

Reformation  
& Revival



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I am attracted to this subject of open confession largely because of my own experience from 1968 to 1978. During these six years of university and seminary study and four subsequent years of pastoral work I often participated in extensive periods of public confession. This was the time of the Asbury College Revival and the Canadian Revival, when several schools and churches were impacted by the need to be open and honest before God.

While in the seminary I led nearly 120 church meetings of various types over four years, usually over weekends. It was the norm to have lengthy periods of confession in the churches. Adults and young people were humbled and open to God. Along with this there were many converted, and it seemed that our boldness was greater than ever before. The churches I pastored continued in this vein. Taking communion weekly at night in the churches often provided the setting for public confession, sometimes lasting well into the evening. During the church services, people often went to other individuals for restitution or reconciliation, or made telephone calls from the office to ask for forgiveness. They could not take communion without being right with God and man. The presence of the Lord was, to us, almost atmospheric in its intensity.

The growth of the church, even without any unusual evangelistic planning, was exceptional, new people coming to Christ nearly every week. We were confident they were God's converts because virtually every one of the persons who was converted was retained. As pastors and people from other areas heard of or experienced firsthand what was happening, they wanted to know the secret. Our only explanation was God Himself.

How thankful I am for the influence of those days, yet with all of this I have come to desire something more for our day—something much fuller and more substantive.

Surprising as it may seem, my growing understanding is that *public* confession is not the *sine qua non* of revival. Additionally, questions should be asked about the particular methodology we used. I do not wish to diminish in the least what many of us knew during those days or the urgent need to humble ourselves before God concerning specific sins. However, this practice of “open microphone” confession is a relatively modern expression and not without its weaknesses. If all we have are some nights, or perhaps even weeks, of public confession, we have not had the depth of revival this country and the world need. We can thank God for such experiences to the degree they break up the fallow ground, but what is called for is a genuine *reformation of the church* as we know it, including, among other things, the most biblically accurate views of how we should repent. It is my belief as well that God graciously gave that ten-year period of time to large numbers of people on the continent, many of whom are leaders now, in preparation for something far greater. I am offering these humble thoughts to contribute to our need.

#### A Better Model

Below are two illustrations of public confession. Let me give a brief history of each, followed by four observations.

During the counterreformation when the church of Scotland was facing formidable attacks from the Roman Catholic church, four hundred Protestant pastors and elders of the General Assembly met in Edinburgh, March 30, 1596. At 9 a.m. the doors were shut as these pastors and leaders met “for humbling themselves and wrestling with God, to pursue a national, as well as a personal, reconciliation.” After having the thirteenth and thirty-fourth chapters of the book of Ezekiel read, John Davidson

showed what was the end of their meeting, that it was the

confessions of sins, and to promise a forsaking thereof, to turn unto the Lord, and enter into a new covenant and league with him, that thus by repentance they might be the meeter to provoke others to the same.

Within an hour after entering the church, following the preaching of Davidson, “they looked with another countenance than that wherewith they entered.” He then led them to turn to personal and prayerful meditation and acknowledgment of their sins while all together in the room. For the next fifteen minutes

they were thus humbling themselves, yea, such a joint concurrence with those sighs and groans, and with shedding of tears among the most, every one provoking another by their example, and the teacher himself by his, so as the very church resounded, and the place might worthily be called *Bochim*, for the like of that day had not been seen in Scotland since the reformation.

After this prayer and swell of confession, Davidson then preached for two or three hours, as was the custom of those men who had learned the preciousness of the Bible, on Luke 12:22. “And when they were to dissolve, they did there solemnly join, and enter into a new league and covenant with God, holding up their hands thereto, with that seriousness and weight, as was a moving sight to all present.” That afternoon there was further renewing of the covenant in the particular synods represented. This covenant was carried back to the synods and churches throughout Scotland, with considerable effect. (*Historical Collections of Accounts of Revival*, John Gillies, first published in 1754, reprinted 1981, Banner of Truth, p. 57.)

