



Lexington Presbyterian Church

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Confession

1 Jn. 1:5-10; Phil. 2:9-11; Rm. 10:9-10

A sermon by William M. Klein

30 October 2016

⁹...if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. (Rm. 10:9-10 NRSV)

⁹Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2:9-11 NRSV)

⁵This, in essence, is the message we heard from Christ and are passing on to you: God is light, pure light; there's not a trace of darkness in him. ⁶⁻⁷If we claim that we experience a shared life with him and continue to stumble around in the dark, we're obviously lying through our teeth—we're not *living* what we claim. But if we walk in the light, God himself being the light, we also experience a shared life with one another, as the sacrificed blood of Jesus, God's Son, purges all our sin. ⁸⁻¹⁰If we claim that we're free of sin, we're only fooling ourselves. A claim like that is errant nonsense. On the other hand, if we admit our sins—make a clean breast of them—he won't let us down; he'll be true to himself. He'll forgive our sins and purge us of all wrongdoing. If we claim that we've never sinned, we out-and-out contradict God—make a liar out of him. A claim like that only shows off our ignorance of God. (1 Jn. 1:5-10 The Message)

1

Today is Reformation Sunday – at least it is recognized as such by the Reformed family of churches across the planet. For many years on this Sunday I tried to open for you one of the confessional documents of our church.

Twelve confessional documents make up the *Book of Confessions* of the Presbyterian Church USA.¹ These documents taken as a whole are definitional for Reformed Christianity. They also help us see that the word "confession" can be understood in two ways, both of which have the same ultimate focal point. This is what I want us to think about on Reformation Sunday 2016.

2

As a part of worship each Sunday we offer private and corporate prayers of confession. One reason we do this is because if we claim that we are free of sin, we're only fooling ourselves.

It is patently obvious that we are capable of fooling ourselves. In fact, some of us spend an entire lifetime averting our gaze every time the truth about ourselves flits into view. But I'm convinced God has planted within us a longing for honesty. I say this because when I ignore this longing for honesty life gets out of whack...and I expect the same can be said for you. You and I pay a price for fooling ourselves...and that price is loneliness, fear, anxiety, greed, abusiveness, objectification of others, divorce, self-righteousness, and on and on.

Abraham Heschel, the great Jewish thinker of the last century wrote about sinfulness being a wall between ourselves and God. He put it this way. He said Jews pilgrimage to Jerusalem in order to pour out their hearts at the Wailing Wall. He said the wall is a symbol for the wall that stands between humankind and God. At the wall the faithful pray, searching for a cleft, for a crevice, through which their words can enter and reach God behind the wall.²

Preacher and writer, Frederick Buechner, makes a similar point. He says that to confess your sins to God is not to tell God anything God doesn't already know. Until you confess them, however, they are the abyss between you. When you confess them, they become the Golden Gate Bridge.³

For you and me, private and corporate confession are opportunities to reach out to God behind the wall...to own up to the abyss of our own making...to be honest...to admit we have fallen short of our best, sometimes way short. By our confessions we affirm that God made us to be kind, loving, forgiving, honest, God-focused, and neighbor-focused. Through our confessions we acknowledge we have been self-focused instead, that it feels lousy to be this way, and that we truly want to live as if we believe Christ has set us free from being self-focused.

3

I know some people don't like me to even talk about sin. This past week I heard Krista Tippett interview journalist David Brooks. Brooks said he had gone on the *Charlie Rose* show and talked about his book (The Road to Character) before it came out, and in that talk he mentioned the word "sin." Brooks said that afterwards he received an email from an editor in New York who said, "I love the way you were talking about your book, but I didn't like the way you used that word 'sin.' It's a downer. Use the word 'insensitive' instead."⁴

That editor's sentiment is very common. I have a hunch this is a common sentiment because folks have some pretty terrible associations with the word. They may have grown up in a church where they were told "NO" more often than they were told, "Yes." As a child they were told, "No, you can't come to the Lord's Table;" "No, you can't make noise in church;" "No, you can't run in the church." As they got older they were told, "No, you can't dance or wear makeup or have a drink." Week in and week out they were told they were miserable, worthless, worms. Sin was a 2x4 used to beat people over the head and keep them in line. And after hearing this sort of thing about sin for so long, they gave up on the church first chance they got.

It is unfortunate that sin was so misrepresented and continues to be so misrepresented...because sin is not simply a clever tool to get people to behave. It is a reality in this world and in our lives that keeps the force and influence of God's redeeming love at arm's length.

What we don't seem to understand is that sin is a condition rather than an act. Or, more accurately, it is a condition before it is an act. By this I mean: Sin is about going through the day without giving God a second thought. We are sinful when God is not at the center of who we are. We are sinful when we ignore the life that is ours because of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

In other words, sin is a condition before it is an act. As a consequence of not letting God be Lord of our lives we commit sinful acts...things like deceit, withholding care and concern, mistaking lies for truth, treating others with disdain, saying mean and hurtful things...

