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AN INQUIRY INTO THE ADEQUACY OF THE PRACTICE  
OF CONFESSION IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

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A THESIS  
Presented to  
the Faculty of Theology  
United College

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Bachelor of Divinity

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by  
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April 1949

THE  
UNIVERSITY OF WINNIPEG  
PORTAGE & CALMERAL  
WINNIPEG 2, MAN. CANADA

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## CHAPTER I

### HIDDEN SINS

Sin is not an illusion or a figment of the imagination but a stark reality. It is defined in Scripture as "the transgression of the law".<sup>1</sup> It is a transgression that involves the whole human race, "for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God."<sup>2</sup> It is an offence against God, and as such it gives rise in man to a feeling of guilt from which he seeks to be redeemed. He knows that sin cannot be undone but must be covered and thus put out of sight and out of remembrance. In this respect he is right, for there is but one way to be freed from sin and its guilt and that is by covering it. However, there are two ways of covering sin, the successful way and the unsuccessful. The successful way is described in Psalm 32 where David pronounces that man blessed whose transgression is forgiven and whose sin is covered in the sense that it is not imputed by God. The unsuccessful way has been expressed in Proverbs 28:13, "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper." It makes all the difference whether sin is covered by the blood-sprinkled mercy seat or hidden by some human strategy. It is to this futile attempt of man to

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1. 1 John 3:4

2. Romans 3:23

cover his sins that we now turn our attention.

### THE PROBLEM

The man who is going under that intolerable burden of guilt finds himself face to face with three offended parties ready to pronounce judgement on him. These are God, man, and his own self. To escape condemnation he must hide from this triumvirate the evidence of his sin. This is a most difficult task in which only the few, if any, are successful in any appreciable degree.

Hiding from God. For those who have never come to view their sin as an offence against a holy and righteous God, but merely as a breach of a social code, this constitutes no serious problem. They seldom think in terms of giving account unto God. For those on the other hand who are deeply conscious of the true nature of their guilt it is no serious problem either, for they are at the same time deeply conscious of the futility of any such attempt. Their God is an omniscient God. They agree with the Psalmist when he says,

Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thoughts afar off. Thou compassest my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word in my tongue, but lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether. Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid thine hand upon me. <sup>3</sup>

For this reason the thought that occupies the mind of

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<sup>3</sup>.Psalm 139: 2-5

guilty men is not so much that of covering, but rather that of appeasing. How can I satisfy an offended God? If they can't appease him, they at least hope for mercy.

Hiding from man. A more serious problem confronts the guilty man when he labors to hide his sins from men. When I say a more serious problem I mean that it gives him greater concern and that primarily for two reasons. First, the offended individual or society is physically near and ready to mete out immediate punishment. Secondly, since man is not omniscient and often extremely limited in his powers of observation, there is much greater hope for success in his venture. We must concede that there are probably many more sins hidden from the knowledge of man than are made known. There are still many unsolved murder cases on the legal records of our own country which will probably remain there. Even though many confessions are made on deathbeds, many crimes are concealed even then. It is impossible to say how many people pass into the beyond with their conscience loaded with guilt which human tongue has never confessed. This brings us to the third, and in my opinion the most difficult problem, namely, hiding from self.

Hiding from self. Whereas the former problem took the form of hiding sin from the knowledge of others, here it takes the form of attempting to get it off the mind. This must of

necessity be so, for sins consciously committed are already known by the offender in the very act. The attempt is therefore made to put the thing out of the conscious mind and repress it into what has been designated the sub-conscious mind. It involves fleeing from one's own self. As we shall see later, this is a most unsuccessful and unsatisfactory venture.

### THE MOTIVES

But just why do people seek to hide their sins? Or in other words, why do they find it so difficult to confess them? I shall make no attempt at an exhaustive treatment of this important question but would like to enumerate several motives which are generally accepted.

#### A sense of shame joined with a feeling of selfrespect.

Shame and selfrespect, which usually go together, are two powerful factors operating to keep man out of sin. But once they have been overcome and defeated, they are equally strong in driving him into concealment. I think it was shame that drove Adam behind the tree. What will people say when they will hear about it? Will that not spell the loss of my reputation? These and other questions present themselves to the mind when one contemplates the possibility of being detected and every effort is put forth to keep the act from becoming public property. Many people choose rather to suffer the pangs of a wounded conscience than to have their pride broken

by confession. Others again seek to ease their conscience by throwing their self-respect to the wind and abandon themselves to sinning in public. They adopt an attitude of indifference. Their slogan is, "I don't care." It is most improbable that sinning without a blush silences the voice of conscience, but it at least reduces the tension produced by the inner conflict between the desire to sin and the desire to maintain self-respect as well as the respect of others. The respective individual is enabled to throw off the mask of hypocrisy and to derive greater satisfaction and momentary pleasure from a life of sin.

I am inclined to accept that the covering of sins is probably more prevalent among church members than among non-members because of the higher moral standards the churches seek to maintain, and the premium that is set on morality. Hiding therefore constitutes a special problem for the church. It will be our task as ministers to educate the people in this matter and to show that an honest confession, followed by amendment, even though accompanied by an intense feeling of shame, will gain for them a purged conscience, peace of mind, and the respect of all sensible members who do not consider themselves beyond temptation.

Fear of public opinion. We are generally held more firmly in the grip of public opinion than we are willing to admit. Society acts as our policeman and keeps a constant



vigilance to see whether any member of its group is guilty of a breach of its social and moral code. It is quite willing to meet out punishment to any offender. What is true of society in general is likewise true for a religious community, a church. Every church has its moral code which serves as a standard of conduct. Almost without exception it is based on the ethics of the Bible. However, we must not forget that Scripture is not interpreted in the same way by all church groups, some being more conservative than others. But in one respect they all agree. Once the code has been accepted by the group, it is expected that every member will adhere to it. This is in fact demanded.

Any member committing an act commonly regarded as a serious breach of the code must expect punishment in one form or another. The punishment meted out by the group is often more severe than that administered by the hand of the law. It may vary in form and also in degree from one group to another but there is a common feature underlying them all. Punishment usually takes the form of ostracism. The offence is made public, and the respective individual is shunned. He may be excluded from communion and also from participation in other activities. He may lose his office that he held in the church. In extreme cases he is excommunicated. He is set aside and made to feel the displeasure of the group. The intention is not only to punish but also

to correct. In any event, he is made to feel ashamed with the expectation that shame will bring him to repentance. Many people who don't fear God at least fear men.

Here again the individual who discovers that his desires and inclinations are contrary to the social code, and if satisfied with the knowledge of the group would call forth the censure of society, has two alternatives before him. He may seek to escape from social control or else cover up his actions. Many prefer to escape. There are always communities where the things they desire to do are sanctioned. Finding the moral code too strict and rigid, they may join the group that is more in sympathy with their own way of thinking. There they may live according to conviction or desire without fear of censure or ostracism. But not nearly all are willing thus to sever their relations with the home community. They love it and would feel lost outside of it. It is this group that seeks refuge under a cloak of secrecy. Their safety lies in silence. They are driven underground by fear of public opinion.

The automobile and the metropolis often come to the assistance of such people torn by inner conflict. The automobile is used extensively today as a device to get away from social control. The city affords an opportunity for the individual to disappear within the multitude. In it he lives as a stranger whom no one will censure as long as he abides by

the laws of the land.

The unwillingness to break with sin. We have now come to consider a third and powerful motive for hiding sin. It is probably the strongest motive. The love of sin is often stronger than the fear of its consequences. Fear of punishment may well cause sinners to tremble, but the love of sin will seal their lips. Confession of sin is usually connected with the forsaking of sin. He who is tired of sin and seeks to be rid of it, sees in confession a means to an end and accepts it as a way out of his difficulty and internal dissension. But he who is still in love and league with sin, sees in confession only a betrayal of himself, bidding society to observe him with a suspicious eye and as such it must be avoided.

Individually these three motives: a sense of shame, the fear of public opinion, and the love of sin might be more easily overcome, but when they unite to reinforce each other they become one great impelling motive forcing the mind to invent ingenious ways and means to accomplish their purpose. It is to these means that we now direct our attention.

#### THE MEANS

It is self-evident that any sin which is to be kept secret must be committed in secret. The question of hiding

or covering sin is as a rule seriously considered before the overt act is committed. For that reason sinners prefer the night when society has relaxed its vigilance and natural darkness provides a protective covering from the eye of man. The words of the apostle John may be fittingly applied here, "...men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be re-proved (discovered)".<sup>4</sup>

But sin leaves its marks which cannot so easily be erased. The danger is always present that some clue will be discovered that will send the detective on his trail. Every precaution is therefore taken to destroy even the scent that might betray the sinner. We shall here consider but a few devices usually employed to cover up sin.

Silence. By silence we do not only mean the refusal to give verbal expression of the act, but also the removal of all traces of sin that could betray the offender. Often nature itself cries out against the crime. Thus Abel's blood was said to cry to God from the ground. It is often easier to keep an offence shut up within one's own mind than to silence the voices of the many inanimate witnesses of which one was not aware at the time of the offence.

The example of David, as reported in that remarkable

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4. John 3: 19-20

thirty-second Psalm, is very striking. Reviewing his past, he remembers the time when he kept silence. David made an ingenious attempt to cover up his act of adultery, especially so after Bathsheba sent to him saying, "I am with child." The consequences spoke for themselves, especially in view of the fact that Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba, was away from home at the time. What was David to do but to recall Uriah from the front and send him to his house. But when Uriah refused to go into his house but slept at the door of the king's house with the rest of the king's servants, David realized that his attempt to keep silent met with little or no success. Another means had to be found. Uriah was the one who could be expected to voice complaint when once the pregnancy of his wife became evident. Something had to be done to silence Uriah. There is no way of telling what people might do in desperation to keep their sin from becoming public. They will not even shrink from murdering those that are in their way. David now committed the greater sin by murdering Uriah through the hands of the Ammonites to cover up his sin of adultery.

We have other illustrations from Scripture which reveal the attempt of men to cover their sins. Moses slew the Egyptian whom he found smiting one of his brethren and hid him in the sand.<sup>5</sup> Achan took of the accursed thing and hid it in the earth in the midst of the tent.<sup>6</sup> Rachel took the stolen gods

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5. Exodus 2: 12,

6. Joshua 7:21

of her father and put them in the camel's furniture and sat upon them.<sup>7</sup> Gehazi bestowed the garments he had received from Naaman in his house.<sup>8</sup> The spade, fire, and water have often been used in history of man with greater or less success to cover up the evil deeds and to silence the witnesses of his atrocious acts.

Diverting attention. Another means of hiding sin is to divert the attention of people in order to avoid suspicion. I remember well when for the first time as a boy I was outwitted by a duck which skilfully lured me away from her brood. Having come dangerously close to her prized possession she lured me away by feigning a broken wing. Many people are about as successful as that duck was in diverting attention to safeguard their own secrets. The two techniques usually employed are (1) to blame others, and (2) to feign piety.

We may have reason to view with suspicion those individuals who are constantly finding fault with others. It has been well said that we hate our own faults when we see them in others. We tolerate within us what we condemn in others. The greatest offenders are often the most merciless critics. Why this should be is hard to understand except we explain it as a psychological device, skilfully employed to ward off

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7. Genesis 31:34

8. 2 Kings 5:24

attacks from without. The principle appears to be that as we are able to focus the attention of society upon some one else's faults, we are able to divert it from ourselves and thus be secured against detection. The apostle Paul refers to this in Romans 2:1, "Therefore thou art inexcusable, O man, whosoever thou art that judgest, for wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest doest the same thing." Jesus also dwelt upon this principle in Matthew 7:1-5 where he draws our attention to the question of judging in the words, "and why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?"

From time to time the church has taken disciplinary action against some of its members for gossiping and hyper-criticism. It is a question whether it is then dealing with a cause or only with a symptom. It might be well to find out what such individuals are actually trying to cover up.

The other technique is that of putting on a religious front. It makes use of religion as a cloak to cover up iniquity. The Jews used the temple and its service to hide their avarice and greed. The temple, that house of prayer, was changed into a den of thieves, i.e., a den where these religious thieves sought and found a refuge and escaped detection. Judas also used this device. When he sat at the

table for the passover he had already covenanted to betray Jesus. But so successful had he been in hiding his evil intentions that when Jesus announced that one of the twelve would betray him, not one of the disciples suspected Judas, but each one asked, "Master, is it I?" Judas also, in hypocritical fashion, asked with the rest, "Master, is it I?"

We experience it over and over again in churches and in schools that individuals begin to emphasize greater spirituality. They criticize the church for lack of spiritual life and missionary zeal. They clamor for a revival; they organize prayermeetings; they testify repeatedly in testimony meetings; they give for missions and other philanthropic enterprises. Their Christian life is marked by increased activity. Now these may be the signs of spiritual health, but they may also be the signs of an uneasy, restless conscience. Prayers and testimonies are not necessarily evidence of genuine spirituality. Spirituality and sanctimoniousness are two different things. The latter will readily lend itself as a means to divert attention. It happens quite frequently that acts of Christians are made manifest of whom we had never expected it. The question confronting us then is whether the fellow Christian has suddenly been overtaken by a fault or whether it is just the manifestation of something that has long been held under cover by a feigned piety.

I do not mean to indicate that we should always be



suspicious when any one grows in spiritual status, but we do want to say that outward piety is often employed as a means to cover up sin by diverting attention.