This experience in Scotland is strikingly similar to the account of Nehemiah, when “all the people gathered as one

man" in front of the Water Gate and Ezra read from the law. The people so revered the Word of God that they stood at the reading of it. When Ezra prayed and blessed the Lord, "all the people answered, 'Amen, Amen!' while lifting up their hands; then they bowed low and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground." They were told not to weep on that day, but to feast and rejoice, though at the hearing of the Word of God they had already spontaneously begun their mourning. The reading and study of the law, while leaders "gave the sense," went on for the complete seven days of the feast. Then on the eighth day they had a solemn assembly.

This fast day was for the confession of "their sins and the iniquities of their fathers." While they stood, the law was read for a fourth of the day, "and for another fourth" of the day "they confessed and worshiped the Lord their God." On the Levites' platform certain men "cried out with a loud voice to the Lord their God." What follows in the text (Neh. 9) is a recorded prayer in which the blessings of God and the sins of their fathers are enumerated with deep pathos, the people agreeing and praying as one.

Thou art just in all that has come upon us. For Thou hast dealt faithfully, but we have acted wickedly. Behold, we are slaves today, and as to the land which Thou didst give to our fathers to eat of its fruit and its bounty, behold, we are slaves on it. And its abundant produce is for the kings whom Thou hast set over us because of our sins; they also rule over our bodies and over our cattle as they please, so we are in great distress (Neh. 9:33, 36-37).

But the people were not left with just confession and brokenness before God. "Now because of all this we are making an agreement in writing; and on the sealed document are the names of our leaders, our Levites and our

priests" (Neh. 9:38). This covenant is recorded in chapter ten and is very practical as applied to their particular sins and their repentance.

I have found these experiences to be similar to many others in the Old Testament and in church history, particularly up until the mid-1800s. They are instructive as a model. Today in the religious world we are in desperate need of wisdom from the Scriptures and from revival history to guide us in the use of public confession. There can be no question as to the great need of humbling ourselves before the holy God who is presently bringing judgment due to our sins. We hope that the judgment is "medicinal" and not final. Indications all around us are encouraging the belief that a substantial visitation of God to His people is beginning. Yet are we prepared in this critical area?

Note that these representative models have the following characteristics:

- 1) Public confession was pastorally superintended.
- 2) Public confession was conducted with a greater rather than a lesser emphasis on preaching and the Word of God.
- 3) Public confession was conducted principally through prayer or by representative persons.
- 4) Public confession rested upon true repentance as exemplified in solemn covenants.

### Observations

**1) Public confession was pastorally superintended.** There is a prevalent belief that a movement of God's Spirit requires pastors and leaders to stop directly leading the people. But this is clearly not the case in the longer-lasting revivals of Scripture and church history, nor is it the biblical mandate. Even the Prayer Revival of 1858, short as it was on preaching (which weakened it as to its duration) was very much ordered by leadership, even to the point of

having rules for public testimony on the walls to guide the meetings. These rules were strictly observed.

There is no contradiction between the guidance of the Head and pastoral oversight; indeed, the exercise of leadership should be more apparent as the Lord makes Himself known. Sheep need shepherds more during times of emotional distress and agony, and the revealing of God's presence brings just that! The leaders of Ezra's day led the people, both by example and the ministry of the Word. They allotted a time for confession. When they believed God did not intend for them to weep, they instructed the people to rejoice as they listened to the Word. They also went around to the people explaining the Scriptures, and they gave specific direction as to the reformation of the people of God. Spiritual leaders have an obligation, not to "get out of the way," but to "be in God's way," sensitively and decisively exercising true biblical leadership. There is much wisdom in carefully guiding open confession. Most aberrations I have witnessed or heard of were related to leaders' discounting the need for such guidance or exercising insufficient leadership. Suggestions will be made to leadership at the end of this article.

**2) Public confession was conducted with a greater rather than a lesser emphasis on preaching and the Word of God.** In times of the openness of God's people when the presence of God is sensibly known, the leaders should not feel pressured to minimize preaching in favor of public testimony or confession. This may happen, but should not at all be assumed. In earlier, more lasting, revivals, it was the preaching of the Word more than public meetings for testimony which brought the conviction of God to the people. There was, of course, the testimony of one person on the street saying to another, "Come and see what God is doing." This was very much a part of all revivals. But the arranged meeting for testimony, or the place of testimony at the end

of services, was a relatively minor footnote to the preaching and tearful repentance caused by that preaching in the greater, more lasting, visitations of God.

