
PRACTICE 1

On Confession

Confession is a simple, historic practice of the church that involves us openly and specifically admitting our sins to God in the presence of one or more of our brothers and sisters in Christ, receiving forgiveness from God which is affirmed by our brethren, and then turning from our sin. Confession is meant to be a normative practice in our lives with God and one another, undertaken out of simple obedience to Christ, and need not either take a long time or be made complicated or difficult to undertake. It is often helpful to take communion immediately following confession, to both remind us of Christ's body and blood given for us for the forgiveness of our sins, and to receive blessing and grace from God by encountering him through this simple sacrament.

The practice of confession is rooted in the Scriptures. John says this:

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us. (1 John 1:8–10, NIV)

And James reminds us:

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. (James 5:16, NIV)

Finally, in The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9–14), Jesus reminds us that it was the tax collector who, unable to lift

his eyes to heaven out of shame, beat his breast and simply said to God, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner” (Luke 18:13, NIV). In admitting his sin to God, he went home justified, Jesus says, unlike the Pharisee, who was unwilling to look at and admit his own sin.

So we are called to confess our sins to one another and to pray for one another. As we do so, we find ourselves freed from the sins that our own hearts, and that the enemy of our souls, “the accuser of our brethren” (Rev. 12:10, NAS), condemn us of. Confession is a gentle invitation from God to renew the life he has already granted us in his Son, Jesus Christ.

A simple guide to a time of confession and communion

Be sure to read through this entire chapter before beginning, as it provides guidelines for a one-hour meeting with one or two other brothers or sisters of the same sex. Three seems to be an ideal number, as it often makes for a deeper sense of accountability and support than does meeting with simply one other person, while also preserving a sense of shelter and confidentiality which a larger group might not. You will find it easy for all three of you to hear each other’s confession in a simple one-hour time together.

When you meet, consider structuring your time as follows:

- Before gathering, be sure you assemble the necessary communion elements if you plan to take communion together.
- Gather somewhere that ensures privacy and freedom from interruptions — often someone’s home is best.
- Take a few minutes to greet each other, get coffee and tea, etc., but try to get started on your time of confession within 10–15 minutes of everyone arriving.

Some notes for the person confessing

General Confession As you prepare to confess your sins to one another, consider opening your time together by praying out loud along the lines of the following (patterned after the General Confession in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer), either asking one person to pray for you all, or all praying together.

Silent Reflection A general confession is a good place to start, but a more personal confession will bring a more clear way toward freedom and

forgiveness. Take a moment to clear your thoughts and reflect. Ask the Lord, “Where have I rejected your instructions?” or “What have I left undone that I should have done” or “Where in my life have I turned myself away from you?”

Personal Confession When you are ready, you can begin confessing the one or several things on your heart. Start your confession by saying, “I confess to the Lord and you. . .” When you are finished, you can say, “This is my confession.”

Some notes for those hearing a confession

As preparation for hearing a confession, Richard Foster provides a few helpful guidelines:

First, as the one hearing the confession, we need to avoid any attitude of superiority. Dietrich Bonhoeffer says in his book *Life Together*: “Anybody who has once been horrified by the dreadfulness of his [or her] own sin that nailed Jesus to the Cross will no longer be horrified by even the rankest sins of a brother [or sister].” Second, we pray that we could radiate the love and forgiveness and grace of God while we listen. Third, we must discipline ourselves to be quiet. There may be a temptation to speak and make an offhanded comment or to pull out more details, but we need to resist that. If we feel they are holding back, the best method is to wait silently and pray. Give people the simple gift of your undivided attention. Fourth, it is important to end with prayer and not just counsel them. There may be some counsel necessary, but for the most part we should simply pray a prayer of absolution over them.

Step-by-step instructions for hearing a confession

1. **General Confession** Invite the person confessing to read the following general confession aloud, or even better, do so together as a group:

Almighty and most merciful Father, I have erred and strayed from your ways like a lost sheep. I have followed the plans and desires of my own heart. I have rejected your holy laws. I have left undone those things which I should have done, and I have done things that I should not have done — and there is no health in me. But You, O Lord, have

mercy on me. O God, free me as I confess my sins. Restore me according to your promises declared to us all in Jesus Christ our Lord. And, most merciful Father, grant for His sake that from now on I might live a godly, righteous, and clear-headed life, to the glory of Your holy name.

And now, Lord, as I prepare to confess my sins, would you search me, and know my heart. Would you test me and know my anxious thoughts. Show me God, where there have been hurtful ways in me; show me where I have failed to obey you, where I have left undone what I should have done, and where I have turned myself away from you in any way. Be with us, Lord, as we confess our sins to one another. Amen.

2. **Silent Reflection** Encourage the person to take some time of silence and reflection.
3. **Confession** If they struggle, ask, “Is there anything specific that weighs on you that you would like to confess to the Lord?”
4. **Prayer of Forgiveness** When they finish, pray a prayer of absolution over them, like the following:

Lord you say in your word that “If we confess our sins, [you are] faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9, NIV). (Say the name of the person confessing here), we therefore declare that by the blood of Jesus your sins are forgiven, and that God will purify you from all unrighteousness. Therefore, God, give [the person’s name] true repentance and your Holy Spirit, so that she/he will find freedom from this sin. I pray that you would give her/him peace and that you would cleanse her/him and allow her/him to serve you with his/her whole life. I pray in the name of your son Jesus, whose precious blood cleanses us from all sin. Amen.

5. **Communion** Ask if they would like to receive communion according to the simple pattern below:

The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said,

“This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me” (take the bread). In the same way after supper he took the cup saying, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (take the cup).

6. **Silence** We will now sit in silence for one more minute to give you time to rest and reflect. We will end our time together with a simple “Amen.”
7. **Prayer of blessing** While one of your confessors (group members) may on occasion offer some brief advice or counsel, generally your simple confession is enough. One of them will then pray a brief prayer of blessing over you to close.