Denial. A third means for covering up sin is the lie. According to 1 John 1:8,10. we may either deny our sinful nature or else deny our acts of sin, both of which are deceptive. If people will stoop down to murder in order to hide sin, they will most certainly not refrain from the use of a lie. This was the method chosen by Ananias and Sapphira when their avarice kept them from laying all the proceeds of the land at the apostle's feet. Now many liars are more successful than Ananias and Sapphira were, but we must admit that denial is beset with weaknesses. It is said of some people that they have not the courage of their conviction. The liar often has the courage but he lacks the conviction. He is faced with the difficult task of convincing others of something he does not believe himself. Then, too, he must be very careful to remember what he has said before so that he will not contradict himself when cross-questioned.

In spite of these weaknesses in the method, we must admit that an unsuspecting and credulous public has often been deceived into accepting a lie for bare truth. The lie is therefore still extensively used. But when covering of sin by the use of the above means is no longer possible, the offender may still resort to another means, namely, self-justification.

Self-justification. This is a form of rationalization, giving a socially acceptable reason for the real reason. After Adam had sinned, he did two notable things, (1) he hid himself, and (2) he justified himself. When he first knew that God had detected him he put the blame on the woman and indirectly upon God himself, "The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat."<sup>9</sup> His progeny has followed his example ever since. When people can no longer hide sin successfully they will justify themselves. This self-justification usually takes the form of accusing others.

This is also well illustrated by the example of Saul.<sup>10</sup> His story really represents a combination of methods. Where one provee unsuccessful he attempted another. When he had disobeyed the Lord's command and had spared Agag and the best of the sheep and oxen, he returned from his victory with great joy. But when Samuel came to meet him his conscience smote him. To hide his disobedience he said, "I have performed the commandment of the Lord."v.13. But the sheep and cattle which he had spared betrayed his disobedience. A thought flashed into his mind. Doesn't the end sanctify the means? he thought. He answered Samuel saying, "The people spared the best of the sheep and oxen to sacrifice unto the Lord, thy God ". When this answer did not satisfy Samuel, Saul had still another

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9. Genesis 3:12

10. I Samuel 15

alternative left. He justified himself stating, "Yea, I have obeyed the voice of the Lord... but the people took of the spoil... to sacrifice." But again Samuel would not accept his reasoning. Saul finally had to admit his guilt, but it was a forced admission, unaccompanied by repentance. His desire was still to cover up his sin and as a last resort he sought to persuade Samuel to assist him in the attempt. He asked Samuel to honour him before the elders of his people and before Israel. Now Saul was no exception in this. We have many churchmembers today who would be just to happy to enlist the service of their pastor in covering up their sins by assigning to them a place of honor.

The means we have discussed thus far were mostly used to hide sin from our fellow men. There still remains the problem of hiding sin from our own self. This usually takes the form of repression

Repression. Man tries to forget and to flee from reality which he is unwilling to face. But this is an escape mechanism. Cain sought to escape by adopting an attitude of indifference. When asked concerning his brother he replied, "I know not, am I my brother's keeper?"<sup>11</sup> Others find relief through the use of intoxicating drink. It helps them to forget for the time being. It ought to be seriously considered whether alcoholism is a cause or an effect. It is my opinion that

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11. Genesis 4:9

it is mostly an effect, the cause being in many instances a desire to forget the past. The temperance problem could be solved if once we could bring the addicts to confess their sins to God and accept divine forgiveness. Still others have sought to forget by means of over-indulgence in work or else find diversion in recreational activities, etc. Just how successful people are in their attempts to hide sin from self and others we shall see as we deal with the question of results.

#### THE RESULTS

Scripture teaches, "Be sure your sin will find you out."<sup>12</sup> Sin has a peculiar way of telling on us. It may be repressed but the effects of it will be manifested in some other way. It is with repressed sin as with a boil. Instead of getting rid of the puss which it contains one puts sticking-plaster over it and thus drives the poison in. The place may heal in a fashion, but the poison will make its presence felt in some other way and in some other place. So the sinner must remain on guard, constantly with anxiety for fresh outcroppings of his guilt. He finds no way of escape. As Stolz says,

After all, the strategy of fleeing from reality is unworkable. No man can run away from himself. If he takes

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12. Numbers 32:23

the wings of the morning and flees to the uttermost parts of the world, he merely changes his location. Flight does not transfigure his being. The change of scene may deflect the attention from himself for a time, but before long it will dawn upon him that he is the same man who sought refuge in escape. 13

The consequences of unconfessed sins that I shall seek to deal with may be stated as follows, (1) a guilty conscience, (2) a haunting fear of being detected, (3) Physical ailments, (4) establishment in sin, and (5) preclusion from divine forgiveness.

A guilty conscience. Conscience is said to express itself sometimes before, sometimes during, and sometimes after the act involved. Before the act it either encourages us to carry out our contemplated action, or advises us not to do so. During the act the voice of conscience is weakest, as a rule, and it is most difficult for it to gain a hearing. After the act conscience speaks most strongly either approving the deed, or protesting against it and producing inner unrest and anxiety. As Paul says, "Their conscience bearing witness therewith, and their thoughts one with another accusing or else excusing them."<sup>14</sup> Conscience is no respecter of persons. It will never yield to bribery. It gives utterance to its unimpeachable and irrevocable judgements regardless of outward authority by which it may be confronted.

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13. Stolz, Karl R., The Church and Psychotherapy, Abingdon-cokesbury, 1943, p.86

14. Romans 2: 15

David could find no rest from his troubled conscience. He later admitted that day and night the hand of God had been heavy upon him. He could not get rid of the burden which the Divine hand had laid upon his conscience. There was no rest and no peace for him. That smouldering fire beneath kept on burning and torturing his soul. The ghastly secret refused to be buried in silence and oblivion. Again and again he relapsed into a consciousness of it. As Weatherhead says,

The victim has put all his sins in a box deep down under his heart and he is sitting on the lid. But he finds the box is not air-tight, and the musty smell of boxed-up sins poisons the very air his soul breathes.<sup>15</sup>

Thus David must have felt for he confessed in Psalm 51 that his sin was ever before him.

Shakespeare<sup>16</sup> in his tragedy Macbeth has very ably described the working of a guilty conscience. There we see Lady Macbeth, after the murder of Duncan, King of Scotland, tortured by her conscience. In her dreams she sees again the stain of blood on her hands and she tries desperately to efface this evidence of her guilt,

"Yet here's a spot.  
Out, damned spot, out I say...  
What, will these hands ne'er be clean? ...  
Here's the smell of blood still: All the perfumes of  
Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh..oh..oh."

Macbeth, concerned about his wife, speaks to the physician,

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15. Weatherhead, L.D., Psychology in the Service of the Soul, The Epworth Press, 1929, p.86

16. Shakespeare, Macbeth, Act V, Sc. III

"Cure her of that,  
 Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased,  
 Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,  
 Raze out the written troubles of the brain  
 And with some sweet oblivious antidote  
 Cleanse the stuff'd bosom of that perilous stuff  
 Which weighs upon the heart?"

To this the physician rightly replies, " Therein the patient must minister to himself." Physicians are helpless in the face of a guilty conscience resulting from suppressed sins. There is but one way to cure a diseased mind and that is by confession and forgiveness.

The haunting fear of being detected. A second result is the fear of being found out. "The wicked flee when no man pursueth."<sup>17</sup> The feeling of guilt fills the soul with a tormenting fear. St. Chrysostom, speaking on the cowardice of sinners, has said, " Such is the nature of sin, that it betrays while no one finds fault; it condemns while no one accuses; it makes the sinner a timid being, one that trembles at a sound." The murderer cannot stay in the presence of the body he has slain. The thief turns aside from the officer who has no intention of apprehending him. He who has inflicted a wrong upon his neighbor shrinks from his eye long before his sin has been suspected. His guilty heart imagines many dangers. His soul is filled with alarms, with quakings, shiverings and abject fears. There is no sense of security.

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17. Proverbs 28:1

Every man he sees is a detective and every remark that is only faintly related to his transgression arouses in him a suspicion that his sin has become known. This condition is so dreadful that men, rather than endure this agony of apprehension, have confessed their crimes and given themselves up to justice.

Physical ailments. But there is a third consequence of unconfessed sin which we dare not overlook, namely the physical maladies that have their origin in the disharmony of the soul. It is a well established fact that the mind has a tremendous effect upon the body. The sick soul gives rise to a sick body. John S. Bonnell says that,

From the depths of the subconscious life there sometimes arise memories, emotions, impulses that express themselves in the conscious life of the individual, like bubbles that arise from the bed of a mill-pond and break upon the surface. They make their presence known in acute nervous disorders, decreasing efficiency in daily tasks, a sense of inferiority, phobias, and mental anguish that destroys the peace of mind and heart. The more he strives to repress these memories that cry out for a hearing the worse does the nervous condition of the patient become. 18

David experiences this too for he says, "When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long... my moisture is turned into the drought of summer."<sup>19</sup> His body was affected by the conflict within his soul. He

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18. Bonnell, J.S.. Pastoral Psychiatry, Harper and Brothers, 1938, p.193

19. Psalm 32: 3-4



suffered grievous pain, both bodily and mental. His sap was changed by summer drought, i.e. the vital principle in him was changed by the heat of God's wrath. David was growing old physically at an accelerated rate because of that torment within. The physical age of many people today is considerably more than their chronological age. Many of them are interested in some remedy that will result in a process of rejuvenation. The best advice that could be given them to regain in some degree their youthful appearance and their former strength, is to confess their sins as David did.

A large percentage of the patients that frequent the doctor's office and complain about bodily ailments could be helped much sooner by a qualified minister than by a doctor. Their trouble is not organic but functional. If only the disease of their soul, which is the real cause of their trouble, could be cured, their physical health could also be restored. It is of no use to treat a symptom; the cause has to be removed. That is why so many patients don't benefit from medical treatment. The prescribed rest cure often only enhances their ailment because it gives them more time to brood over their mistakes. The seaside will do little good either, for if you take a troubled mind to the seaside and hope to be made whole, you will be disappointed, the sea cannot wash you clean. The Psalmist prayed, "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me. and I shall be

whiter than snow."<sup>20</sup> Where the trouble is due to past transgressions the sovereign remedy is a full and complete confession. That alone can bring the realization of Divine forgiveness, with inward peace and cleansing.

Establishment in sin. Concealment of sin results further in the confirmation of that sin. No deliverance from sin can be expected through hiding it. Sin is not destroyed by being covered. It is no more killed than the seed of a poison plant is killed when it is sown in the soil, and so temporarily buried out of sight. An evil driven back to the inner recesses of the soul grows there and spreads its deadly influence. Whereas confession would clear out the noxious malaria of guilt, concealment only shuts it up to breed in its own stifling atmosphere. "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper", is a statement that has found verification in life.

Preclusion from Divine forgiveness. Finally, concealment also results in the preclusion of Divine forgiveness. God only pardons those that are penitent, and penitence is impossible without an admission of guilt. Those wretched rags which man may draw over his foul deeds never suffice to cover his sin from the sight of God but they will prevent God from covering it with the shield of his forgiveness. It was when David said, "I have sinned against the Lord," that Nathan

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20. Psalm 51:7

responded, "The Lord hath also put away thy sin."<sup>21</sup> Later on when he reviewed his own experience for our benefit he said, "I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid, I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin."<sup>22</sup>

God has prescribed unto man one way out of sin and that is via confession. "He that confesseth and forsaketh them (sins) shall have mercy."<sup>23</sup> "But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."<sup>24</sup> Confession is the institution which God has given to us not only as a means to obtain release from emotional tension, nor only as a means of spiritual discipline, but as a means toward that great end of Divine forgiveness. The question that confronts us now is, What has the church done with this institution during the last twenty centuries? We shall devote the following four chapters to an attempt to answer this question under the headings: Auricular confession, the Protestant Confessional, Sharing, and Catharsis.

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21. 2 Samuel 12:13

22. Psalm 32:5

23. Proverbs 28:13

24. 1 John 1:9

## CHAPTER II

### AURICULAR CONFESSION

The Church of Rome has always placed great emphasis upon confession, even to the extent of raising it to the status of a sacrament. Although in practice it limits itself almost exclusively to auricular confession, it actually acknowledges various kinds of confession as we are able to see from the following quotation,

Confession is the avowal of one's own sins to a duly authorized priest for the purpose of obtaining their forgiveness through the power of the keys. Virtual confession is simply the will to confess even where, owing to circumstances, declaration of sin is impossible; actual confession is any action by which the penitent manifests his sin. It may be made in general terms, e.g., by reciting the "Confiteor" or it may consist in a more or less detailed statement of one's sin. When the statement is complete, the confession is distinct. Public confession, as made in the hearing of a number of people (e.g. a congregation) differs from private, or secret, confession which is made to the priest alone, and is often called, auricular, i.e., spoken into the ear of the confessor.<sup>1</sup>

Confession may therefore be either virtual or actual, general or detailed, public or private. The usual practice of the church, however, is the actual, distinct, and private or auricular confession. It is this kind of confession that we are primarily concerned with in this chapter. The reasons for adopting this practice have been given by the Council of Trent in these words,

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<sup>1</sup> Hanna, Edward J., "Penance", The Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. XI, p. 625

As regards the method of confessing secretly to the priest alone, though Christ did not forbid that anyone, in punishment for his crimes and for his own humiliation as also to give others an example and to edify the church, should confess his sin publicly, still, this has not been commanded by Divine precept nor would it be prudent to decree by any human law that sins, especially secret sins, should be publicly confessed. Since, then, secret sacramental confession, which from the beginning has been and even now is the usage of the church, was always commanded with great and unanimous consent by the holiest and most ancient Fathers; thereby is plainly refuted the foolish calumny of those who make bold to teach that it (secret confession) is something foreign to the Divine command, a human invention devised by the Fathers assembled in the Lateran Council. 2

The Catholic teaching, therefore, is that Christ did not prescribe public confession, salutary as it may be, nor did he forbid it; and that the secret confession, sacramental in character, has been the practice of the church from the earliest days.

