

Practice Makes Perfect (Almost): Confession

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Tensions abound in the practice of confession for Christians.

1. Tension of doctrines of “justification” and “sanctification”
 - “Justification” = legal standing before God that is accomplished when we accept the work of Jesus on the cross (2 Cor 5:21; Rom 10:9-10). [position]
 - “Sanctification” = ongoing work of transformation in our lives, where we grow into our perfection position in our practice (Phil 2:12; Rom 12:1; 2 Cor 3:18; Col 3:10).
2. Tension of confession as a “grace” instead of a discipline
 - It is a grace *and* a practice.
 - 1 John 1:9
 - 1 Tim 2:5
 - James 5:16
3. Tension of private practice and corporate practice
 - It is both. You can guess which side is ignored in the church.
 - John 20:22-23
 - Matt 18:15-20
 - Matt 5:23-24

Steps to a “good confession”

St. Alphonsus Liguori writes, “For a good confession three things are necessary: an examination of conscience, sorrow, and a determination to avoid sin” (quoted in Foster 1978, 132).

1. Examination of conscience (“prayer of examen”)
 - 2 Cor 13:5
 - John 13:10
 - John 16:8
 - 1 John 1:9
 - 4th of 12 steps of AA – a fearless or ruthless moral inventory.
 - Specific, concrete, and particular.
2. Sorrow
 - An act of the will that becomes an emotion – abhorrence, hatred for the sin, embarrassment, shame, etc.

- Ortberg labels this step as a step of “perception,” taking the log out of our eye instead of the speck out of someone else’s eye (Matt 7:3-5). Ask two questions to get to the level of perceptive sorrow: (1) why did I do what I did? And (2) what happened as a result of my sin?
 - James 4:8-10
 - Luke 19:8
3. Determination to avoid sin
- “Lord, give a yearning for holy living, a hatred for unholy living.”
 - I.e., repent means turning away and not continuing in the sin, 1 John 5:18
 - Confession involves a promise for the future, i.e., not to do the sin again.

Result

A healthy church confesses its frail humanity and knows forgiveness and the empowering graces of God through Jesus Christ.

An unhealthy church silences its confessions. When alone in your sin, you indeed are alone.

Bibliography

Richard Foster 1978, ch. 10.

John Ortberg 1997, ch. 8.