

Confession

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

—I John 1:9

THE SCRIPTURES TELL

us, “All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.” (Rom. 3:23) One might then ask, “What should I do about my sin?” To address this question, we begin by reading the Apostle John’s statement in I John 4:9,10 about the greatest gift ever given: “In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” God sent his son so we might have life through him—“The man Christ Jesus; Who gave himself a ransom for all.”—I Tim. 2:5,6

This Gospel message had been delivered many times already. Most likely John felt compelled to repeat it not only to fortify what had been preached earlier, but also to warn the disciples against false prophets and doctrines which threatened the very necessity and meaning of Jesus’ sacrifice.

In the same context as the verses quoted above, John gives a warning. His words, given to those in

Christ living near the end of the first century, parallel Jesus' prophetic warning to those living at the end of the Gospel Age. Let us compare their statements. John's warning is recorded in I John 4:1-3. "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world." John's warning to the brethren of his day to "believe not every spirit" and to "try the spirits" meant that they were not to believe the teachings of everyone who claimed to have the "spirit" of God, but to test those things they were taught by comparing them to God's Word. For example, John said that God's Word clearly testified that his son Jesus had come in the flesh, and if any teaching denied that truth, it should be considered as being of the spirit of antichrist—that is, in opposition to Christ.

Jesus' warning is recorded in Matthew 24:3-5, 23-25. "As he sat upon the mount of Olives, the disciples came unto him privately, saying, Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming [presence], and of the end of the world [age]? And Jesus answered and said unto them, Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many. . . . Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there; believe it

not. For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect. Behold, I have told you before.”

Note the similarities between these two warnings of Jesus and John—terms mentioned such as “false prophets,” “false Christs,” “try the spirits,” “take heed,” and “spirit of antichrist.” Man’s fallen, sinful spirit has more often than not gotten in the way of his faith in Christ. In John’s day, the Greek philosophers took the teaching of “liberty” in Christ (Gal. 2:4), and tried to expand it into a concept of salvation based more on man’s abilities than on his faith in God. The worst of these philosophies was Gnosticism, which taught that salvation was based on man’s knowledge, and credited Jesus to be no more than a good teacher who failed to go far enough in releasing the Jews from the bondage of the Law. It was this type of spirit also which John was warning against during his lifetime.

Jesus’ prophetic warning is particularly applicable to our day. While today’s false teachings are varied, they share the same general idea of man’s ability to obtain his own salvation, of which John warned the brethren in his day. For example, beginning in the 1960s, the New Age movement began teaching that “God is within us”—each one possesses a little of God sufficient to develop ourselves as fully as we desire, and capable of carrying out our own salvation. Additionally, many churches today are increasingly proclaiming “great signs and wonders” in missionary work, feeding of the poor, helping many overcome alcohol and drug dependency, mending broken homes, providing financial security, and

other great works. We do not criticize these noble efforts and the limited good they have accomplished. However, we note that one of the effects has been the same as in John's day—an elevation of man's importance and a decrease of God's importance in providing man's salvation and recovery from the terrible effects of sin.

A recent *Time* magazine article on this topic spoke of baby boomers returning to the churches, but on their own terms and with many of their own ideas of what Christianity should be. The author pointed out that, as a result, many churches have become almost indistinguishable from many "self-help" groups, and concluded with the statement that all these efforts would fail spiritually as long as church-goers replace "the glorification of God with the gratification of man." This is the same spirit of opposition to Christ which John warned against.

How can we protect ourselves from these and other threats which teach in opposition to Christ? How do we resist the temptation to replace "the glorification of God with the gratification of man?" The Apostle John has given us a very practical and essential tool to ward off these false doctrines that would in any way minimize the ransom price paid by our dear Master on the cross, with the words of our theme text: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."—I John 1:9

From the statements of John quoted thus far, we conclude that confession is an important tool to help us resist the spirit of opposition to Christ—antichrist. Let us consider John's words on this

subject more closely, and examine the importance of confession in our consecrated walk.

WHO SHOULD CONFESS?