#### THE BASIC ASSUMPTION

The whole practice of auricular confession is based upon the supposed power of the priesthood to forgive sins. According to the Roman Catholic interpretation of John 21: 22, 23 and Matthew 18:18 Christ has made the pastors of his church his judges in the court of conscience, with commission and authority to bind or to loose, to forgive or to retain sins, according to the merits of the cause and the disposition of the penitents. But how shall he pass sentence if he

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2. Ibid., p. 625

does not have a full knowledge of the cause? It is therefore concluded that he who has made the pastors of his church the judges of men's consciences, has also laid an obligation on the faithful to lay open the state of their consciences to them, if they hope to have their sins remitted.

Thus the Church of Rome, taking it for granted that the priest is a judge in the penitential tribunal, invested with power to forgive sin, requires, as a consequence, that her members shall practice secret confession to him. To corroborate these statements I shall again quote from the Catholic Encyclopedia,

Such remission (of sins by the church) was manifestly impossible without the declaration of the offences to be forgiven. The Council of Trent, after declaring that Christ left his priests as vicars unto whom as rulers and judges the faithful must make known their sin, adds: 'It is evident that the priests could not have exercised this judgement without knowledge of the cause, nor could they have observed justice in enjoining satisfaction if (the faithful) had declared their sins in a general way only and not specifically and in detail'...

Since the priest in the pardoning of sin exercises a strictly judicial function, Christ must will that such tremendous power be used wisely and prudently... How can a wise and prudent judgement be rendered if the priest be in ignorance of the cause on which the judgement is pronounced? And how can he obtain the requisite knowledge unless it come from the spontaneous acknowledgement of the sinners?...

That there is a necessary connection between the prudent judgement of the confessor and the detailed confession of sins is evident from the nature of a judicial procedure and especially from a full analysis of the grant of Christ in the light of tradition. No judge may release or condemn without full knowledge of the case... Clearly, therefore, the words of Christ imply the doctrine of the

external manifestation of conscience to a priest in order to obtain pardon. 3

Thus we are brought back to our earlier statement that the whole structure of auricular confession to a priest is built upon the initial premise that the priest, as vicar of Christ, has power to forgive sins. If this premise is correct, it follows that the conclusion is right. If the foundation is not sound, it follows that the superstructure is not secure. We shall reserve criticism of the premise until we shall come to an appraisal of the whole practice.

#### THE NATURE OF AURICULAR CONFESSION

As was indicated before, auricular confession is made to the priest who alone is said to have the power from Christ to forgive sins. The priest claims a twofold qualification for this office, (1) his position as vicar of Christ, and (2) his special training which he gets to qualify him to elicit and to hear confessions. Generally the priest is a man of mature age who has been highly trained for receiving confessions and deals with them under an authoritative technique. Strong emphasis in support of this practice is also drawn from James 5:16, "Confess your faults one to another, and pray for one another." In v.14, the Douay Bible reads "priests" for "elders" of the Protestant Bible. And so "to one another" in

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3. Ibid., p.625

v.16, is said to mean to the priests. But in 1 Peter 5:1 we have the same Greek word, and the Douay translates it "ancients"; agreeing with the Protestant translation "elders". The conclusion is that "to one another" in v.16, does not refer to the elders but to the people over whom they were placed. Accordingly it might become just as necessary for the priest to confess to the layman as vice versa.

This practice of confession to the priest takes the place of the Protestant confession to God. The Catholic does not approach God directly as David did, nor as the Publican did when he smote upon his breast and pleaded God's mercy. Neither is it incumbent upon the Roman Catholic to confess his sins to his fellowmen whom he may have wronged. Anyone holding to the teaching of confession to laymen after 1215 was considered a heretic. Thus the hearing of confessions within the Roman Catholic Church has become the monopoly of a special group, the priesthood. It is into their ears that all the moral filth of the whole parish is poured.

Private Confession. Confession is private, i.e., secret: no third party can be present, and the priest is bound to observe secrecy in the subjects disclosed to him. To guarantee secrecy, the Church of Rome has introduced the seal of the confessional. St. Alphonsus Liguori, an exponent of the Church of Rome has given his views on the subject in his Moral Theology. Blakeney has given a brief synopsis of his views in



his book, 'Popery and its Social Aspect, from which I quote,

(1) The object for which the seal is so binding, is plainly avowed, - lest the confessional should become odious to the people. The reason is repeated again and again, and, indeed, it is self-evident. The confessional would soon be deserted if the people had not some guarantee that their sins would not be disclosed. The Saint does not say that the violation of the confidence reposed by the penitent in the confessor would be intrinsically evil; but he reprobates such violation on the grounds of expediency.

(2) The seal is to be maintained, even if the safety of a whole nation were at stake.

(3) Things revealed extra confessionally to the confessor do not come under the seal.

(4) The priest, with the permission of the penitent, may act on the knowledge acquired in confession. We would especially call attention to the following passage, 'If it be doubtful whether the confessor may have spoken with permission, the priest is to be believed rather than the penitent.' 4

We observe that the Seal of the Confessional contains certain escape clauses which make it possible for the priest to evade the seal and use the information obtained in the confessional for private ends. We noted in the first place that the priest, with the license of the penitent, may disclose a matter revealed under the seal. A penitent may well be induced to grant such a license either at an unguarded moment, or under the powerful influence of priestly control. Secondly, if the priest is to be believed in preference to the penitent when it is doubtful whether such license was granted, how shall the penitent produce evidence when there was no third

4. Blakeney, R.P., Popery and its Social Aspect, The Gospel Witness, pp.168-169

BIASED!

person present to attest whether permission was granted or not? Finally, the priest is not bound to secrecy in regards to anything revealed save in the very act of confession. How easily may a priest draw his penitent into such confessions that do not come under the seal! Thus, after all, the Catholic is at the complete mercy of the priest and the guarantee that his confession will be kept secret must be found in the character of the priest.

Compulsory and habitual confession. Every Roman Catholic who has reached the age of discretion must confess his sins at least once a year. This rule was laid down by the Lateran Council of 1215 and made annual confessions obligatory. The church had long been requiring this but it never became a law until this time. The Lateran Council presupposed the necessity of confession as an article of Catholic belief and laid down a law as to the minimum frequency of confession. The Council of Trent stated that "the Church did not through the Lateran Council prescribe that the faithful of Christ should confess -- a thing which it knew by divine right necessary and established -- but that the precept of confessing at least once a year should be complied with by all and every one when they reached the age of discretion." <sup>5</sup> Confession is not to be limited to once a year but it must not be less.

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<sup>5</sup>Hanna, Edward J., op. cit., p. 625

Complete confession. The following information bearing on the subject is again taken from the Catholic Encyclopedia,

The Catholic teaching is that all mortal sins must be confessed of which the penitent is conscious, for these are so related that no one of them can be remitted unless all are remitted. Remission means that the soul is restored to the friendship of God; and this is obviously impossible if there remain unforgiven even a single mortal sin. Hence the penitent, who in confession willfully conceals a mortal sin, derives no benefit whatever; on the contrary, he makes void the sacrament and thereby incurs the guilt of sacrilege. If, however, the sin be omitted, not through any fault of the penitent, but through forgetfulness, it is forgiven indirectly; but it must be declared at the next confession and thus submitted to the power of the keys. 6

Various causes may excuse a penitent from such completeness of enumeration. Thus in shipwreck, before a battle, when the penitent is unable to speak, or can only say very little from physical weakness, a very general confession of sin may be enough for absolution, but if opportunity offers itself later, the confession must then be completed.

Confession must also be vocal, though for a grave reason the penitent may make it by presenting a written paper, or by signs. It must also be accompanied by supernatural sorrow and firm purpose of amendment. It should be humble and sincere; as short as is consistent with integrity; in language which is plain and direct, but at the same time pure and modest.

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6. Ibid., p.628

In summing up what has been said concerning the nature of auricular confession we may say that the Roman Catholic Church requires of all its members that have reached the age of discretion a minimum of at least one annual auricular confession to the priest which is to be entire, vocal, humble and sincere, and accompanied by supernatural sorrow and purpose of amendment.

As a sacrament, auricular confession is connected with a ritual. The form of confession has been described thus,

The penitent kneeling at the confessor's feet, says, "Pray, Father, bless me, for I have sinned." The priest gives the blessing prescribed in the Roman ritual, "The Lord be in thy heart and on thy lips, that thou mayest truly and humbly confess thy sins, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." The penitent then recites the first part of the Confiteor, enumerating the sins of which he has been guilty since his last confession, and then adds, "For these and all my other sins which I cannot now remember I am heartily sorry; I purpose amendment for the future, and most humbly ask pardon of God, and penance and absolution of you, my spiritual Father." 7

#### THE TECHNIQUE

Such a confession as described above is as a rule not so easily elicited from man. We have seen in the previous chapter what efforts are put forth by individuals to cover up their shame; rather suffering the pangs of conscience than to expose the evil in their hearts. It is often easier to make a general confession of sin than to enumerate in detail

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7. Catholic Dictionary, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1893

what is on our record in the hidden recesses of our minds. Man feels that he has a little chamber designated "private" to which none but he and God have access. But this is exactly what the Roman Catholic Church demands and we are surprised that so many devout Catholics simply turn the key over to the priest and let him ransack their soul and turn the whole inside out. We ask, how does the Church do it? It needs but a little investigation to give us at least a partial answer to our query. She uses particularly two tools or instruments, one reinforcing the other. The one works as a pull and the other as a push. The one is the skilfully used question, employed to elicit a confession and the other is the pressure of threat, based on the power of the keys, employed to extort a confession.

A sample of their technique is given by William C. Irvine in his book, Heresies Exposed. He writes,

The prudent confessor will endeavor, as much as possible, to induce his (the penitent's) confidence by kind words, and then proceed from general to particular questions -- from less shameful to more shameful things: not beginning from external acts, but from thoughts, such as, Has not the penitent been troubled, inadvertantly as it were, with improper cogitations? Of what kind was the thought indulged? Did he experience any unlawful sensations? And so on..." 8

Irvine then goes on to quote Liguori as saying that good confessors begin to investigate the cause and seriousness of the disease by interrogating concerning the habit

8. Irvine, Wm. C., Heresies Exposed, Loizeaux Brothers 17th edition, 1946, p.146

FOR  
THIS  
TYPE  
OF  
JUNK  
THEY  
GIVE  
A U.C.  
B.D. Degree

of sinning --the occasion --the time -- the place-- the persons with whom -- the combination of circumstances --.

If these and worse questions fail to give the necessary response, then pressure is applied. If shame forces them to seal their lips, it will damn their souls. Then all the past confessions and communions have been so many sacrileges, and there is then nothing left but to pay the extreme penalty -- to be lost. Since good Catholics have been indoctrinated to believe in the power of the priesthood and have failed to grasp the teaching of the New Testament that there is one Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus, they are often compelled by a desire to live eternally to confess all.

That such confessions often mean the surrender of womanly self-respect must be clear to all. Father Chiniquy in his informing book, *The Priest, the Woman and the Confessional*, devotes a whole chapter to this struggle of the woman in the confessional. I quote,

For I do not exaggerate when I say, that for many noble-hearted, well-educated, high minded women, to be forced to unveil their hearts before the eyes of a man, to open to him all the most secret recesses of their souls, all the most sacred mysteries of their single or married life, to allow him to put to them the questions which the most depraved woman would never consent to hear from her vilest seducer, is often more horrible and intolerable than to be tied on burning coals. 9

He goes on to state how women have told him after fainting in the confessional-box that the necessity of

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9. Father Chiniquy, *The Priest, the Woman and the Confessional* p.13

speaking to an unmarried man on certain things, on which the most common laws of decency ought to have forever sealed their lips, had almost killed them.

Chiniquy <sup>10</sup> relates one of his own experiences when he went to hear the confession of a dying woman. I shall give it in his own words,

My dear Father... Can you allow me to confess my sins without forcing me to forget the respect that I owe to myself, to you, and to God, who hears us? And can you promise that you will not put to me any of those questions which have already done me such irreparable injury? I frankly declare to you that there are sins which I cannot reveal to anyone except to Christ... Can you not forgive me without adding to my iniquities by forcing me to say things that the tongue of a Christian woman cannot reveal to a man?

QUESTION  
DID SHE  
REVEAL  
THEM?  
TO CHRIST?

The answer which he, as a minister of the church and bound to obey her laws, gives is most revealing of the attitude of the church on this point.

My dear sister...through her most holy Popes and theologians she (the Church) tells me that I cannot forgive your sins, if you do not confess them all, just as you have committed them. The church tells me also that you must give the details which may add to the malice or change the nature of your sins. I am also sorry to tell you that our most holy theologians make it a duty of the confessor to question the penitent on the sins which he has good reason to suspect have been voluntarily or involuntarily omitted.