It is an interesting fact that the Epistles never address this issue of public confession, though much is said about church life and the believer's repentance. We do find public confession in Acts 19:18-20 with new believers burning their books on witchcraft in a Zaccheus-styled repentance. But even here the description of the work of God (v. 20) is that of the *Word* prevailing. James 5:16 ("Confess your sins to one another") is not an invitation for "open microphone confession," but should be understood in the context of the sick person among praying elders.

Here is an appropriate place to emphasize that there seems to be a significant difference in the Word-based revivals and the experience-based revivals as to duration and reforming quality. Consideration should also be given to the saturation of doctrine into the hearts of people preceding revival as an element in its strength. In our day, what would revival look like without a new resurgence of biblical truth? We are already so experience-based that one cannot fathom what strange things might occur. As far as I know, revival has never come to a nation already experiencing most of the unusual religious aberrations characteristic of its demise. This is the very reason for our cry for *reformational* revival.

For instance, the revival of 1904-1905 in Wales (also affecting other parts of the world) was not a "preaching" revival at all. The preachers were in fact told to be quiet. This, in the minds of many revival scholars, was a great loss; yet, due to the inculcation of truth prior to that revival, more was conserved than might have been otherwise. Most revivals since the mid-1800s (and this is a general statement) have put more emphasis on testimony and experience than the earlier visitations of God. The study of

revival is not an exact science, but I believe an examination of revival history will reveal that the sturdiness of revival built upon a Word base excels the experience-based movements.

Perhaps a very brief description of the Great Awakening will illustrate. Two concurrent streams were flowing during the Awakening. First was the serious and searching doctrinal preaching of men such as Whitefield, Wesley, the Tennents, Frelinghuysen, etc. Doctrine was important even when controverted (as seen between Whitefield and Wesley). Simply reviewing the titles of their messages is enough to let one know that doctrine was everything to these men.

Another stream was the "Societies for Prayer" movement. From the Reformation days these societies had continued but were considerably revived during this Awakening. In these smaller gatherings heartfelt prayer, Bible study, accountability, and fellowship among believers took place, along with the outflow of acts of mercy. Even in these societies the Word of God took preeminence, although the intimacy of the groups would allow for a genuine relating of experience, sins included. Many conversions took place in and through these groups, as sermons were read and repentance was preached. The overall impact of biblical preaching on an already biblically literate people produced a solid and powerfully reforming work on the nation. My own belief is that the impact of this kind of Word-centeredness is massive. We need, in other words, more than mere confession: we need reformation in our thinking. And this comes about through doctrinal preaching.

Concerning America, at least, one wonders just how much the expectation of extensive *public* confession (as being the essence of revival) is related to a shift in thinking precipitated by the altar call system which developed con-

currently in our history through the influence of Charles Finney. In this system the preacher and people expect some immediate response to the message which is visible and often unattached (in its worst form) to the content of the message. Unfortunately, because of this system as it has developed, the significance of the Word preached is often considered less important than what takes place in a few moments during an appeal to public response at the front of the building. The really weighty moment is the public altar call.

This kind of model may have influenced to some degree the sense of importance we give to the people's *public* response. The eighteenth-century (and earlier) preachers did not preach as much to the will ("come to the front and surrender") as to the mind and the conscience of the people, leaving them to deal with God about their condition. Thus the hearers would weep to themselves and struggle before God both in the services and at home until a deep substantial work was accomplished. The great things of God happened between them and God, not in public expression. This is the power of preaching when God's presence accompanies it. I suggest that we have lost some of our confidence in God's ability to use His Word powerfully in the lives of those who hear. Rich and passionate doctrinal preaching preceding and accompanying revival is a very powerful thing in the hands of God. It is what God loves and what He commands His ministers to put forth even if revival never comes, even in those difficult days "when they will not endure sound doctrine." Yet history records the greatest of blessings are attended to it.

