhaktas, the latter really do not seem to worry themselves about this issue. They have found in Jesus a Savior who heeds their cries, and they come together to worship and adore this Savior, to

praise him and thank him and to ask for his continuing salvation in their lives. Perhaps more disconcerting than the *Khrist Bhaktas'* obliviousness to Christian concerns about the difference (if any) between Christian faith and other kinds of faith, is Jesus' own seeming disregard for the purity of the religiosity and faith of the people who approached him for help. A woman who has been hemorrhaging for twelve years grabs onto his cloak in an act of desperate faith, and power flows out of Jesus and heals her. A blind man sitting at the side of the road, hearing that Jesus is passing by, screams out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"—and Jesus stops to restore his sight. A pagan Roman centurion pleads with Jesus to heal a favorite slave, insisting that Jesus need not even come to the sick man, and Jesus heals the slave from afar. A gentile woman begs Jesus to cast out an unclean spirit from her daughter, and Jesus is pestered into exorcising the spirit.

The stories go on and on and on, stories about ordinary, religious people coming to Jesus with goodness knows what kind of hope and faith, seeking relief from some worldly problem or another—and Jesus consistently not only pays attention to them, but yields to their entreaties. In full consonance with the witness of the Gospels, the *Khrist Bhaktas* insist that Jesus continues to yield to the entreaties of the unfortunate today, even—especially—in Banaras. All they need is faith that Jesus is there and attentive to their pleas.

Any culture, including our own, including secular cultures I would argue, is teeming with religious life and all kinds of faith. When Jesus walks into any culture, he becomes part and parcel of the religious milieu, dispensing hope and blessing to those who, in pain and suffering, cry out to him with whatever faith they possess. That should always be the starting point of our reflection on Christ's presence and activity in culture. And we, the church, would do well to bear in mind that Jesus consistently shirks the protection from the teeming masses that his official disciples are eager to provide. Instead, he calls us to follow him. ❧

## NOTES

1 Banaras is also known as Varanasi and as Kashi.

2 Kerry San Chirico, "Between Christians and Hindus: Religion, Identity, and Power among *Khrist Bhaktas*, Dalit Hindus, and Dalit Catholics of the Banaras Region" (PhD dissertation prospectus, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2009).

3 My information on the Chamars in this movement comes from Mathew Schmalz, "A Space for Redemption: Catholic Tactics in Hindu North India" (PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 1998).

4 Schmalz, 135.

5 Schmalz, 36.

6 So the Corinthian Christians ask the apostle Paul, should they eat meat offered to pagan deities or not? See 1 Corinthians chapter 8.



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