This answer brought forth the piercing cry of the woman, "Then, O my God, I am lost -- forever lost". There are people who will rather risk their souls than comply with the demands of the confessional. May we not be forced to conclude

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10. Ibid., p.24

then that auricular confession, in spite of what good may come from it, is defective in some respects as well?

### APPRAISAL

As I attempt an appraisal of auricular confession as taught and practiced by the Roman Catholic Church, I am aware of the danger of being determined in my evaluation by a prejudiced mind. I shall seek to steer clear of this danger and recognize that a practice that has successfully withstood so many attacks in the past, must have something in it that is of solid worth. I propose, therefore, to evaluate not only its weaknesses but also its good points. I shall do so from the Scriptural, psychological, and moral points of view.

#### Good Points

Scripturally. Auricular confession is not based so much upon teaching of Scripture as upon the supposed practice of the early church. The Scriptures have been searched for support of the doctrine and certain passages are quoted by members of the Church of Rome, but with trembling and evident hesitancy. Such passages as Matth. 3:4; Numb. 5:6.7; Jas.5:16; and Acts 19:18 are quoted, but they are not really convincing. However, it is clear that the Bible teaches confession of sin and insofar the Catholic doctrine has a Scriptural basis. I think it is beyond dispute that the Catholic Church through

Prejudiced  
BIGOTED  
&  
UNAWARE  
of  
R.C.  
ritual  
& practices

I BET  
QUIRING  
NEVER SET  
FOOT IN AN  
RECHURCH



its teaching and practice of confession has contributed much toward keeping the sense of sin alive and also the need for purification and cleansing.

Psychologically. It cannot easily be denied that confession meets a deep need of human nature. Cardinal Newman's argument for the confessional was really based on this need. He said, "How many souls are there in distress, anxiety, and loneliness, whose one need is to find a being to whom they can pour out their feelings unheard by the world. They want to tell them and not to tell them, they wish to tell them to one who is strong enough to hear them, and yet not too strong to despise them."<sup>11</sup> Catholicism has thus often been commended because by confession it affords an opportunity of depositing the confession of sins in the breast of another man, where it remains kept under the seal of secrecy.

The confessional has afforded the adherents of the Catholic Church a release from inner tension and in spite of its limitations has done much good as a purifying and hygienic process. Karl Stolz writes,

Unconfessed and unforgiven moral lapses, haunting desires, and secret temptations create a breach in the personality which only confession and amendment can heal. The eruptive mental states may display themselves in distorted forms which to the untrained observer seem to have no connection whatever with the person's religious sentiments and behavior. Unburdening himself in confession, rehearsing vividly and with emotional excitement the details of the experience which has become a

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<sup>11</sup>.Quoted by Hanna, Edward J., op. cit., p.634

point of tension within him, the person finds relief. When the confessed experience is a mere memory, is a thing of the past with no connection with the present, its reinstatement is sufficient to purge the self and to restore its equilibrium. 12

The therapeutic value of the confessional is generally conceded.

Morally. The confessional has also been useful as a moral discipline and is also intended for that. Pascal is said to have uttered the statement that a man often attains for the first time a true sense of sin, and a true stayedness in his good purpose, when he confesses his sins to his fellow-man, as well as to God. There is evidently a truth in this statement although it is generally understood that a true sense of sin precedes confession. The confessional, rightly used, may and does help certain individuals to mend their ways. Many evils that are confessed perish in the intense feeling of moral repugnance which accompanies the confession. People are shamed out of their sins. Leibnitz says in this regard,

For the necessity of confessing our sins deters a man from committing them, and hope is given him who may have fallen again after expiation. The pious and prudent confessor is in very deed a great instrument in the hands of God for man's regeneration. For the kindly advice of God's priest helps man to control his passions, to know the lurking places of sin, to avoid the occasions of evil doing, to restore ill-gotten good. 13

However, the whole system of auricular confession

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12. Stolz, Karl R., Pastoral Psychology, Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1940, p.222

13. Hanna, Edward J., op. cit., p.634

manifests weaknesses in the same fields where it displays its strength. It is to these weaknesses that we now direct our attention.

### The Weakness of Auricular Confession

Scripturally. Much emphasis has been placed by Catholic authorities on the words in Matthew 18:18, "Verily, I say unto you, whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." These words are said to constitute the priests authority to forgive sins. It is forgotten that these words can be interpreted in other ways. J.H.Gauss has the following comment on this passage of Scripture,

"The Jewish Mishna uses the expression 'binding and loosing' as declaratory not judicial. Note also 'Whatsoever' is neuter gender, that is, whatsoever things, not persons. 'Binding and loosing' is simply declaring what acts, words, etc, are sinful and what are not. The writers of the New Testament, inspired by the Holy Spirit, are authority on matters of right and wrong in Christian living. Romans 12:23. Considering this, and the fact that the apostles never exercised the power to forgive sins, the Savior's words are rightly understood to simply authorize them to declare the condition of forgiveness, viz., repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. <sup>14</sup>

We are reminded by Roman Catholics that the words, "Who can forgive sins but God only" (Mark 2:7) were spoken by Pharisees. The inference is that there are others who can forgive sins. However, the Pharisee's mistake consisted not in their belief that God alone had the power to forgive

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<sup>14</sup>Gauss, J.H., God's Truth vs Man's Theories, The Frederick Printing Co., p.33

sins, but rather in denying the Deity of Christ. Christ, as God, could forgive sins. Hence we must look upon the confessional as an infringement upon the prerogatives of God. The priest in the confessional is regarded as God, or God's representative in the court of conscience. Without undoubted authority from heaven, such an assumption partakes of the nature of blasphemy. Jehovah is the Lord of consciences. Against him we have sinned, and to him alone are we bound to confess.

We have noted before that the words, "Confess your faults one to another" are rather a proof against auricular confession to a priest. It implies that it is as much the duty of the priest to confess to the layman, as the layman to the priest. In Acts 19:18 we read, "Many that believed came, and confessing, and declaring their deeds." Those who came and confessed, did so openly, which is altogether different from auricular confession, which signifies confession whispered in the ear. In the following verse we are told of those who brought their books together, and burned them before all men.

We will find that all the texts that can be adduced in favor of auricular confession, relate to the public acknowledgement of sin.

Psychologically. From the psychological point of view also, the confessional manifests its weakness. It is not

always sound psychological practice. In the first place, confession is compulsory, and as a compulsory exercise it creates resistance to the disclosure of hidden but dynamic experiences. To be of value the confession must come from one who is overwhelmed by the consciousness of sin, truly penitent, and desirous of restoring severed relations with God and man. Psychoanalysis has demonstrated that the psychp-analytical treatment is of no avail in the cases of those who do not at heart desire a cure.

NOT  
NECESSARILY

In the second place, the confessional has a tendency to focus attention upon the guilt rather than upon the origin of the wrong confessed. Too often it does not probe sufficiently to the source of evil.

And thirdly, it makes use of the power of suggestion and in its attempt to probe into the secret life of the penitent, it often instills ideas into his mind that pollute his soul instead of cleansing it. Weatherhead has summed it up very well in a brief statement, when he says,

YOU  
EXAGGERATE  
SIR!

Our Roman Catholic friends have spoilt the idea of confession for us by making it habitual when it ought to be occasional, by enforcing it when it ought to be spontaneous and voluntary... and further, sometimes, by asking such ill-advised and clumsy questions in order to wring a confession as to put worse ideas into minds than they have the skill and ability to take from them. 15

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15. Weatherhead, Leslie D., Psychology in the Service of the Soul, The Epworth Press, 1929, p.82

Morally. We are now ready to apply the moral test. That there are moral values to be attached to it we have already conceded, but it is a question whether its negative moral influence does not outweigh the positive. We have several points to score against the auricular confession on moral grounds.

1. It gives undue power to the priesthood. They acquire a knowledge of all secrets and affairs, and are thus enabled to exercise both an indirect and direct control, in domestic circles and in the field of politics, for the advancement of the church and for their own purposes. This power has been used and abused.

The priest knows to a great extent the secrets of a whole family if he has but one member of the family under his guidance. Equipped with this knowledge he may interfere with marriage relationships. He controls, according to his own fancy, the parent's conduct toward the child, and the child's conduct toward the parents. He may compel parents to disown and disinherit a child that has turned Protestant by threatening to withhold absolution. He has control over kings and subjects. The confessor of the king of France is supposed to have said,

"With my God in my hand, and my king at my knee,  
Who can greater be?"

The priest, by means of the confessional, has even rendered monarchs helpless as in times when countries have

CONFESSION  
IS  
SECRET  
STUPID!

HOGWASH

THERE  
IS NO  
KING OF  
FRANCE  
TODAY

GROSS  
EXAGGERATION

→ HOW ABOUT  
AN EXAMPLE?

been placed under an interdict.

2. It is immoral in its character and results. Father Chiniquy, an expriest, has called auricular confession 'a deep pit of perdition for the priest.' The confessional he designated a 'Modern Sodom', and the dogma of auricular confession he termed a 'Sacrilegious Imposture'.

Blakeney <sup>16</sup> comments upon the immoral and unchaste influence of the confessional, both upon the priest and the penitent. He points out that sin only is the subject of discourse in the confessional -- not purity, nor the beauty of holiness -- but crime in all its hideous forms. All mortal sins, and the circumstances which affect their character must be detailed in the privacy of the confessional. Treatises on the nature of sin have been composed by Liguori and others for the guidance of the confessional <sup>SP</sup> that are so polluted that they are only fit for the abodes of hell. → TSK, TSK

Now the priest, bound by the unnatural law of celibacy, is obligated to listen day after day to confessions from both sexes. He must give ear to matrimonial secrets, and by means of questioning, help to draw aside the curtains of the marriage bed. Into his human heart are poured forth confessions of voluptuousness and sin in every form. His mind becomes the receptacle of all the filth of the district charge.

16. Blakeney, R.P. op. cit., p.169

YOU GOT  
TO BE  
KIDDING!

WRONG!  
ALSO  
THERAPY  
&  
INSTRUCTION

That this constitutes a danger for the priest is evident. It has been aptly said.

"Vice is a monster of such hideous mien  
As, to be hated, needs but to be seen;  
But seen too oft, familiar with her face,  
We soon approve, admire, and then embrace."

THIS CLOD  
QUOTES A  
GREEK PAGAN!

The danger of the confessional and the immoral results flowing from it are admitted by Catholics. Liguori is quoted by Blakeney as saying,

A confessor ought to be exceedingly cautious in receiving the confessions of women... Confessors, without necessity, ought not to hear the confessions of women after evening twilight, or before morning... In a short time such persons come to this, that they no longer act toward each other as angels, as they commenced, but as those who are clothed in flesh; they interchange looks, and their minds are affected by soft impressions, which still seem to proceed from the first devotion; hence the one begins to long for the presence of the other, and thus the spiritual devotion is converted into carnal. And indeed, oh how many priests, who before were innocent, on account of similar attractions, which began in the spirit, have lost both God and their soul. 17

Such is the result of the unhallowed interrogations of the confessional and of priestly celibacy. It appears that the vow of celibacy by the priests is made easy by auricular confession. We have had our attention drawn to the significant fact that the confessional in the present form was not instituted and forced upon the people until after the vow of perpetual celibacy was forced upon the clergy. It was in A.D. 1215, during the darkest age of the church. at the fourth Council of Lateran that Pope Innocent III made auricular confession an article

NOT SO  
15. Blakeney, R.P., A Manual of Romish Controversy, p.88



of faith in the Church of Rome. This fact is conclusive proof not only of the worthlessness of the institution, but of its evils and dangers. The history of clerical celibacy and the confessional has ever been that of sin and crime.

The confessional is also dangerous and contaminating to the penitent. When a female is taught that shame in confession is a soul-destroying sin, and required to unfold all, it can be imagined that modesty and purity, the great ornaments of the female, suffer by such a system.

3. The confessional has been allowed to become a substitute for real penitence and thus has brought about a light and loose way of thinking about sin. This has been demonstrated in history by the sale of indulgences. Tetzels slogan, "Sobald das Geld im Kasten klingt, die Seele in den Himmel springt," certainly did not produce a sense of the awfulness of sin as a transgression against a Holy God. It may be also remarked here that its emphasis on individual sins and the details thereof, introduces the danger of overlooking the fact that a person's life as a whole is sinful, and people are not led like the Publican to confess, "God be merciful to me a sinner." It is an attempt to purify the stream without purifying the source. Thus people go to the confessional and may experience a momentary emotional release from tension but don't come to know the peace that passeth understanding.'

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It was probably not so much the confessional as the abuse of this practice that occasioned the forcible reaction of Luther against it and helped to bring the Reformation on its way. It will therefore be of interest and service to us to know what Protestantism, after its general reaction against institutionalized confession, has made of it. We shall take up this study in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER III

### THE PROTESTANT CONFESSIONAL

The expression "Protestant Confessional" is really a misnomer. The Protestant churches have no confessional as understood by Roman Catholics. We shall use the term, however, to distinguish it from a confession of faith. The abuses of the practice of auricular confession prior to and during the Reformation called forth a reaction which finally led to the repudiation of the confessional by Protestantism. The confessional-box in the evangelical church has been broken down never to be built again. This does not mean that Protestantism has repudiated the confession.