An additional word should be said here about the downplaying of prophetic and doctrinal preaching. In our day, warmhearted lovers of substantive doctrine are hard to find. I often discover that pastors know relatively nothing of the truths that were the passionate cry (if not the cause

of martyrdom) of their forbears. The pastors are certainly devotional, but in leading the people much more is required. (See 2 Tim. 4:1-4.) A largely unprepared pastorate could be a source of the relative ease with which we diminish preaching for public demonstrative experience. I don't say that these men are necessarily conscious of the problem but that they are doing what they have learned to do. What I *am* saying is that a merely devotional attitude toward preaching has reduced the importance of it, *even in the mind of the preacher himself!*

If the Spirit convicts of sin, righteousness, and judgment, preachers should see their role as being instruments God can use in cooperation with this great objective. The Spirit comes with His sword! If sin is lawlessness (1 John 3:4), then God's standard must be upheld for there to be true biblical conviction. A man may confess and experience some relief, but he needs sound teaching to understand the immense and particular nature of God, the nature of man, the magnitude of judgment, the ongoing liberation of Christ's atonement, and the biblical truths for walking in harmony with God. In the midst of the first century (which is a revival paradigm), Paul labored to inculcate truth into the churches, certainly with extensive application. His messages were not merely "how-to's" on being successful, but were powerful doctrinal pleas. He argued his case because it was necessary for the people of God to believe correctly. The presence of God attending His Word, along with our sincere trust in Him, delivers doctrine from the common characterization of its being barren. A communicator who will not preach vigorously from the mountain peaks of great doctrine hardly deserves the name of preacher.

This word to pastors: This is not a time to hold back but to preach more deeply. Preach biblically, but amplify the doctrine. Fill your preaching with content. Argue your case and get under people's skin. May I suggest that you consid-

er series on the doctrine of God, the nature of depravity, the nature of Regeneration, the distinction between saving faith and spurious faith, the Judgment of God, the anger versus the love of God, the electing work of the Father, the meaning and effect of Christ's cross (not just the chant, "Christ died for our sins," with a few more stories, but real doctrinal material), the meaning of Justification by faith, the conviction of the Spirit, the Calling of God, Repentance from sin, the sacrificial call in following Christ, etc. All of these were staple preaching during earlier revivals. But do not just speak doctrine without application from beginning to end. And buy theology books. No pastor's library is complete without Charles Hodge, Boyce, Dabney, Shedd, Strong, Berkhof, Edwards, Warfield, Turretin, etc. (Church members zealous for truth should buy these books for their pastor. Avoid buying devotional books—he has enough of those!) You are never more like the greatest revival leaders than when you preach flaming doctrinal messages. In times of revival, you will find that you are preaching far too little, both in terms of time and number of messages. I will never forget preaching in certain cities of Romania during their revival while under Communist control. The people were never satisfied with just one sermon (which could last nearly two hours with translation) but required *two*. Many of the people stood for the entire services—they could not get enough of the Word of God.

As well, the ministers should remember the teaching of Paul to "give attention to [public] reading." Children, persons who cannot read, and persons who can but have not read the Bible that week, need to hear larger portions of God's Word expressed with great spirit.

If revival is *primarily* based on even the most well-ordered public confession with only a sprinkling of devotional preaching, then it will be a fragile thing indeed. One wrong move by those in the front, or one unusual person

speaking or praying, may change the atmosphere and close down the service. It takes only a minor demon to ruin it all. But revival built upon the Word of God is as fragile as a hurricane! The great Reformation demonstrates this. And there is no need to separate the idea of revival from reformation. Martin Luther has us singing what must happen during the kind of revival we need: "And though this world with devils filled should threaten to undo us; we will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us."

**3) Public confession was conducted principally through prayer or by representative persons.** Often a catalogue of the sins of the people were read and prayed through by leaders as the people wept through their sins privately. The Bible is full of such representative confession (1 Kings 8:28-53; Ezra 9:3-10:1; Neh. 1:4-11; Neh. 9; Dan. 9:3-23; etc.). It is typical of post-biblical revival, as well. The experience at the Synod of Fife in Dumferline, Scotland, May 12, 1596, is illustrative. This meeting followed the larger assembly previously mentioned. Rev. James Melville moderated the meeting and read the articles for reformation of the church already agreed upon at the assembly. Then he preached a long time on the last chapter of Joshua.