As we consider “who should confess?” we must understand to whom John is speaking in our theme text. While it is true that all have sinned, and that confession is always a proper response to one’s sinful condition, it is quite evident from the context of John’s words that he is not speaking to sinners in general, but directly to the footstep followers of Christ. Note these words from earlier in the same chapter: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; (For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;) That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full.”—I John 1:1-4

Whose joy can be full in this present evil world in which we live except those who have been begotten by the Holy Spirit, those who understand God’s plans and purposes? Clearly, the world in general does not enjoy this fullness of joy today. The world is consumed in a spirit of fear, distress, and greed. Likewise, most of today’s churches do not enjoy this fullness of joy because they are so consumed in earthly affairs. If these words of John were applicable to sinners in general, it would give the

impression that there is no difference between those in Christ and the world. It would nullify the need to deny ourselves and follow Jesus according to the terms of the divine call—"Gather my saints together unto me; those that have made a covenant with me by sacrifice."—Ps. 50:5

Additionally, if applicable to sinners in general, some might mistakenly conclude from John's words that it is impossible to commit further sins after past sins have been forgiven by our gracious God. However, such is not the case, and our reliance on God continues in every step of our life, as Paul reminds us, saying, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us." (II Cor. 4:7) It is evident, then, that John is speaking, not to the world in general, but to those who would become the sons of God.

It is important that we understand why confession is needed in our life as a child of God, and the purpose of confessing our sins. We turn to the testimony of David and Solomon on this point. David wrote these words, saying, "How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, Whose sin is covered! How blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, And in whose spirit there is no deceit! When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away Through my groaning all day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer. I acknowledged my sin to You, And my iniquity I did not hide; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD'; And You forgave the guilt of my sin."—Ps. 32:1-5, *New American Standard Bible*

David was eager to serve God and quick to seek forgiveness when he erred. We find three important points regarding confession in this beautiful account: 1) Without confession David suffered and there was no fullness of joy (vss. 3,4); 2) Confession preceded forgiveness, meaning it is a prerequisite. (vs. 5); 3) God's forgiveness was a blessing that led to fullness of joy (vs. 1). We see that confession was an important element in David's relationship with God and his service to him.

Solomon also had experiences with regard to confession, and provides similar words, as recorded in Proverbs, "He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, But he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion." Prov. 28:13, *NASB* Here we see the same three thoughts as David had expressed—hidden sins are detrimental to our well-being; confession leads to forgiveness; and forgiveness is a blessing from God, here expressed as "compassion".

If confession leads to forgiveness, we should want to know more about it. Let us consider Paul's words concerning forgiveness as he recalled the details of his conversion before Agrippa. "I said, Who art thou, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest. But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee; Delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee, To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness

of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me.”—Acts 26:15-18

There are two points worth noting here. First, Paul was sent to the Gentiles to turn them from darkness to light. Second, the purpose of his mission to provide the light of truth to these was that they might be granted forgiveness of their sins and be given the opportunity of receiving an inheritance.

We now return to John’s discourse and consider our need of cleansing, and its relationship to confession and forgiveness. “This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.”—I John 1:5-10

John makes it very clear that we are all sinners in need of cleansing, stating that if we claim to have not sinned we are liars! If we are to be considered as walking in the light, and cleansed from all unrighteousness by the precious blood of Jesus Christ, then, according to the apostle’s words, confession is required. We will be partakers of these blessings “if we confess our sins.”

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WHAT SINS TO CONFESS?

John states in I John 5:16 that there two kinds of sin which, in particular, can apply to the Lord's people at the present time. He says, "If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it." The second of these sins, the "sin unto death," is willful sin against light provided by the Holy Spirit. Jesus speaks of this type of sin in this way, "Whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come."—Matt. 12:32

Paul confirms this principle in Hebrews 10:26, which reads, "If we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins." Because we are free moral agents and not banned from making such a treacherous and terrible choice, John says we are not to pray for those who commit this sin. They have made their own choice, with full knowledge against the light of the Holy Spirit.

The other sin John mentions is a "sin not unto death." These are unintentional sins, faults, and shortcomings of our flesh that we all are guilty of and battle constantly throughout our walk in the narrow way. John says we should pray for one another concerning these types of sin, that we might be encouraged and grow spiritually from our mistakes. This also clarifies for us which sins we

should confess—not the sin unto death (which one would likely not think of confessing anyway), but sins “not” unto death. We should confess the faults and shortcomings of the flesh, in which we all share, and which the Apostle Paul once described in himself with these words: “The good that I would [do] I do not: but the evil which I would not [do], that I do.”—Rom. 7:19

Notwithstanding the scriptural testimony previously cited, some may reason that the body members of Christ cannot sin, as John seems to state in I John 3:6-9. “Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him. Little children, let no man deceive you: he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous. He that committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil. Whosoever is born [begotten] of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born [begotten] of God.”

We should note two points in these verses. First, the sins spoken of in these verses are of the willful kind, not unintentional. This is shown by John’s statement that they are “of the devil,” that is, they are willful even as Satan’s sin was willful “from the beginning.” The second point we note is that the true child of God cannot commit such willful sin as long as he continues to abide under the begetting power of God’s Holy Spirit. Being begotten of God, he is opposed to all such sin.