The statement that the more evangelical forms of Protestantism in their general reaction against institutionalized confession have been guilty of pouring out the child with the bathwater is probably an exaggeration. We fully concede that in the struggle against deep-rooted heresies truth often suffers casualties, and that also in the struggle against auricular confession the Protestant churches may have sacrificed something that is of positive religious worth. The question, however, may be raised whether they have not gained more than they have lost.

It is not to be thought that a religious movement

based on the rediscovery of the Bible, with its strong emphasis on Scriptural authority, should have missed out entirely on the Bible teaching on the value of confession. The emphasis may be weak and one-sided, but it is there and must be recognized by the student of history.

In the treatment of our subject we are faced with a major difficulty. We cannot attempt to speak of a uniform doctrine or practice of confession within Protestantism. Protestantism may be compared with a large tree providing a place of refuge for more than two hundred and fifty different birds of different colors all singing their own peculiar song. Protestantism is divided by its spirit of individualism into so many denominations that it is almost impossible to find a doctrine or practice on which they can agree. But in spite of this diversity there appears to be a certain degree of uniformity based on a common heritage which may justify our attempt to speak of a Protestant confessional.

#### THE BASIC ASSUMPTION

The doctrinal basis of the Protestant confessional as at the time of the Reformation and as held by evangelical groups since, is threefold, (1) the nature of sin as a transgression of the Divine law, (2) justification from sin by grace, through faith, (3) the priesthood of all believers. These are really the three pillars of the Protestant con-

fessional. The first recognizes the fundamental need of an acknowledgement of sin and makes man directly responsible to God to whom confession must be made. The second makes salvation an act of Divine grace. Confession of sin is therefore completely without meritorious value. The honest confession qualifies man for Divine forgiveness, but it does not entitle him to it. The third recognizes the unity and equality of all believers in Christ and thus denies to the priests the exclusive right to hear confessions which people are willing to deposit with them. Some of these points will receive further treatment in the following paragraphs.

#### THE NATURE OF THE PROTESTANT CONFSSIONAL

As indicated before, we are confronted with the difficulty of finding some common ground within the ranks of the many denominations that will warrant us to speak of the nature of the Protestant confessional. We believe that such a common basis can be found if we are willing not to confine ourselves within too narrow limits. Before we do so, however, let us briefly consider the doctrine and practice of some of the major groups, as they stand revealed in history.

#### Denominational Practices and Trends.

Lutheranism. It is only natural that we begin with Lutheranism as the spearhead of the Reformation. Among the Lutherans obligatory confession to a minister of the word

survived the Reformation, although its sacramental character was denied in consequence of the Protestant concept of justification by faith alone. Luther himself reacted forcibly against the confessional for several reasons. He disapproved of the torture of conscience of the individual who was forced to lay bare his intimate sins. He also objected strongly to the conduct and demeanor of many confessors as well as the other abuses to which the practice of confession led. However, he never rejected the confessional itself. He was so convinced of the necessity of the private confession that he remarked at one time that if thousand and again thousand worlds were his, he would rather lose them all than to have the smallest piece of the confessional removed from the church. He would recognize none as a Christian who withdrew himself from it. But Luther seriously modified some of the doctrines underlying the Roman practice. In the first place, even though he used the formula, 'I forgive thee', he never contended that it was in him to absolve men. He merely announced God's forgiveness to the penitent sinner. In the second place, he rejected penance as a regulated series of penalties. He also held that absolution could be obtained through a Christian lay brother as well as through a priest. In the course of time the Lutherans substituted for private confession a general confession followed by general absolution. Individual confession was replaced by congregational confession.

The congregation as a whole confessed its sin before taking communion.

Calvinism. Calvin, like Luther, rejected the idea of auricular confession as demanded by the Church of Rome while at the same time he insisted on the value of confession where it was legitimate. He emphasised confession to God and to man, as well as private and public confession. His teachings are well summarized by Dakin in the following paragraph,

The primary confession is direct to God, because it is he who forgives, forgets, and wipes away sin. But also one who has so confessed to God will doubtless have a tongue ready to confess wherever there is occasion among men to publish the mercy of God. He will not be satisfied to whisper his secret to one individual alone, but will often and openly in the hearing of the whole world ingeniously make mention both of his own ignominy and of the greatness and glory of God. Hence the secret confession made to God is followed by voluntary confession to men--all for God's glory or in the interest of the sinner's humiliation that he may be edified thereby. 1

This last expression indicates that confession among Calvinists was also used as a measure of discipline. Public sin was judged as an offence against God and man and had also to be confessed in public. The offender appeared first before the session and assembly of ministers and elders where he was sharply examined. Following that the penitent had to confess his crime openly before the congregation and desire God's mercy. This public confession was to profit not only the offender but the whole congregation as well. To confirm this

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1. Dakin, A., Calvinism, Duckworth, London, 1940, p.71

I quote a paragraph from 'The Liturgy of John Knox,

If we consider his fall and sin in him only, without having consideration of ourselves, and of our own corruption, we shall profit nothing, for so shall we but dispise our brother and flatter ourselves. But if we shall earnestly consider what nature we bear, what corruption lurketh in it, how prone and ready everyone of us is to such greater impiety, then shall we in the sin of this our brother accuse and damn our own sins, in his fall shall we consider and lament our sinful natures.

Also shall we join our repentance, tears, and prayers with him and his, knowing that no flesh can be justified before God's presence, if judgement proceed without mercy. The profit which this our brother and we have of this his humiliation, is, that we and he may be assured that our God is more ready to receive us to mercy, than we are to crave it. 2

The Calvinists, even before the Lutherans, substituted for private confession a general confession which found its way into the ritual of the church.

Anglicanism. The Church of England resisted to some extent the attempt of the non-Conformists to have all reference to private confession expunged from the Book of Prayer and this with some success. In every Prayer Book used in the Established Church there appears this injunction in the exhortation to the Holy Communion, "If there be any among you, who by this means (confession to Almighty God with full purpose of amendment) cannot quiet his conscience herein, but requireth further comfort and counsel, let him come to me or some other discreet and learned minister of God's Word and open his grief;

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2. The Liturgy of John Knox, University Press, Glasgow, 1886, p.52



that by the ministry of God's Word he may receive the benefit of absolution, together with counsel and advice." Thus the Church of England has provided a means of getting rid of those difficulties and anxieties that beset most people. The value of confession is emphasized.

The Oxford Movement in the middle of the nineteenth century fostered a revival of auricular or private confession, and the practice has received wide acceptance among Anglo-Catholics. The movement leans toward Roman Catholic views of the sacraments. Albert H. Newman, writing on the results of this movement says, "Auricular confession has been revived. A few years ago a work called "The Priest in Absolution", prepared for secret use among the High Church clergy, was brought to light and created a great sensation. It was an almost literal translation of a French Roman Catholic book, and embraced the worst features of the Roman Catholic Confessional."<sup>3</sup>

Liberalism. Liberal Churchmen have manifested a greater opposition to auricular confession, not only to the practice as such, but more particularly to its doctrinal implications. Their views on the nature of guilt and on the atonement are so much at variance with the views of Catholics and Evangelicals that they could not accept auricular confession into their program on the same basis. Neither is confession generally practiced as a means of church discipline.

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<sup>3</sup>. Newman, A.H., A Manual of Church History, Judson Press, Revised edition 1931, Vol. II, p.653

This should not, however, lead us to imagine that the Liberal Churchmen are opposed to confession and do not realize its value. Quite the opposite is true. It is from them that we probably hear most of the therapeutic value of the confessional. Their psychological approach to the religious problems has encouraged them to give their support to the psychoanalytic movement. They have accepted with enthusiasm the light which psychology has thrown upon the structure and function of religious confession. A large number of liberal pastors have received extensive training in psychiatry and practice it with a fair amount of success. Several of them have made valuable contributions in the field of literature on the subject.

It is also from the ranks of the liberals that we hear of the talk about restoring the confessional. The words of Stolz probably represent a large section of opinion when he writes,

For centuries the confessional has survived and afforded adherents of the Catholic Church a release from inner tension, which has been held in contempt by Protestants. Protestants have held a position which has on the whole been short-sighted. They have sacrificed too much of positive religious worth. It is not necessary to accept the Catholic doctrine in detail in order to appreciate the function of the confessional. The Protestant Church may provide its constituency with a confessional without assuming all the powers and prerogatives which the Roman Church claims... The Protestant Church conducting a confessional to which people may freely resort can conserve what is of value in the Catholic system and add to that other items from the wider field of psycho-analysis which have been sufficiently tested and found serviceable. 4

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4. Stolz, Karl R., Pastoral Psychology, Abingdon-Cokesbury 1940, p. 221

Fundamentalism. The Fundamentalist groups would most likely be the last ones to bring back the confessional. Neither are they found to be quite as willing to apply the findings of psychology in their dealings with religious problems as are the liberals. Congregational confession in the form of ritual is practically unknown in their practice. But they, too, have recognized the need and value of confession. Individual confession of one's sins to God is an absolute necessity for obtaining pardon. Confession to those who have been wronged is considered a duty and ought to be accompanied by restitution. Public confession of public sins is required in many churches as a means of church discipline. It is intended to be both punitive and corrective and should serve as an example to others. However, public confession of a generic nature also plays an important role in the revivalist meetings of Fundamentalists and certain evangelical sects. Testimony meetings often turn out to be confession meetings. This is being anticipated. The very fact that it is anticipated, serves as a kind of preparation for those who are burdened and feel a need to confess to some one.

What has been said must necessarily suffice as a brief survey of the doctrine and practice of confession as found within the major Protestant groups. We shall now seek to determine in what respect they are in essential agreement.

### Protestant Characteristics of the Confessional

A study of the Longitudinal and horizontal cross-section of Protestantism will bring to light an essential agreement on the following five points:

(1) Confession must be primarily to God. Protestants have taken their stand upon the Gospel truth that there is "one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus."<sup>5</sup> We approach God through Jesus Christ. This means that the human priest must relinquish his usurped position and move out of the focus of the confessional. There is no authority whatever that entitles him to become the repository of the sins of the people which are neither directed against him, nor is it within his power to efface them. If there were no other responsibilities connected with the priesthood than to hear confessions, as far as the average Protestant is concerned, the priest might apply for another job. In seeking forgiveness the sinner must take his stand before a holy God whom he has offended and who has the power to forgive, and not before a human priest who may be as vile as the confessing sinner himself.

(2) Confession must be voluntary rather than compulsory. It must be born out of a free volition and not out of legal compulsion. Protestantism has found no Scriptural authority for demanding auricular confession to minister

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5. 1 Timothy 2:5

or priest. The utmost that the Protestant pastor can do is to urge the penitent soul to accept the divine forgiveness, but he cannot demand a detailed confession of sin.

A confession of sin, to have real value, must be prompted by an inner feeling of necessity, and an inward readiness. It must be accompanied by a sense of guilt, a feeling of sorrow, and a desire to abandon sin. In other words, it must be accompanied by true repentance. A confession may be premature, and as such it usually results in a still-birth. It produces no evidence of real life, joy or satisfaction. Protestants have repudiated compulsory confession not only on the basis of insufficient Scriptural authority, but also on the basis of its negative results. In the first place, it brings no real peace or victory to the individual. In the second place, it may lead the respective individual upon second thought to hate himself and others also for having this shame and humiliation forced upon him. Compulsory confession, instead of releasing those that are bound, leads them into deeper servitude and bondage and into spiritual confusion.

(3) Confession must be occasional rather than habitual. The rule that confession must be at least once a year is resented by Protestants. I don't say that there are no Protestants that have not made a habit of confessing to their pastor. There are indeed those who constantly dwell on their

sins, take out their spiritual 'innards' , look at them and then show them to others. Confession is not to be regarded as the normal diet of Christians. It is to be spontaneous and not habitual, and like medicine, to be taken when needed. An overdose may prove harmful if not fatal.

Habitual confession is fraught with many dangers. He who confesses repeatedly finally gets accustomed to it. Confession is made easy. He loses that delicate feeling of shame and sin gradually loses its sting. His conscience is dulled, and confession, intended as a mighty bulwark against sin, becomes the trap door to sin, though probably covered with flowers.

(4) Confession must be specific rather than detailed. The Protestant churches in general have not emphasized a detailed confession. This does not mean that the people have been encouraged to hide their sins behind general statements. Such general confessions are only of limited value and do not prove satisfactory. Confession must be specific so that the confessor will know what sin is being confessed. The sin must be given a name. However such details as answer the questions, where, and when, and under what circumstances, etc., are not demanded. Neither is there a specific inquiry made into the secret thought life of the individual. The Protestant confessional is neither designed as an investigation bureau nor as a torture chamber. This is not to say that confession is made

particularly easy for Protestants. To sit face to face with the minister and reveal one's guilt is no easy matter. The shame and humiliation that accompany confession make it difficult for the sensitive soul to consider confession as an easy escape from the consequences of misdeeds. But the penitent may at least be reasonably assured that his soul will be spared the agony and the torture of having to answer those ill-advised and clumsy questions which are against all common laws of decency. The penitent has come of his own accord and he confesses those misdeeds of which he is convinced that they should be confessed.