... with that evidence and demonstration of the power of God therewith, as all who were there were enforced to a strange and unusual motion, with groans and tears, yea then to some retired personal meditation for searching each of them their own ways.

And after some time did he make public confessions, *in the name of the rest*, of unthankfulness, undutifulness, negligence, coldness of spirit, instability, unsuitableness in speech and conversation, as too visibly fashioned after the world; yea, thus with trembling and weeping, for the misusage of so honourable a calling, and the fear and dread of

that weight of the wrath of God lying over them, for the blood of so many souls belonging to their charge, did then weep bitterly, and pour out their souls before the Lord, pleading for grace, and an effectual help to be strengthened against these evils (emphasis added).

Private sins were dealt with as the individual groaned before God alone. This took place both while all were present together, and in "retired personal meditation." We are not sure if this meant they left the room, but the context suggests they did not. At this time and in other similar occurrences one person read, extemporaneously expressed, and/or prayed through publicly, the sins of the people; agreement with tears was given by the people. In times of great repentance the affirmation of the larger body could be felt by all. All of this was to confirm the covenant that was being made and to personally recognize their individual and corporate complicity and their heartfelt willingness to submit to the leadership of God in its particulars.

**4) Public confession rested on true repentance as exemplified in solemn covenants.** Not satisfied with naming sins and experiencing emotional peace only, these penitent people enumerated their sins and activated their obedience by use of signed covenants. This usage of covenant is a biblical precedent to which we would be wise to return (2 Chron. 14-16; 23:12-21; 34-35; Ezra 10). These covenants were instruments used for a period of time, often being reread, to encapsulate the particular issues of obedience called for at that time. There was no mere outward submission to the covenant in either case study mentioned above. There is always the danger of an emphasis on externalities without the soul of genuine affection and passion for obedience. But this is not the case in the biblical or the Word-centered revivals of earlier days.

The revival we have been praying for is not a mere few



weeks of meaningful displays of public confession. We long for God's place to be rightfully restored and for a transformation of individual character and society in conformity to God's will. God knows what we have done wrong, and though there is benefit to naming sins, the real purpose of confession is humble obedience. An employer does not care for a workman who is only verbal about what he does wrong as much as he wants a man who will turn from that wrong to do what is right. A covenant articulates the areas of obedience to be pursued and adds impetus to personal and corporate repentance.

#### **Some Cautions to Consider in Times of Public Confession**

**1) Public confession may give relief wrongly.** This may happen in the genuine believer and in the unregenerate. If an unsaved man has a problem and goes to a counselor or has a group therapy session in which he tells all of his sins, he may feel considerably relieved. He might receive the same instantaneous relief during public confession in the assembly of believers. But the real problem of the man's heart may not be resolved. I have a growing awareness that this is exactly what happens to many. It would be far better in their case for them to hear the preaching of the Word and to wrestle with their state than to have peace. Because they feel better they never deal with the crucial issue of true regeneration. Believers may also receive relief through confession as a sort of substitute for repentance, restitution, and restoration. They may admit their sin under the pressure of the moment but still love it. If lack of peace was what prompted the confession, rather than hatred of sin, the restoration of peace through confession may be enough to cause the offender to do no more than confess.

**2) Public confession may give relief prematurely.** There is such a matter as conviction of sin, although it is out of vogue these days. Knowing the difference between the sor-

row of the world and the sorrow which is according to the will of God is difficult (2 Cor. 7:10). We should never take it on ourselves to determine just how much visible sorrow is necessary in the sinful persons around us; conviction is what *God* uses to bring a person to repentance, not what we are in charge of measuring. We simply do not know how much sadness over sin is necessary to birth a true hatred of sin and love for obedience. But God does. Our problem is that the slightest sign of emotion causes us to attempt to relieve the individual. Sometimes we are tampering where we should not. God is at work. A premature public expression of repentance may abort it. We are so misinformed about what our sin actually is at the root, the seriousness of that sin before God, and the manner of God's dealing with it, that we cannot, in our day, imagine anyone taking more than twenty minutes to deal with his sins, even the most hideous of them. This is the day of quick fixes; but our sins are like tumors intertwined in our innermost persons, and require extensive, pervasive surgery rather than cosmetics.