Part of our battle to develop as spirit-begotten New Creatures comes from this dual aspect of our

being, as we currently have “this treasure in earthen vessels.” (II Cor. 4:7) This begotten New Creature—the new heavenly will and mind—currently resides in an earthly, imperfect body. The spirit-begotten will does not sin because it is from God, but as long as we are in these earthen vessels, we continue to commit the unintentional sins of the flesh. These are the sins John tells us we are to confess. These are the sins we speak of when we pray, “Forgive us our sins and shortcomings.”

This duality of sin, willful versus unintentional, and the fact that the child of God has a spirit-begotten mind or will, residing in a fallen earthly body, raises an interesting question. Can an unintentional sin become willful? If an unintentional sin is later recognized, but not repented of, and not rectified, is it then willful? Are we then sinning against the Holy Spirit by omitting proper repentance and rectification? It would appear from John’s words that this is indeed the case. Sincere, heartfelt confessions would be of even greater necessity to correct such a course.

Especially important along this line is our dealings with the brethren. Because “we walk in the light [with our brethren], . . . [and] have fellowship one with another” (I John 1:7), we must first know who our brethren are. Jesus said, “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.” (Matt. 7:21) In other words, actions speak louder than words when determining who are to be considered as brethren. Jesus further says, “Who are my brethren? . . .

Whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother.”—Matt. 12:48,50

In dealing with the real or, at times, perceived sins of our brethren, we should consider Jesus’ advice on the matter, as recorded by Matthew, “You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER’ and ‘Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, ‘You good-for-nothing,’ shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell [*gehenna*—destruction]. Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.”—Matt. 5:21-24, *NASB*

These are very serious words. Jesus is here saying that God will not accept our offering if our brother has something against us. He is further saying that the offender has the responsibility to reconcile the transgression, and that this is required before we can once again present an acceptable offering to our Heavenly Father. We should, therefore, frequently ask ourselves if we have fully reconciled with those we have transgressed against. Here again, confessions are required. Let us then be very careful in all of our thoughts, words, and deeds directed toward our brethren.

TO WHOM IS CONFESSION MADE?

According to some scholars, the practice of confession and absolution in the traditional church systems is based on John 20:22,23. From the *New English Translation*, we read, "Then he breathed on them, saying, 'Receive the Holy Spirit!' If you forgive any man's sins, they stand forgiven; If you pronounce them unforgiven, unforgiven they remain." The church systems took these words to authorize setting up the practice whereby confessions would be made to a priest, as if they had acquired this gift long ago given to the Apostles. This practice became yet another fear and control tactic of Satan to keep the church congregation in line with the doctrines of the clergy. The verses quoted above authorized only the Apostles to forgive sins, as one of the special gifts which was conferred on them at Pentecost. Aside from this authority, granted exclusively to the twelve Apostles, the Scriptures do not authorize any such form of confession as traditionally practiced in the churches.

On the contrary, we should always direct our confessions to our Heavenly Father, not through a priest or any human agent. God has provided us with a much better avenue through which to approach him. The Apostle John says, "My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." (I John 2:1) These words tell us that our Advocate, Jesus, represents us to the Father because our sins are against God. That is a very sobering thought, but thanks be to him that God has provided his Son to act as our advocate before him! Jesus is the

“propitiation [satisfaction] for our sins.” (vs. 2) If we ask, he will impute his merit with such sufficiency to cover all of our defects—but we have to ask. If we do we can have complete confidence that our confessions will result in our total cleansing.

We are to remember that sin is sin. We should take them all to the LORD in prayer, even the ones that slip our minds, or those that we may not recognize. Such apparently happened in David’s life on occasion, as he confesses in Psalm 19:12, saying, “Who can understand his errors? cleanse thou me from secret faults.” As his children, we received spotless robes of righteousness when we consecrated to do God’s will. If we stain this robe in any way we need to seek cleansing as quickly as possible. We must not let the stain set in.

In summary, we should consider confession as a valuable tool provided to help keep us humble, remembering our need of the ransom price provided by Jesus’ death on the cross. Confession is a key to a healthy spiritual life based on four basic principles: 1) Concealed sins are detrimental to our spiritual well-being; 2) God is pleased when we come to him for forgiveness; 3) Confession leads to forgiveness; and 4) Forgiveness is a blessing from God. May the Lord help us to use confession along with all of the other tools he has given us to make our calling and election sure. ■

“The LORD is merciful and loving, slow to become angry and full of constant love. He does not punish us as we deserve or repay us according to our sins and wrongs. As a father is kind to his children, so the LORD is kind to those who honor him.”
Psalm 103:8,10,13, Good News Bible