(5) Confession may be made to laymen as well as to ministers. We have already called our attention to Luther's position on this question. He held that one could obtain absolution through a lay brother as well as through a priest. More often than not Protestants will go to their ministers for confession for several reasons. In the first place, by their vows all confidences are inviolate and sacred. Secondly, their training and experience qualify them for this kind of work. Furthermore, it is embarrassing and difficult for all of us to live in daily contact with those to whom we have opened our inmost mind and heart. However, there is nothing that I know of within Protestantism to forbid people to confess to laymen or that will indicate that such confession is of inferior value. Thus many a fireside has become a perfect

confessional where friend confessed with friend. Sons have confessed to their fathers, and daughters to their mothers and have found relief and strength. Whether one chooses minister or layman, one must rest inwardly assured that he is a discrete and trustworthy person and enjoys one's confidence.

### THE TECHNIQUE

Insofar as Protestantism has repudiated compulsory, detailed confession of the Roman Church, insofar it has also repudiated its method. A voluntary confession does not require a set of skillfull questions to open up the heart and mind of the penitent. The Protestant problem has been to get people to confess of their own volition. Their policy has not been to make people confess, but to make them want to confess. How is this to be accomplished? Voluntary confession rests upon conviction of sin and a hope and desire to be delivered from it. Evangelical Protestantism has therefore placed its reliance upon the Holy Spirit to produce in man this deep inner conviction of sin through the Word of God and to hold forth the promise of forgiveness. For "he will reprove the world of sin<sup>6</sup>."

Instead of dragging people into the confessional by force, evangelical Protestantism has gone forth to preach

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6. John 16:8



the gospel of God's saving grace in season and out of season. Such preaching involves the preaching of sin in its origin, its course, and also in its consequences. But an exposure and denunciation of sin separated from the background of God's holiness is not always sufficient. Light views of sin can generally be traced to light views of God's holiness. It was when Isaiah saw a vision of God in his holiness that he cried out, "Woe is me, for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the king, the Lord of hosts."<sup>7</sup> There is nothing else that will bring man under such conviction of sin as a view of the holiness of God. The history of Protestantism will bear me out on this that times of dynamic gospel preaching have usually been times of confessions.

#### APPRAISAL

Protestantism has sought to remedy the abuses of auricular confession and to safeguard against their recurrence. It has therefore concentrated on strengthening those points where auricular confession revealed its weakness.

#### Good Points.

(1) The Protestant conception of confession and forgiveness is more Scriptural than the Romish confession because it is neither compulsory nor habitual. <sup>↑</sup> The individual comes

7. Isaiah 6:5

HARDLY a scholarly term

to the minister not because the church demands it, but because of an inner urge for confession and forgiveness. No Scripture can be adduced to substantiate compulsory confession.

(2) The Protestant confessional has made the penitent directly responsible to God. The priest has been eliminated as mediator between Christ and man. He is not considered any more as 'God in the Confessional.' The minister does not say to the penitent, "I forgive thee" or "I absolve thee", but like Nathan said to David, "The Lord also hath put away thy sin."<sup>8</sup>

(3) The Protestants have put their confession on the basis of grace rather than on the basis of law. This is in harmony with the Scriptural teaching of salvation by grace. Confession is not a meritorious act which will in any way reduce our debt to God or lessen our punishment. Nor is it any thing that will put God under an obligation to us. It only qualifies the penitent to receive the forgiveness of his sins freely bestowed by a merciful God.

(4) Still another strong point of the Protestant confessional is the fact that it does not require the unconditional surrender of womanly self-respect by being required to disclose to an unmarried priest all that is in her heart. Rather it permits the penitent to retain the key to the chamber

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8. 2 Samuel 12:13

THIS  
GAY  
HAS A  
HANG  
UP ON  
WOMEN'S  
MODESTY

of his heart and unlock but those secrets which he is willing to make common property and the consequences of which he has become willing to bear. Thus any shame and humiliation in connection with his confession are not forced upon him by undue pressure from the church but are voluntarily accepted as the price of peace.

(5) We are informed that although many faithful Catholics find the confessional a fruitful source of spiritual consolation, there are many cases where anxiety neurosis is developed by penitents who fear that they have not made a 'good' confession and that they may be guilty of sacrilege. They are troubled by the fear that they might have consciously kept something from the priest and so they constantly run back to the priest with unimportant data. Even if a confession to a minister may not always produce the desired results, it at least does not add unnecessarily to that feeling of guilt which is already weighing heavily upon him.

(6) The Protestant practice of confession also tends to lead the penitent into a realization of his independence in Christ. The Roman confessional has tended to develop a dependent type of individual, one that is tied to the apron strings of his spiritual advisor. He is made to depend constantly on the spiritual advice of a human being who has him under his control and thus he is held down in a state of

spiritual immaturity. This extensive control over the souls of believers which has robbed them of the possibility of a normal development into maturity within the limits of Christian liberty has led Protestants to place confession on a voluntary basis. The believer is encouraged to make use of this liberty and settle his troubles with God alone in meditative confession wherever possible.

OVERY  
SIMPLIFIED

### The Weakness of the Protestant Confessional.

In spite of its many good points, the Protestant confessional has betrayed certain weaknesses which are too obvious to escape our attention. It will be found that these weaknesses are manifested in those fields where auricular confession manifested its strengths. We shall limit ourselves to a brief discussion of two major weaknesses.

(1) In the first place, there has been an overemphasis on a social and collective confession at the expense of individual confession. No doubt there is a place in the Christian church for a general, congregational confession. There were times when Israel had to come before God as a nation and say, 'we have sinned.' Calvin encouraged general confession with fasting at special times of distress, famine, war, etc. There is also a proper place for confession in song and prayer in the worship service of the congregation. Public worship is intimately related with public confession. What we criticize is that this emphasis may have been at the expense of individual confession. Although this liturgical, general, and congregational

gational confession as made by the minister and people in the course of public and corporate worship is valuable, it is not nearly as effective as voluntary, individual confession. Stolz says,

The public confession of the worshipping congregation may impart to the individual aesthetic thrill rather than a sense of personal guilt and a desire for pardon and amendment. The prayer of confession recited by the congregation, being general in its statements of delinquency both of commission and omission, and phrased in choice diction and sonorous rhythmic periods, arouses in the worshiper a mild mood of penitence combined with a warm stimulating sense of well-being and an appreciation of literary values. Furthermore, one is exhilarated by participation in a dramatic religious attitude and act. The confession of an individual, in his closet or in his study of the pastor, tortured by an outraged conscience, so far from being an aesthetic and literary performance, is an excruciating episode. His oral confession is not a literary gem, but issues, charged with shame and compunction, haltingly and perhaps incoherently from the depth of a broken and contrite spirit.

I feel that I cannot improve on that quotation. Certainly the confession itself is not to be merely sentimentally soothing, but morally lacerating and mentally excruciating. A sentimental salve for conscience instead of self-criticism and self-condemnation only contributes to further delinquency. An individual admission of guilt for specific personality defects may be more painful, but it is also more productive of relief and ethical fortification.

(2) Secondly, there has been a lack of recognition for the need of private confession and a failure to make adequate provision for it. The necessity of a private confession also

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9. Stolz, Karl R., op. cit., p. 223

to man, has its basis in human nature. This may not always be evident on the surface<sup>for</sup>, unlike the sea which has all its unrest on the surface and an unbroken calm underneath, man preserves a calm in the face of others, but underneath there is tumult. Suppressed sins create a pressure which must be relieved if it is not to lead to disaster. Confession of sin serves as a safety-valve. Many a man lies in a suicide's grave because he had no one to whom to open his heart when his troubles became unbearable. Many others have broken down mentally under the strain and finally ended up in a mental hospital. Still others end up with the aimless, endless wanderings of the maniac. What they needed was someone to whom they could pour out from their soul all their consciously repressed sins and burdens and griefs and sorrows.

Poets have recognized the value of confession. Shakespeare says, " Give sorrow words: the grief that does not speak

Whispers the o'er fraught heart and bids it break."<sup>10</sup>

Tennyson, In Memoriam, has these lines,

Nor could I weary, heart or limb,  
When mighty Love would cleave in twain  
The lading of a single pain,  
And part it, giving half to him." <sup>11</sup>

Psychiatry, as a science, has also seen the fundamental need for confession and so has also the Roman Catholic Church. For evangelical Protestantism private confession has practically

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10. Macbeth, Act IV, Sc.3

11. In Memoriam, 25

become a piece of 'neglected Christianity'. Because of the great abuse of the confessional, we have permitted ourselves to be robbed of the use of it. Our modern society has made its contribution toward this neglect for it has allowed the individual few opportunities to disclose his inmost worries. A man shall not complain of his failures nor parade his successes. Bodily ailments may be discussed but a frank discussion of spiritual troubles and anxieties is taboo.

Because we have failed to see the need of individual private confession, we have also refused to make adequate provision for it. Protestants generally have not been prepared for confession by an adequate emphasis in the pulpit. The value of private confession has not been sufficiently presented to the congregation. Then, too, the pastors have not made it sufficiently clear that they were willing to place themselves at the disposal of those who would have the courage to open up to them. This could be done by setting aside certain days of the week for this purpose. Ministers should regard it as an essential of their pastoral relations to display such an attitude of friendliness and concern that people will gladly confide in them. Lastly, it is to be questioned whether the average Protestant pastor has received adequate specialized training to help him deal effectively with those cases that do come up. As Stolz says, "A procedure which combines an informal confessional and

scientific values of psychiatry with that type of preaching which calls men to an immediacy of religious experience and and arouses them from moral sloth is sorely needed."<sup>12</sup>

This neglect on the part of the Protestant churches to consider seriously the question of private confession has given rise to a list of problems that have been annoying to the pastor. Those who feel that they ought to confess and cannot persuade themselves to go to their pastor, will finally find someone to whom they can confess.

The testimony meeting has offered a partial solution to many anxious souls. They see in it an opportunity to get relief. What they could not confess to one in private, they will confess to many in public and people will listen to them. Thus the testimony meeting has become what it was really not intended to be - a confessional. However, it is a one-sided affair. The individual gets relief through confession but the response in the form of personal advice is lacking and the results are not entirely satisfactory.

Others make use of the visiting evangelist. He is a stranger to them and arouses their conscience through his preaching and manifests a particular willingness to help them. He invites them into the consultation room. It so happens that the pastor's own members will by-pass him and go to the evangelist whom they often keep occupied till

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<sup>12</sup>. Stolz, Karl R., op. cit., p.224



the early hours of the morning.

It has also been observed that many people, when they wish to unburden themselves, consult the lawyer or the physician. These are professionals whose ears are accustomed to listening tales of human troubles, and who give promise that their conversation will be held confidential. It must be acknowledged that lawyers and physicians have been able to relieve many of their clients and patients. However, they are usually not able to give the needed spiritual advice which the patients need so desperately. Lawyers and Doctors have to listen to many stories that should be told to a spiritual advisor. This fact must be considered as a rebuke to the average pastor.

Still others seek affiliation with a group that promises to meet their needs. Thus the Protestant churches have lost many members to the Catholics for the simple reason that it offered a ready opportunity to unburden themselves to one who was willing to listen. Many also have joined the Oxford Group Movement because it made sin-sharing one of its major doctrines and practices. The Oxford movement with its emphasis on public confession has really been a protest from within the Protestant churches against its neglect of confession

It has also been disturbing for the pastor to see so many of his members go to the psychiatrist to pour out their troubles. The psychiatrist, too, is a willing and ready listener offering them relief from inner tension. Psychiatry

as a scientific movement, has registered its protest against the Protestant churches from without.

It will be of value to us to see what the Oxford Group and also psychiatry have to offer to the burdened soul and to what an extent they really meet its spiritual needs. The next two chapters shall be devoted to a similar analysis of these two movements.

## CHAPTER IV

### SHARING

We have now come to the study of a movement which has sprung up during the last century within the pale of the Protestant church, namely, the Oxford Group Movement. Adherents of the movement have been known as Buchmanites, Groupers, Oxford Groupers, and the New Oxford Group, but the members themselves have preferred to call themselves members of the First Century Christian Fellowship.

Like so many other religious 'isms', Buchmanism may be spoken of as an unpaid bill of the church. There is an ever-existing danger for the churches to become one-sided in their presentation of Christian truth. Among other things, the Protestant churches have neglected confession that has content and that goes into sufficient detail. This neglect has been seriously felt and has given rise to a movement within the church that has gone into the opposite extreme. Emil Brunner says, "It is certain that a part of the great influence of the Group Movement may be traced to the fact that in it confession has come again into its right."<sup>1</sup> Confession, or sharing, has come to be one of the major doctrines of the Group. Irvine remarks,

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<sup>1</sup> Emil Brunner, Emil., The Church and the Oxford Group, Hodder and Stoughton, 1937, p.75

Perhaps the thought of 'sharing' one's religious experiences with others, in which confessing one's sins takes the most prominent part, is that which distinguishes this movement more than any other individual practice. This Sin-sharing is fundamental to the movement." 2

Today the Group does not speak of 'sin-sharing' as much as of sharing experiences. However a change of name does not mean a change of character. It is still practicing sin-sharing. Because of its strong emphasis on confession I feel that it deserves a place in our study together with Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, and also the scientific movement. It has well been said that "the sharing of the Buchmanites, the confessional of the Roman and Anglo-Catholic churches and the consulting room of the psycho-analyst have one thing in common, apart from fundamental differences. Each acknowledges the need for openness instead of repression." 3

#### THE BASIC ASSUMPTION

The underlying assumption of the whole practice of sharing is that mutual confession or, as we may call it, a conversational exchange of sins, is a means toward victory over sin. Two things ought to be reviewed at this point, (1) their attitude toward sin, and (2) the proposed way of overcoming it.

