

Confession—Healing Salve for the Soul's Wounds

MARTIN LUTHER writes about three types of confession. Confession, in which acknowledgment of sins is directed to God, is confession of faith or confession of the heart. Private confession happens in the presence of a trusted confessor father or mother. In the confession of love a transgression is acknowledged to the person against whom one has transgressed.

In private confession one is able to speak of specific sins into which one has fallen or that burden one's conscience. Upon hearing the pronouncement of absolution by a believing confessor father, the penitent person can be assured that "God himself through the mouth of man forgives him his sins and proclaims him free" (Luther's Large Catechism).

Repentance and confession are different issues. A person becomes a child of God when a believing person preaches the gospel of forgiveness of sins to him or her and he or she believes. On the other hand, confession is linked to a child of God's endeavor in faith. Confession is used in order that we would be preserved as children of God.

Confession Is Based on Scripture

Sometimes confession has been questioned because the Scriptures do not speak about confession. It is true that the words "private confession" do not appear in the Bible. Nevertheless, the elements of private confession are present in the Bible: acknowledgment of sins and absolution.

The letter to the Hebrews exhorts: "Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us" (Heb. 12:1). The epistle of James instructs: "Confess your faults one to another" (James 5:16). John's reminder is similar: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Absolution is also based on the Scripture. Christ left His congregation and its members what is called the power of the keys, meaning they have the authority to forgive sins. "Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so I send you. And when he had said this he breathed on them and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them" (John 20:21–23).

Jesus connects the Holy Spirit to the power of the keys. This means that only absolution by a person who has the Holy Spirit—a believing person—affects the forgiveness of sins before God. On the basis of the universal priesthood, or the priesthood of the Holy Spirit, each and every believer can act as a confessor father or mother.

The core of confession is absolution. No one is capable of perfect confession of sins wherein one is able to relate all his or her sins. However, God's absolution is complete and all-inclusive. It can be believed without conditions and without any demands.

God does not remember forgiven sins (Jer. 31:34). Therefore, one may think that matters, which have been forgiven in confession, cannot be talked about after they have been confessed. Nevertheless, absolution does not exclude a person from temporal responsibility. Paul wanted to preserve a clean conscience before God and man (Act 24:16).

What about Public Confession?

Public confession means public acknowledgment of sins before the congregation. In the Early Church, in the beginning of the third century, public confession was used for major crimes such as murder. In speaking about public confession it is necessary to differentiate between public acknowledgment of secret sins and

public acknowledgment of public sins. No basis is found in the Scriptures for a Christian needing to publicly tell of secret sins before the congregation. Private confession is meant for such sins, and the confessor father has an obligation to preserve the confidentiality of confession. The Scriptures are not silent regarding public sins, for example, speaking of David's adultery and murder (2 Sam. 11). Publicly known sins can also be forgiven in secret confession. It is up to the penitent person to decide whether he or she also publicly repents of his or her sins.

Confession is a gift that brings blessing to the life of a child of God. We do not become more righteous through confession, since we are already made righteous by faith through the perfect merit of Christ. As partakers of this merit, the atonement blood of Jesus continuously cleanses us of all sins.

Ari Pelkonen

Adapted from Siunau: Ajankohtaista
2013 (SRK's 2013 yearbook)

Discussion Questions:

1. Confession-discuss its importance in your faith life.
2. What is most important in confession--the confession itself, or the word of absolution? Why?
3. What role does the confessor-father/mother play in confession?
4. What can happen if confession becomes a precise enumeration of one's sins?
- s. What can happen if one ignores the grace-gift of confession?