

“Confession of Sin”

From John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, Book III, 4.8-9, English updated and emphasis added.

John Chrysostom, who lived at Constantinople, and was himself prelate of the church, had this to say regarding the confession of sins:

“Tell your sins”, he says, “that you may efface them: if you blush to tell another what sins you have committed, tell them daily in your soul. I say not, tell them to your fellow-servant who may upbraid you, but tell them to God who cures them. Confess your sins upon your bed, that your conscience may there daily recognize its iniquities.” Again, “Now, however, it is not necessary to confess before witnesses; let the examination of your faults be made in your own thought: let the judgment be without a witness: let God alone see you confessing.” Again, “I do not lead you publicly into the view of your fellow servants; I do not force you to disclose your sins to men; review and lay open your conscience before God. Show your wounds to the Lord, the best of physicians, and seek medicine from Him. Show to Him who upbraids not, but cures most kindly.” Again, “Certainly tell it not to man lest he upbraid you. Nor must you confess to your fellow servant, who may make it public; but show your wounds to the Lord, who takes care of you, who is kind and can cure.”

He afterwards introduces God speaking thus: “I oblige you not to come into the midst of a theatre, and have many witnesses; tell your sins to Me alone in private, that I may cure the ulcer.” . . .

9. But that the whole matter may be more plainly unfolded, we shall first honestly state the nature of confession as delivered in the word of God, and thereafter subjoin their inventions — not all of them indeed (who could drink up that boundless sea?) but those only which contain summary of their secret confession. Here I am grieved to mention how frequently the old interpreter has rendered the word confess instead of praise, a fact notorious to the most illiterate, were it not fitting to expose their effrontery in transferring to their tyrannical edict [i.e., confessing to one’s priest] what was written concerning the praises of God. To prove that confession has the effect of exhilarating the mind, they obtrude the passage in the psalm, “with the voice of joy and praise,” (Vulgate, *confessionis*) (Psalm 42:4). But if such a metamorphosis is valid, anything may be made of anything. But, as they have lost all shame, let pious readers reflect how, by the just vengeance of God, they have been given over to a reprobate mind, that their audacity may be the more detestable. If we are disposed to acquiesce in the simple doctrine of Scripture, there will be no danger of our being misled by such glosses.

There [in Holy Scripture] one method of confessing is prescribed; **since it is the Lord who forgives, forgets and wipes away sins, to Him let us confess them, that we may obtain pardon. He is the physician, therefore let us show our wounds to Him.** He is hurt and offended, let us ask peace of Him. He is the discerner of the heart, and knows all one’s thoughts; let us hasten to pour out our hearts before Him. He it is, in short, who invites sinners; let us delay not to draw near to Him.

“I acknowledge my sin to You,” says David; “and my iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions to the Lord; and You forgave the iniquity of my sin,” (Psalm 32:5). Another specimen of David’s confessions is as follows: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness” (Psalm 51:1). The following is Daniel’s confession: “We have sinned, and have committed iniquity, and have done wickedly, and

have rebelled, even by departing from Your precepts and Your judgments” (Daniel 9:5). Other examples everywhere occur in Scripture: the quotation of them would almost fill a volume. “If we confess our sins,” says John, “He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins” (1 John 1:9). **To whom are we to confess? to Him surely; — that is, we are to fall down before Him with a grieved and humbled heart, and sincerely accusing and condemning ourselves, seek forgiveness of His goodness and mercy.**

10. He who has adopted this confession from the heart and as in the presence of God, will doubtless have a tongue ready to confess whenever there is occasion among men to publish the mercy of God. He will not be satisfied to whisper the secret of his heart for once into the ear of one individual [i.e., a priest], but will often, and openly, and in the hearing of the whole world, ingenuously make mention both of his own ignominy, and of the greatness and glory of the Lord.

In this way David, after he was accused by Nathan, being stung in his conscience, confesses his sin before God and men. “I have sinned against the Lord,” he says (2 Samuel 12:13); that is, I have now no excuse, no evasion; all must judge me a sinner; and that which I wished to be secret with the Lord must also be made manifest to men.

Hence the secret confession which is made to God is followed by voluntary confession to men, whenever that is conducive to the divine glory or our humiliation. For this reason the Lord anciently enjoined the people of Israel that they should repeat the words after the priest, and make public confession of their iniquities in the temple; because He foresaw that this was a necessary help to enable each one to form a just idea of himself. And it is proper that by confession of our misery, we should manifest the mercy of our God both among ourselves and before the whole world.