**3) Led by the emotion of the moment, some confessors may step beyond the line of propriety.** You might say that when God is present all will go well and we should not worry about this issue. But history does not support this. As the level of acceptance increases with the emotions of the people, the intense desire to be free from guilt may cause persons to do and say very strange things. This may happen in the arena of words or actions. An unusual thing begins to happen when our freedoms are misguided. The history of revival is full of those aberrations in terms of physical manifestations which contributed to the demise of the revival rather than its life. If the notion comes that freedom from inhibitions is the measure of spirituality, then we are put in the most vulnerable position before our enemy. Pressures on individuals, which they begin to believe are

from God, cause persons to do the unusual to verify their willingness to submit to God. These exhibitions have done nothing to support the cause of revival or glorify God.

Impropriety may show up in the words of the one confessing as well. Often the history of public confession has recorded the practice of the admission of sins which should never have been made public. The teaching of Matthew 18:15-17 on church discipline shows us that private sin is to be held in the private sphere unless the offending party refuses to repent. If a man may be reconciled to another by a private consultation, then nothing further is required. Paul said that it was "disgraceful even to speak of these things which are done by them in secret" (Eph. 5:12). To mention the names of people that have been wronged who may or may not be in the assembly, before they have given permission, or before the situation has been privately dealt with, is a gross error as well. Yet it happens fairly consistently. Thankfully, the Lord often condescends to our sincere failure in order to smooth it over. How sad for a woman to hear of her husband's moral failures in a public setting. It may have relieved him, but she now has to carry the weight of being publicly known as an adulterer's wife for the rest of her life along with a feeling of shame that she has somehow been unattractive to her husband. There should be no reason to confess private matters of such a nature before the church or group except in cases where church discipline demands it. Certainly, when a person needs accountability, then another person or a small intimate group of mature believers should hear his confession. Or later, when the individual has conquered his sin through Christ and it has become part of the story of his life in Christ, then he may have reason to speak of it in more general terms, but normally not sooner.

Though those of us living here in America are notorious at hiding our sins, we are also notorious for parading our

sins. We have a familiarity with sin that few societies have tolerated. Our foreign friends find us uncomfortably free to talk of private matters. Some people are so conversant with seeing and hearing about the evil side of life through television and the talk of friends that nothing is sacrosanct.

Another abuse has taken place when a confessor inadvertently indicts another. "When John hurt me by saying that I was not able to lead the class, I immediately got angry," etc. There are many such potentialities in public confession. It takes a particularly wise leader to work through the mine fields.

**4) If public confession becomes the measure of genuine revival, certain persons will most likely be led to insincere confessions out of zeal.** This is pride in reverse—a subtle pride of humility or piety. "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9). If there is a compelling expectation for everyone to confess sin, willing people will seek ways to conform. I have known this pressure myself under these same conditions; it happens more often than one may think.

#### Suggestions for Leaders Directing Public Confession

Although "open microphone" services are a more modern kind of expression of public confession and should be used with all the cautions fully weighed against the benefits, there may yet be times leaders will call for just such means. In this event, let us pray for wisdom and help from God. The following suggestions may aid you.

Exercise leadership in times of public confession. It is not proper for you to get out of the way entirely. It goes without saying that your leadership should be sensitive to the Holy Spirit.

Lead the people in repentance during your public prayers. This leadership in prayer should not be forgotten

even when the microphone has been opened to others. This is precisely the way private matters should be dealt with by the church. Remember the models we have mentioned.

You may wish to instruct the people to pray quietly on their own for some period of time as well. They may do this at their seats, sitting or kneeling, or, if you so desire, at the altar. In some situations this will come very naturally. Encourage and expect the spirit of James' admonition in your praying.

Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning, and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you (James 4:8-10).

You may wish to frame your request for public confession by asking questions similar to these: (1) Where did the Lord find you (in regard to your sin)? (2) What did the Lord do to get your attention? (3) What specific changes are required to obey God?