Concerning the former it has been pointed out that there is no proper sense of the awfulness of sin in the Group. Dr.

2. Irvine, Wm. C., Heresies Exposed, Loizeaux Brothers, 17th edition, 1946, p46

3. Harrison, Marjorie, Saints Run Mad, The Bowering Press, 1934, p.75

T.T.Shields<sup>4</sup>, who has had considerable experience with the Groups also objects to the inadequacy of the Group's doctrine of sin. Sin has been defined as anything that keeps us from God and from other people. Such a definition may sound alright and contain a large element of truth, but is it adequate? Certainly there are many things in life, such as obedience to God, which often require us to separate from other people yet which could not be designated as sin. A better definition could be found in 1 John 4:3, "Sin is the transgression of the law."

Sin has also been described as something with 'I' in the center of it. In his chapter on Sin, the Layman with a Notebook says, "In the 'I' in the word sin lies the secret of sin's power... If we can surrender that 'I' to God Sin goes with it; When we live without that 'I' in our lives we are without sin"... Individual self-interest is the causation of world sin."<sup>5</sup>

It is significant to note that in the writings of the Oxford Group there is a conspicuous absence of reference to the saving blood of Jesus Christ. However, the Group sees the possibility of realizing a world set free from the destroying influence of sin. This is to be brought about by an army of Life-changers through the means of sin-sharing. This brings us to the next point, the proposed way of overcoming sin.

Irvine quotes the following statement from an Oxford

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4.Shields, T.T., The Oxford Group Movement Analysed, The Gospel Witness, p.49

5.The Layman with a Notebook, What is the Oxford Group, Oxford University Press, 1933, p.23

letter, "They urge the need of 'deep sharing' , or open confession within the group, as a means of release from sin and cementing the fellowship of the Group."<sup>6</sup>

Sherwood Sunderland Day, in his booklet entitled, 'The Principles of the Group' says,

Confession to God alone is often not good enough in that it may cost nothing and may be merely the confession to a subjective picture of God which the person has built up for himself or herself. In such a case, what actually happens is that the person does not confess at all --there is no real pain in repentance -- it is an easy way of trying to ease one's conscience. Confessing to another person always costs and it is thus a test of honesty in hating sin."<sup>7</sup>

The idea is that confession which is to shame one out of sin, must be painful and must cost us something, and that in order to cost us something it must be made to another person.

Emil Brunner, a sympathizer with the Group states that confession has several functions. He lists the following,

(1) It is a moment of decision wherein a man turns to Christ, in analogy to the baptism of John the Baptist.

(2) Confession is not only a psychological relief, but it is an admission of guilt before God in the presence of a human witness... Thus confession becomes a moment of the central act wherein a man turns to God and receives forgiveness.

(3) It is a means whereby the body of Christ is purified, the means for removing the hindrances which separate one man from another. It is one of the mysteries of the Group Movement, an instrument for the Holy Spirit which binds all together."<sup>8</sup>

6. Irvine, Wm. C., op. cit. p.47

7. Quoted by Shields, T.T. op. cit., p.26

8. Brunner, Emil, op. cit., pp.75-76

This complete confession, sometimes referred to as the 'washout', is said to produce the change, a word which corresponds with the older word conversion. He is now a changed person, ready to join the happy throng.

In summing up we may say with L.P.Jacks," The Group Movement is, in essence, a new phase of the Christian attack upon sin, or let us say, a revival in a less formal environment of traditional methods of attack." 9

#### THE NATURE OF SHARING

The sharing of Buchmanism comprises confession and witness. Sins are confessed to another member, or to the Group, as a start. They are then brought up as 'dead specimens' to be a witness to a changed life. Let us consider sharing from these two aspects.

##### Sharing As Confession.

(1) The Oxford Group does not claim that sharing in the sense of confession is their spiritual prerogative or their invention. In this it differs considerably from the Roman Catholic teaching which holds that one must confess to a priest or be eternally lost. As a Group working within the churches it considers "sharing as an invaluable aid to reclaiming lives for God and that the nominal faith of the person is not of so much importance as the fact that the person, after being

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9.Jacks,L.P., Oxford and the Groups, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1934, p.124

changed, can return to his or her faith and become a spiritually alive member in it."<sup>10</sup>

(2) Confession is made to man and is made either to an individual or to the Group. Usually men and women are induced to begin the Christian way of life at one of the House-parties. Here the prospect is given into the charge of one of the members of the house-party of the same sex as the prospect. After a 'quiet period' where he 'listens in' for guidance he is expected to make his confession before one other human being, usually the one who is in charge of him. At times this sharing is done before an applauding crowd which has met for the purpose of such exchanges.

This does not exclude confession to God. Concerning those who rather confess to God, the Layman has this to say,

We can tell them that we do not deny that they can go straight to God if they wish and God will forgive them, but that if they wish for a sure and certain knowledge that their past sins-- and all of them-- are to be wiped out, once and for all, these sins must be brought into the open and honestly faced. To put them into words, before Christ with another Christian, as a witness, is the only healthy way of making sure that the spiritual system is virtually cleansed." 11

Samuel M. Shoemaker speaks in the same vein,

Of course, confession, in the absolute sense, is to God alone: but when there is a human listener, confession is bound to be both more difficult and more efficacious. It is, as a matter of fact and experience, a relatively

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10. The Layman with a Notebook, op. cit., p.33

11. Ibid., p32



uncostly thing to fall on our knees and confess our sins to God -- it should not be, and perhaps would not be if we were closer to God and more sensitive to his will; but it is a very costly thing to say these things out in the presence even of a human being we can trust; and as a matter of fact, this is extraordinarily effective in making the first break to get away from sins. 12

Brunner adds to this that, " It is only through the presence of this human witness that confession of guilt before God becomes concrete and real." 13

It appears that the whole movement suffers from a lack of a right conception of God as a real being. We get the impression that to them man is more real than God. To anyone who comes into the presence of God, God becomes very real.

(3) The Group practices public sharing. Sharing in the Group is confidential, though apparently without restriction of the number or quality of the persons in whom confidence is reposed, beyond the fact that they are all members of the Group and believe themselves under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. There is thus a certain guarantee of privacy about the confession. Usually the individual chooses the one or the Group to whom he will confess. He depends upon instinctive knowledge of human nature to guide him in the selection of the right person. The Layman says, " All of us meet on occasions those who are complements to our own natures; those we feel instinctively will understand or

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12. Quoted by Van Baalen, J.K., The Chaos of Cults, Eerdmans, 1946, p. 207

13. Brunner, Emil, op. cit., p. 75

have passed through the very sin that we are passing through and with whom we know our confession will remain sacred from other men."<sup>14</sup> Confessions thus shared are to become the property of God, not man, and Christians are to have no fear that their frankness will become the property of other men. What will become of these secrets when some of the members quit the group is hard to say. In any case it seems clear that people would be led not only to carefully select the people with whom the knowledge is to be shared, but also the sins to be revealed.

(4) Sharing is full and often indiscriminate. Whether it be sexual perversity, or pride, or theft, the sinner must confess his sin before some other person. He must make a complete confession, hiding nothing. The process is to be so complete that it has been called the 'washout'. But sharing is also indiscriminate. The house parties are usually attended by both sexes, by old and young, rich and poor, learned and unlearned, and also by strangers. Apart from the influence of such a practice on the ethics of the Group, it is not hard to imagine that the meeting of such a mixed group must cause people present to exercise great caution as to the nature of the sins they will confess. We are inclined to think that full confession is probably more a theory than an actual practice.

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14. The Layman with a Notebook, op. cit., p.34

(5) Lastly, I must mention that sharing is to be accompanied by restitution. Restitution, they say, is openly cutting the cord of sin which has bound us to the life of wrong we have lived in the past, and the only way of doing this is by acknowledging our faults to the people concerned and to pay back by apology or in kind if necessary, that which we have taken from them. This is taught as a natural corollary of confession, for restitution involves a confession of sin to the offended party. The result of this emphasis has been gratifying. It has been reported that after the great Oxford Group Movement in Denmark, the government had to create a special department for the contributions of the men and women who had been falsifying their income taxes. Other and similar examples could be cited. In this respect it must be commended.

#### Sharing For Witness.

Confessions that have once been shared and forgiven shall be forgotten, except when they are brought out as 'dead specimens' in witness of the living work the love of Christ has done for them. Thus as far as outsiders are concerned, confession must not be made in public, but witness must be borne. It will be difficult to make a hard and fast distinction between the two since in almost every witness there is an inherent element of confession of sin although kept in a subordinate place.

The Group says that 'when Christians confess, pagans believe.' Confession is a means for them of winning other souls for Christ. This is rather a negative doctrine. The primary witness of Christ is life, not talk. The idea of sharing our human thought and experience is not the central idea of evangelism. We are rather to proclaim the gospel.

This sharing for witness is a rather sensitive point of the Group Movement. Much that is derogatory has been said against it. Evidently there is justification for much of what has been said. Inevitably the limits of seemliness and edification are occasionally, if not frequently, transgressed in such a procedure. Emil Brunner, speaking from his experience with the Group, has this to say,

I must say that such trespass over the boundary is amazingly rare. The modern man lives so much in privacy that a personal witness as such appears to him unseemly. Without doubt he would have condemned in unmeasured terms Peter's confession to the church of disloyalty to his Master and Paul's frequent reference to his great sin against the Lord's church. They both acted, not from an impulse to unburden themselves, but in order to bear witness to God's grace. The excessive self-concealment which passes for normal in our time, and which is customary in the church everywhere else, is at least as detrimental as excessive self-disclosure. The Group aims at neither one nor the other. But its special task is certainly to attack the masquerade which passes for normal life and to bring into powerful operation the blessing of mutual frankness which is the pre-supposition of true fellowship. 15

This speaks favorably for the Group's practice of sharing, but it may still be doubted whether the Group

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15. Brunner, Emil, op.cit., pp. 77-78

always hits the happy medium between excessive self-concealment and excessive self-disclosure. Those confessions brought up as dead specimens may easily be raised back to life again and as such be more effective in arousing sinful desire than to curb it.

### THE TECHNIQUE

Dr. Buchman and his Life-Changers like to speak of themselves as 'soul-surgeons.' As such they aim to arrive at a diagnosis which appears to mean delving into the secret life (particularly sex life) of the individual. This is what they call the moral test. A critic has described soul surgery as the process of tearing the confession from the suspect. Life-Changers have been urged to be lovingly relentless in insisting that confession is made when and where it is needed.

Although there are undoubtedly some 'soul-surgeons' who have acquired remarkable skill, there are many who start to practice long before it is safe for them and for others to do so. New converts are encouraged to become life-changers immediately. So much may be said in favor of the Roman Catholic confessional that the priests have usually received specialized training for the task. The same must be said of the medical men.

Marjorie Harrison in her book 'Saints Run Mad' has the

following to say about the Soul Clinic, "Dr. Buchman's soul clinic is unwise and utterly irresponsible. The most ignorant novice is encouraged to dabble with the sensitive souls and minds of his fellows. He has only to become 'changed' according to Buchmanite standards,-- pay a shilling for the manual of Soul Surgery, and start to experiment at once."<sup>16</sup>

We were told before that the practitioner was to be 'lovingly' relentless. That means he is to be personal. The priest and the medical man are generally quite impersonal, radiating not love, but kindness, common sense and wisdom. If then confession shall not become mere orgies of emotionalism they must be handled more impersonally and objectively

When a prospect is reticent, the surgeon will take him into his own confidence by telling him his own experiences with sin and cleansing. This usually opens the way for the prospect to come out with his confession. It is much the same principle that operates ~~that operates at~~ the house parties where the crowd meets for the purpose of mutual confession. There crowd psychology is at work increasing suggestibility. The inhibitory tendencies and the sense of individual responsibility is weakened. Emotion is excited and critical judgment begins to fail. The whole meeting tends to produce a condition of like-mindedness and resistance is broken down.

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<sup>16</sup>.Harrison, Marjorie, op. cit., p.76

The individual falls in line with all the rest. People can often be induced to do something contrary to their inner convictions and inclinations merely by being told that 'everybody else does it'. The actual hearing and seeing it being done has a still greater effect. Very often when such people become their individual self again and regain their critical judgement, they are very much upset for having permitted themselves to be tracked into saying what they did not want to say.

#### APPRAISAL

##### Good Points.

(1) Buchmanism has rendered the Protestant churches an important service in calling their attention to their inadequate emphasis on confession.

(2) It has also emphasised the Christian duty of confessing to those we have wronged. The Protestant churches have always taught confession to God as opposed to a priest. This has led to a default on the part of many to consider confession to man as something unnecessary.

(3) It has also stressed the necessity of restitution. This is indeed laudable. Miss Harrison states that restitution, in theory, and usually in practice, is one of the few sound precepts of the movement. Not all converts in the Protestant and Catholic ranks have been so willing as Zachaeus to restore

fourfold whatsoever they had taken by false accusation. There is a definite need for righting wrongs as far as man is concerned.

(4) We must also concede that the practice of sin-sharing has therapeutic value just as all other confession has. It helps people to get things 'off the chest'. It may prove very helpful to such individuals who consider their sins to be very original and exclusive. Once they share their sins, they discover that all their sins are also the sins of others. Thus sharing has taken the anxiety from many hearts and minds.

