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**Confession &  
Forgiveness**



## Confession

*“And because it is requisite, that no man should come to the Holy Communion, but with a full trust in God’s mercy, and with a quiet conscience; therefore if there be any of you, who by this means cannot quiet his own conscience herein, but requiring further comfort or counsel, let him come to me, or to some other discrete and learned Minister of God’s Word, and open his grief; that by the ministry of God’s holy Word he may receive the benefit of absolution together with ghostly counsel and advice, to the quieting of his conscience, and avoiding of all scruple and doubtfulness.”*

(Book of Common Prayer, Holy Communion)

*“Here shall the sick person be moved to make a special Confession of his sins, if he feel his conscience troubled with any weighty factor. After which Confession, the Priest shall absolve him...”*

(Book of Common Prayer, Visitation of the Sick)

*“Receive the Holy Ghost for the Office and Work of a Priest in the Church of God, now committed unto thee by the Imposition of our hands. Whose sins thou dost forgive, they are forgiven; and whose sins thou dost retain, they are retained.”*

(Book of Common Prayer, The Ordering of Priests)

It has always been of great interest to me to hear people say that the Sacrament of Confession, or Reconciliation as it is called today, has no place in the Anglican Church, and that it died out at the Reformation. One can only assume that this idea comes about because of a perception that somehow the Reformation brought about a change in the way that we see our relationship with God; that humanity no longer needs any other mediator between God and us but Christ. So, if I want to confess my sins, then I can go straight to God, discuss the matter with Him, and get forgiveness from him.

The quotes above, all from the Book of Common Prayer, show that this was not the intention of the reformers in England. (Never forget that the reformation in England was very different from that in Europe, avoiding a lot of the extremes of people like Calvin and Zwingli.) For them, the place of *auricular confession* (confession before a priest) was assumed. What did change was the idea that that was the *only* way to make your confession; the direct approach to God was also acceptable.

So, although less emphasise was placed upon it than before, auricular confession was never abandoned by the Anglican church. Under the Oxford Movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, which reminded the Church of its catholic roots, much of the great spirituality of the church was re-emphasised, including the use of confession as one of the sacraments.

Sin and repentance are among the great themes to be found in the Bible and, indeed, within the church. One would have to say that for some people that's about the only thing that Christians seem to talk about! It must be admitted that the Church has, in the past, been guilty of piling sin onto the shoulders of its members as a burden, rather than relieving people of that burden. At the same time, it is possible that we have now moved in the opposite direction by failing to remind people about sin, and its consequences. Some people might assume that when I mention the word 'consequences' I am referring to some form of Eternal Punishment, Hell, but that is far from the case. I think that the consequences of sin are much more in the here and now, and not brought on by a wrathful God. Most of us have, at some time in our lives, experienced the crippling effect of guilt; how it can completely twist and ruin our own lives. God has no need to punish us, even if He wanted to; we do it very well ourselves!

So, what is 'sin'? In many ways it is a hideous word, because it carries with it a history of baggage; it is almost comical, a word used in a parody of an American evangelist. The word in Greek that 'sin' translates is '*hamartia*'. Originally, this was an archery term, used to describe an arrow that misses the mark and, to me, that is a useful definition. Sin is not just about being wrong, or bad; it is about failing to achieve that which we should, always with the understanding that we can try again. Sin is our failure to be what God wants us to be – and that means that sin is our failure to be truly human. It is not just about following the rules, or doing what God says we shouldn't do; it is about not living up to our full potential. Sin is not what humans should do; and that is why we feel so bad about it.

Imagine, if you can, a mother with a son. The mother loves the son beyond anything else, and wants the best for him. She has given him everything that he has ever needed; maybe not everything that he wanted, but certainly everything that he needed. She wants him to grow, and have the best life possible.

But, the time comes when, for some reason, the boy turns to drugs, and becomes addicted. The mother watches as the boy gets worse and worse, and his life starts to unravel around him. Physically he is being destroyed; mentally he is being destroyed.

Is the mother angry? Yes, of course she is; angry that he will not, if he continues, be what he could be and have what he could have. Is she angry with the son? Yes, because she can see how he is wasting all that he has. Does she want to punish him? No, she wants to help him, to bring him back, to love him. She can see the pain that he is in, the suffering that his addiction causes him, and she wants to remove it. But no addict can be forced to give up their addiction; that is their decision. She waits for him to ask for help, waiting to give everything she has when he asks. She is not physically hurt by his addiction; her sorrow, and her pain, are for him.

And what about the son? Addicts tend to know that they have a problem, even if they cannot admit the true effects of the addiction. Slowly the guilt will build up, and the physical effects will get worse. The addiction takes over every

aspect of his life, and he knows it. But he cannot bring himself to ask for help, and as he watches his mother watching him, he finds himself unable to face her, to be with her, and the relationship begins to crumble. And asking for help becomes more difficult. Something has to change.