If you call for public confession or someone asks to speak to the church, lead the people to discuss their confession with you briefly before sharing publicly. If a person is not ready to speak publicly, you will know that better than anyone. Explain to them the necessity of private restoration if applicable. Lovingly ask them to return to their seats and to deal privately with God, or ask them to see you afterwards when you can more carefully explain why you asked them to wait. God will guide you in this. You are not required to let everyone speak who says he wishes to. You must lead.

Instruct the people not to relate private matters in the

public setting. *Our confession should be only as public as our sin.* If general statements indicating areas of disobedience are needed to make sense of the confession, then carefully instruct the individuals and the group how to do that. If someone goes beyond what is proper, do not panic or act embarrassed, but kindly remind the audience that we are to be private with private sin, except where accountability is needed, in which case they should see mature believers for help.

Though specific *repentance* for all sins both public and private is required, private sins publicly confessed, *if mentioned at all*, must be spoken of in very general ways. Remember, even general terms for private sins may cause people to read far more into the confession than was intended; it also may imply far less. This is one additional reason for carefulness. One also should be cautious not to mention specific sins of a private nature which include others without first having dealt with the other parties involved and having received permission.

You may wish to be supportive by standing beside those speaking. In this way you can give guidance, help them clarify their repentance, encourage the church's forgiving response to their confession, etc.

Encourage brevity in sharing. The reason for this is practical. If one continues a long time, he will likely say too much. "When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, but he who restrains his lips is wise" (Prov. 10:19).

Ask for prayer for those repenting of sin. You may also wish to have others gather around the repenting person to pray for him or to meet with him following the service, or you may ask the church or group to pray as a whole.

Consider, as well, the use of communion and the offering of gifts to God as opportunities to remind and make room for true repentance. These times are especially useful since they are accompanied with severe admonitions in Scripture

(Matt. 5:23-24; 1 Cor. 11:27-34). Some believe the communion of the early church was never taken less than once a week. This is precedent, not command. To have communion more often (not in a routine way, but with variety of Scripture about the work of Christ, and in different styles, including less formal ways) is a good method to keep the need for repentance before the people.

Repeatedly emphasize repentance over confession. Confession moves the tongue; repentance changes the life.

When the time is right call a special session to consider the sins of the church more seriously. Make a catalogue of sins. Do this first with the leaders, or you may wish to ask small groups in your church to help highlight the major sins. The leaders can group together what is most often repeated. It is best to describe these sins in sentence form in order to be more descriptive. You may even feel a small paragraph is required to relate the particular disobedience with force. Bring the church together in Solemn Assembly. Weep and mourn over your disobedience.

Consider following the cataloguing of sins with a covenant. When at least the core of the church is serious about obeying, ask them to sign the covenant, or to show response in some tangible way. The covenants say, "We will not be satisfied with mere naming of sins, however humbling and freeing this may seem at the moment, but we will be satisfied only with true obedience to God's Word." Take portions of the covenant to preach on in the coming weeks, or to cover in brief segments prior to your messages. Read it often and think of ways to bring it regularly before the church. Speak not only of the sins of the people but of practical ways those sins may be conquered in Christ.

If you do not lead the church to a covenant as a whole, then at least help the people see the value of writing down their particular sins, and the necessary adjustments God requires, for their own daily review and prayer.

### **The Call for Reformation**

What I am calling for is not that public confession be lost as a tool God uses in our churches and schools, but that we understand it in the context of a larger reformation. This will be demonstrated by the way we handle the Word of God and the way we properly place confession subservient to and flowing out of the more diligent preaching and teaching of the great doctrines. It will also be seen in our intense desire for true *repentance*—ongoing repentance—as illustrated through the covenants agreed upon by the churches in earlier days.

We are all extremely grateful to God for the recent stirrings around the country. But let's not feel that all is done if times of confession are experienced. Rather we must courageously preach, thoroughly repent, and lovingly exalt God in the context of a new humility, seeking a large-scale reformation of our present anemic and shallow Christianity. Ours has been a Christianity of great numbers and large boasts but little substantive change in individuals and society. This day demands that people like ourselves become weeping reformers, intent on experiencing again what occurred in other generations: "The word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing" (Acts 19:20).

### **Author**

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