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

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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.)?¹ 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."² 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.³ 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.⁴ 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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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."⁷ 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.⁸ 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.