And that is how repentance – another great Christian word – comes in. Again, the original Greek word gives us an insight into its meaning; *'metanoia'* in Greek means more than just saying sorry; it means a change of mind, a change of life. Repentance involves a desire to do things differently; it is active. To put this into classic Christian terms, the repentant sinner wants to change their life.

So, the starting point of repentance is not fear of what God might do to us; it is not a way of getting away with doing anything that we want safe in the knowledge that God will forgive if we say sorry, however insincerely. The starting point of repentance is wanting to change so that we can become everything that we have the potential to be, so that we can become truly human.

Of course, it is the so-called 'big' sins that are likely to hit us hard and bring us to our knees: murder; theft; sex crimes; etc. We have come to believe that the 'minor' sins do not really matter as much. Yet, I would suggest that it is the 'minor' sins that will drag us away from God. Gossip, greed, envy, anger – it is the sins like these that cause our separation with the divine and, often, in such a way that we don't even notice until it is too late. Has anybody else noticed that, in the Ten Commandments, bearing false witness is on the same level as murder?

Philip Yancey, in his book *'What's So Amazing About Grace?'* says:

“People divide into two types: not guilty and the “righteous,” as many people think, but rather different types of guilty people. There are guilty people who acknowledge their wrongs, and guilty people who do not...”

Confession, or Reconciliation as it is often called has become a much-neglected part of Anglican spirituality, even though it has always been available. One suspects that many people today believe that they can confess their sins directly to God in their own prayers, without the need to go through another person. If one can in all honesty do this, and if one in all honesty actually does, then that is excellent. The point, of course, is can one do these 'in all honesty'? It's so easy to not really go into a proper personal examination, and then just as easy, in prayer, to skip over those things which are just too much to bring to mind. It's easier for many people to hide things in their mind without ever really truly saying things.

It could be worth mentioning here that many people believe that the Confession and Absolution given towards the beginning of the Eucharist take care of personal sins. This is not the case; that particular Confession is a general one, admitting that we, as the corporate Church, have sinned against

God; the pronoun used is “We confess....”. Likewise, the Absolution is a general one.

But still the question remains, why go to a priest to confess to God? Why bring up the really nasty bits of one’s life to another person, admitting to things which nobody wants another person to know?

One very important point to make here is that *sin is not an individual issue; it affects the whole community*. From the earliest times of the Church, it was common that Christians would not only share each other’s joys, but also the burden of each other’s sins. If I had done something that was now affecting my life, my spiritual life, then it also affected the life of the whole community of the Church. It was for this reason that the early church taught people to confess *publically!* One of the earliest Christian documents that we have, the *Didache*, written towards the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century says:

“Confess your sins in church, and do not go up to your prayer with an evil conscience. This is the way of life. . . . On the Lord’s Day gather together, break bread, and give thanks, after confessing your transgressions so that your sacrifice may be pure”

Over time, a lot of people found this too hard, so the church taught that one could go to someone who represented the community of faith, the priest.

The first reason goes back to what was said earlier. For many people, to actually talk, to bring things to mind in such a way as to be able to articulate them, forces them to be more honest about the things that they have done; indeed, it can be a relief. If something is wilfully left out of the confession, then the Sacrament is invalid. Thus, total honesty is essential, and the person involved is forced to face up to the reality of sin and how it effects their relationship with God.

At the same time, the priest is there to help, not to judge. He/she listens to what has been said, and then tries to offer advice to help the person in their spiritual growth. As mentioned, the priest does not act as judge; sin is sin is sin, the liar is in need of as much forgiveness as the murderer, and the priest is as much a sinner as anybody else. His/her job is merely to listen, offer help, and at the end announce the forgiveness of God. (It is worth stressing this; God forgives, and God always forgives a person who repents, the priest merely announces this forgiveness.)

Many people worry about what the priest might think about them, or the way the priest may act towards them after he/she has heard their confession. This is dealt with in the idea of the Seal of the Confessional. Under no circumstances (and this really does mean NONE) can a priest reveal what has been heard or even act upon anything heard. It’s as though the confession never took place; what has been said is finished, is over. The priest cannot even say that he/she has heard a particular persons confession; it’s as though it never took place.

People who use the Sacrament on a regular basis often find that they are more able to cope with temptation, and are able to actually analyse their own spiritual life better; for many it is a way of starting afresh, cleaning the slate before renewing their spiritual life. Whatever the reason, it is a gift offered by God to His Church, and should not be rejected lightly. If anybody would like to talk more about this, or has any questions, then any of the clergy would be more than willing to help.

To finish with, the following can be seen to sum up the Anglican view of the Sacrament of Reconciliation:

***All can,  
None must,  
Some should.***