Our prayers of confession give us an opportunity to come clean with ourselves, one another, and with God about how self-focused, rather than God-focused and neighbor-focused, we have been.

4

I said earlier the word "confession" can be understood in two ways. On the one hand, it refers (as I have been saying) to the free acknowledgment before God of the naked truth we know about **ourselves**. But, at the same time, and perhaps more importantly, confession means acknowledging to God the truth we know about **God**. Our confessions of faith give praise and glory to God.⁵

Just as we confess our sinfulness each Sunday in morning worship, we also typically confess what we believe about God through what we call an "Affirmation of Faith." To make this affirmation or confession of faith we say the *Apostles' Creed* or use words from *A Brief Statement of Faith* or *A Declaration of Faith* or some other confessional document. We turn to these documents because they provide a very helpful way for us to frame what it is we believe...and in some cases, what we do not believe.

For example, the *Theological Declaration of Barmen* was adopted in May of 1934 by what was known as the Confessing Church in Germany. What prompted the writing of this document was a threat from the Nazi regime to the essence of Christian faith. By calling on the church to trust and obey Jesus Christ alone and not to follow Adolf Hitler, *Barmen* implicitly declared that the church was in the midst of a situation so dire that a fresh way of thinking about and living one's faith was necessary.⁶

When in our day we find ourselves in a similar situation we can turn to the *Barmen Declaration* to see how they made sense of what was going on. The insights of that day may well help us in our day clarify what it means to be loyal to Christ Jesus when we are being encouraged to be loyal to some other person or ideal.

Or consider the *Confession of 1967*. If you consider all that was going on in this country and across the planet in the 1960s it would not surprise you to know that pastors, elders, and church members realized there was a need for reconciliation. In a context where there was enmity and discord, it occurred to church leaders that reconciliation was at the heart of the gospel message - that, in fact, reconciliation with God was what Jesus accomplished for us through his life, death, and resurrection. And so church leaders began to think the time was right to restate the Christian notion of reconciliation in a clear, contemporary, and articulate way. The result was the *Confession of 1967*.

When in our day we find ourselves in a similar situation we can turn to *The Confession of 1967* to see how they made sense of what was going on. We can see how that confession of faith lifted up reconciliation through Christ as a way to address that impasse. The insights of that day may very well help us in our day which is so fractured become better agents of reconciliation.

We have looked briefly at how there are two ways to understand the word "confession." You may recall that I said earlier both ways of thinking about confession have the same ultimate focal point. Let me now explain what I meant.

Whether we are confessing our sinfulness or our faith...both have to do with gratitude to God. One declares our praise to God for the gift of sins forgiven.⁷ The other gives praise to God by pledging our allegiance to God out of a sense of gratitude for God's grace and mercy.

My point may be crystal clear...but just in case it is not, I want to make sure you understand our confessions of sinfulness or of faith do not convince God to grant us pardon. As Frederick Buechner said, to confess our sins to God is not to tell God anything God doesn't already know. However, until we confess our sins, they are the abyss between us and God. God has already forgiven us in Christ Jesus...that is not something we have to convince God to do. Our confessions arise out of a spirit of deep gratitude... and a desire to take a new path...to accept God's gift of forgiveness...to live in a different way - a God-focused way.

You may have noticed today that during the time of confession and assurance of pardon, Christine said these words: "Hear the good news: The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting. I declare to you, in the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven."

Did not notice what she said next? She said: "As people who have heard Christ's promise of forgiveness, we are eager to be instructed in faithful living." In other words, out of a desire to take a new path into the future we are eager to hear how this can happen.

And so one of the best places to turn is to **Jesus' summary of the law**: "Our Lord Jesus said: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. An a second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."⁸

On this Reformation Sunday my hope is that we have a healthier sense of the importance of confession. Through our confessions we give to God the name that is above every name...so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.



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Endnotes:

¹ The twelve confessional documents are: The Nicene Creed, the Apostles' Creed, the Scots Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Second Helvetic Confession, the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Shorter Catechism, the Larger Catechism, the Theological Declaration of Barmen, the Confession of 1967, and a Brief Statement of Faith. The twelfth document, the Belhar Confession, is not yet in our current book of confessions but was approved to be included by the 222nd General Assembly that met June 18-25, 2016 in Portland.

² Heschel, Susannah. ed. 2011. Abraham Joshua Heschel: Essential Writings. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 100.

³ Buechner, Frederick. 2004. Beyond Words. NY: HarperCollins, 65.

⁴ See: www.onbeing.org/program/david-brooks-and-ej-dionne-sinfulness-hopefulness-and-the-possibility-of-politics/9001.

⁵ Outler, Albert C. ed. 1955. Augustine: Confessions. Dallas: Perkins School of Theology. Don't have the page number.

⁶ Book of Confessions, Study Edition. 1996. Office of the General Assembly, PCUSA. Louisville: Geneva Press, 308.

⁷ Gerrish, Brian A. 2000. The Pilgrim Road. Louisville: WJK Press, 12.

⁸ See Matthew 22:37-40.