

Lyfe guide to confession

Confession- admitting to God, to ourselves, to others the wrong we have done or thought- does not belong in a dusty box in the corner of an ornate Catholic church. It belongs at the centre of the spiritual life of every Christian. By confessing our sins, we are able to receive the forgiveness, restoration and healing that God, through Jesus' crucifixion, longs to give us. As it says in 1 John 9, "if we confess our sins to God, he can always be trusted to forgive us and take our sins away."

Few of us would take issue with the idea of private confession- quietly telling our loving God, who already knows what we are about to say anyway, our worst secrets. But telling someone else? That is a pretty uncomfortable thought. Why would we want to do that? And is it even biblical, when we are assured that we have direct access to God, and need no human mediator (1 Timothy 2:5)?

Is public confession biblical?

In short, yes. Jesus has given us authority to listen to each other's confessions and on his behalf to forgive (John 20:23). In James 5: 16 it says 'If you have sinned, you should tell each other what you have done. Then you can pray for one another and be healed. The prayer of an innocent person is powerful, and it can help a lot.' Confession got itself a bad name because before the Reformation it was used as an instrument of manipulation and extortion. But even Luther managed not to throw the proverbial baby out when he emptied the bath, writing in the Large Catechism, "...when I admonish you to confession, I am admonishing you to be a Christian."

Why would we want to confess to anyone other than God?

01 Because sometimes we need the reassurance of hearing the truth of our forgiveness spoken over us. We may doubt the validity of our inner confession, and fear rejection on the basis of having done it wrong, or insincerely or without tears. Saying it out loud to another person with the authority to pronounce God's forgiveness is very healing. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes that our fellow Christian "...has been given to us to help us. [They] hear the confession of our sins in Christ's stead and [they] forgive our sins in Christ's name. [They] keep the secret of our confession as God keeps it. When I go to my [fellow Christian] to confess, I am going to God."

02 It is painful to acknowledge our failings, but doing so counteracts pride and hypocrisy. If the thought of confessing our sins to a person horrifies us, maybe we need to have a long hard look at why that is.

03 In confessing our sins, we give freedom to others to do the same, and we discover we are not alone in our struggles. Richard Foster writes, "if we know that the people of God are first a fellowship of sinners, we are freed to hear the unconditional call of God's love and to confess our needs openly before our brothers and sisters...We are sinners together. In acts of mutual confession we release the power that heals."

The forgiveness and grace of God is freely available to all who confess their sins and repent (that is, change direction), and this confession may well be a private matter between an individual and God. But as we have seen, there are compelling reasons for confessing to each other as well.