#### The Weakness of Sharing.

Many writers have come forth to offer their criticism not only of the Group movement as a whole, but also of their practice of sin-sharing in particular. T.T.Shields has condemned this practice on three counts. I quote, "There is nothing that will bring a man into the dust, and into deepest humiliation, like a view of the holiness of God. Therefore I condemn this 'sharing' practice as being unscriptural, a violation of all sound principles of psychology or mental science, and immoral in fact and influence."<sup>17</sup> Let us adhere to this outline.

It is Scripturally unsound. We are told that the text which reads, "neither be partakers of other men's sins,"<sup>1</sup> 1 Tim. 5:22

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<sup>17</sup> Shields, T.T., op. cit., p.27



should be literally translated, "Be ye not sin-sharers." This is then the inspired prohibition of the very practice in which Oxfordites take both pride and pleasure.

Scripture also teaches that confession to those we have wronged is a duty, but it is understood that private offences should be privately confessed. "If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone."<sup>18</sup> To go and publish one's sins to those who are blissfully ignorant of them is neither obligatory nor desirable but actually defiling.

These sin-sharings have often made the impression that the participants were boasting in their shame. Sins that are forgiven are to be forgotten. To dwell upon sins formerly committed, and to tell them with gusto, as is undoubtedly done at the houseparties, often creates the impression that people take pride in their sin. Critics who have visited these meetings have not been able to escape the conviction that the Buchmanites enjoyed each other's filth with a vicarious taste of the sins described. Yet Paul, when he speaks to the Romans concerning their former servitude, says, "What fruit had ye then in those things whereof ye are now ashamed?"<sup>19</sup> Many of the things confessed belong to that category of sins of which Paul says that "it is a shame evento speak of those

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18. Matthew 18:15

19. Romans 6:21

things which are done of them in secret." (Eph.5:12) That this danger of boasting exists is admitted by the Groupers themselves as we see from the following quotation,

We can hardly resist painting our sins in bright colors and making ourselves heroes and heroines of the great spiritual conflicts we have fought, although we may have succumbed to sin in the fight. Pride is as subtle as the serpent; it can enter even our accusations against ourselves, giving us, although we may not acknowledge it, a piquant enjoyment of our confessions." 20

We must also mention the dishonesty connected with sin-sharing. This may be for two reasons, first, to save one's self-respect and secondly, to create an impression. There is evidence that stories have been repeated and changed from time to time. Sins become exaggerated with repetition. The rehashing of sins at the hilarious meetings is certainly not in keeping with the shame and sorrow that goes together with confession in Scripture. Such confessions, instead of making the angels rejoice, are an insult to the majesty of God.

(2) It is psychologically unsound. Psychology is a mental science which studies the normalities and abnormalities of human behavior and aims at a satisfactory adjustment of all individuals to their total environment. If any religious movement would be psychologically sound it will cooperate in attempting to make normal adjustments. Let us listen to some testimonies.

T.T.Shields quotes a doctor as saying,

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20. The Layman with a Notebook, op.cit., p34

There is a certain class of patients I dread to have come to my office. They come for one purpose, to ask me to discuss one subject. I have found there was nothing wrong with them except with their minds. I have studied the psychology of it and have reached the conclusion that they came for a vicarious indulgence of the very things they want to discuss. 21

Dr. Leslie Weatherhead warns of the danger that sharing may become "spiritual nudity or exhibitionism from which we get a moral kick."

Writers of the Oxford Group Movement have also sensed the danger as we see in the following quotation, "As shepherds of souls we are bound to heed the warning of psychology-- that to share may mean for some the stimulation of latent exhibitionist perversion; and to listen, the subtle indulgence of sex curiosity."<sup>22</sup> Thus the very tendencies which they professedly seek to curb are satisfied in disguise.

(3) It is immoral. It is next to impossible to handle filth and to remain undefiled. Just as the Roman priest, by means of his vicious questions often puts worse ideas into the minds of the penitent than he has the skill to remove, so the hawking round of past sins which goes under the name of sharing tends to besmirch the minds of those with whom it is shared. This danger of besmirching lies in the practice of private confession between members, especially when it is remembered that Buchman and his followers compute ninety percent of sins

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21. Shields, T.T., op. cit., p.25

22. Irvine, Wm. C., Ep. cit., p.47

to be those connected with sex.

When the purpose of sharing is to cement the fellowship of the Group and when the sharing of sexual sin is encouraged, we may draw our own conclusions as to its influence on moral life.

Irvine gives a quotation which summarizes pretty well all that needs to be said here.

I honestly believe that there is a subtle attraction about talking about one's sins, which is wholly unhelpful to spiritual growth. The movement is sex-obsessed, and there is a danger of one's horror of immorality being lessened by too much talk on the subject. One's sense of shame gets easily dulled. 23

Let us conclude in saying that the Buchmanite's idea of the spiritual value of their public and private confession is not only over-estimated, but harmful.

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23. Ibid., p.47

## CHAPTER V

### CATHARSIS

The term Catharsis is used to describe the expressive method in psychotherapy. It is a term which is derived from a Greek word meaning "to purify". It indicates the naive theory by which the curative effect of expression was formerly explained. It was held that by confession the individual got certain obnoxious elements of thought out of his system, thereby purifying it. This principle has been recognized and has found expression in such popular statements as "confession is good for the soul", "get it off your chest", and "pump off your dirty water."

Modern science is not in agreement with older explanations that by simply talking an individual excretes or eliminates anything. The analogy which compares speech with the physiological processes by which poisons may be eliminated from the body is considered far-fetched. However, science has not discarded this method of approach but has developed it and uses it widely and finds it helpful. The technique of confession or catharsis has not been discovered by science. The Catholic church has used it long before. But today science has, more than ever, realized the value of its use and practices it in accordance with its convictions. The Protestant church

has had to stand beside and look upon the practice of psychotherapy as a silent rebuke for their own neglect. It appears that science has and will be used to help restore to the Protestant church the use of private confession.

Psychiatry as a science and also as a practice has entered the field only recently. The vary nature of its work has caused it to cross the field of religion, even though it has developed as a science and not as a religion. Psychiatrists are finding their way into the churches, establishing clinics and offering their services. Pastors begin to feel that a certain knowledge of psychiatry is essential and should be considered a qualification for all. Religion and psychiatry are not identical but have things in common. Both are concerned about nursing man back to health, and both make use of confession in their procedure. It is this fact that leads us to give consideration to confession as used by science alongside with Catholicism, Protestantism, and Buchmanism.

#### THE BASIC ASSUMPTION

Psychiatry operates on the basis that individuals seek to make adjustment to their undesirable and shameful experiences by a repression of these experiences into the unconscious, where the repressed memory remains active, and seeks to come out in disguise, thereby causing tension and

eccentricities of behavior, including phobia. Proper adjustment can only be made by bringing the repressed experiences into open daylight and by consciously facing the facts.

As a rule the psychiatrist as a practitioner does not think so much in terms of sin as rebellion against God, or as a transgression of his laws, or as a disturber of the peace between God and man, leaving man to face a righteous God with a guilty conscience. He thinks rather in terms of mental conflicts, emotional complexes, personality maladjustments, and mental disorders. His concern is with mental hygiene rather than with spiritual health.

Repression is considered to be a very unsatisfactory adjustive mechanism, more so than either compensation or day-dreaming. Although the latter two are antisocial, they have at least tension reducing values. Repression gives no opportunity for the reduction of emotional tensions aroused by situations. The individual stays in a tense emotional state. What is even worse, repression is tension producing itself. The individual who represses makes his adjustive difficulties worse instead of remedying them. It is generally agreed that individuals who have learned to repress are likely to suffer throughout their lives from disorders involving fear, because they have no outlet for reducing this type of emotional tension.

The psychotherapeutic approach to the problem of re-

pression is known by various terms, i.e., expressive therapy, confession, the talk cure, and catharsis. It has been learned that catharsis not only frees the individual from those conscious fears and guilt feelings of which he is aware but that, continued, it can bring to light more deeply buried attitudes which also exert their influence on behavior. In the process of telling of his difficulties the patient often makes an adequate emotional response that previously has been inhibited. He openly represents his fears, shames, motives, and attachments. The whole process of expression is therefore tension reducing. In addition the patient is helped to gain an insight into his own difficulties and is led to face the facts. He is thus expected to achieve a normal adjustment to life.

#### THE NATURE OF CATHARSIS

Catharsis has many things in common with confession as practiced either by the Catholics or Protestants.

(1) Firstly, like the Protestant confession, it is entirely on a voluntary basis. The clinician simply lets it be known to the public by various methods of publicity that he is available for counseling and then expects those who are in need of help to come to his office entirely on their own free will. No high pressure is used to bring them in. They are neither threatened by hell, excommunication nor



social ostracism if they fail to come, nor are they persuaded to come by a stirring emotional appeal. They may be persuaded to come by those who have come and have found relief.

(2) Secondly, it is a confession to man. The clinician is one of his own flesh and blood. God does not necessarily come into the picture. The clinician is usually a well-trained, objective and, theoretically, well adjusted man. His training combines both study and experience. Many psychiatrists have their M.D. degree and are professionals. This does not say that there are no 'quacks' in this field of service. Usually their training requires that they themselves first submit to a psycho-analysis before they are permitted to enter the practice.

(3) Furthermore, it is private and confidential. No secrets are divulged. Information that is used for illustration is generally used only by permission and is related without reference to the person concerned or else under a fictitious name. The patient does not speak through a small latticed opening, kneeling on a step, but is comfortably seated in the presence and full view of the clinician.

(4) It is expected that the patient will make a full statement of his difficulties. The demands of the psychiatrist upon the sincerity and frankness of his patient are as a rule no less exacting than those made on the penitent in the early church. Under the guidance of the psychiatrist the patient's resistances are removed and he is helped to discover

important material for the diagnosis of his case which is added to his confession. The possibility is, that in the end he may tell more about himself and his adjustments than he knew at the time when he entered for the interview.

(5) Finally, catharsis may be repeated. In this respect it differs from the teaching and general practice of the church. The reasons for repeated catharsis have been given by Shaffer. He says,

In this procedure, the patient is made to tell his own story not just once but again and again. The clinical interviews may be conducted by having the patient begin his story anew and retell it, adding such new facts as he can recall, but chiefly repeating what he has told before. This method is justified by the need for repetition in extinguishing a conditioned response. Complete extinction is achieved only by continued repetition of the unreinforced stimulus over a period of time. The procedure of repeated catharsis is employed not primarily for the information that it may yield but for the effect that it has on the patient. Each repetition makes the situations that he describes seem more familiar and hence less mysterious, fearsome or hopeless. 1

#### THE TECHNIQUE

The psychiatrist has developed a technique in the counseling process with a high degree of efficiency. Both the priest and the pastor might get some valuable aid from the psychiatrist in this respect. Several things are worthy of our consideration at this point.

(1) Establishing rapport. This ought to be a primary

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1. Shaffer, L.P., Psychology of Adjustment, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1936, p 476

concern, because a high degree of rapport with the practitioner is necessary before the patient will disclose material of which he is ashamed, and before repressed experiences can be reinstated. Rollo May<sup>2</sup> has given some valuable suggestions as to how to proceed. He begins with an emphasis on the importance of being at ease. He states that one cannot over-emphasize the psychological importance of relaxation. Artificial tension is always symptomatic of barriers or dams to psychic activity. Sitting in comfortable seats will be more helpful in this respect than kneeling on a step. A second suggestion is that a counselor must balance sensitivity and robustness in his attitude. He must not permit himself to become 'delicate' or else the counselee will withhold his confidence. The professional manner is another barrier to establishing rapport. The minister must be a man as well as a minister. His whole attitude ought to be that of a fellow human being. If a pastor exhibits the ministerial manner or voice, rapport will be made very difficult.

A final consideration is the ability to use the other person's language. Language is the ordinary channel of empathy. The degree of empathy can often be measured by the ability of one to speak the other's language.

(2) The art of listening. The psychiatrist is not there primarily to give advice but to give ear to what his patient

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<sup>2</sup>May, Rollo, The Art of Counseling, Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1939, p.127

has to say. He has a story to tell and wants to be listened to with interest and understanding. The principle is therefore to induce the patient to make a full statement of his difficulties, to tell his own story with as few interruptions as possible. It is up to him to do the talking in the confession period. He should be allowed to start anywhere and only where necessary should he be interrupted.

(3) Objectivity. In a purely cathartic approach, the psychiatrist maintains an entirely detached and objective attitude. He offers neither reproach nor commendation. Neither must he show any signs of being shocked or offended. Rollo May says,

If the counselor is shocked or offended, he forfeits his right at that moment to be a counselor -- for such a reaction is a sign that his own ego has insinuated itself into the picture. Being offended is, in fact, a way of withdrawing and protecting one's self. He who is shocked by the use of certain sex words, or the description of certain sex practices, cannot qualify as a counselor in these areas... Calm objectivity, which is based on the realization that nothing which is human is foreign or unworthy of understanding, is the attitude for the counselor. 3

(4) Encouraging release. The release of feeling and attitude might almost be considered as a central feature in catharsis. The trouble is usually emotional rather than intellectual. For that reason it is even of greater significance to respond to the feeling which is being expressed than to give sole attention to the intellectual content. To bring

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3. Ibid., p.144

into the open those thoughts and attitudes, those feelings and emotionally charged impulses, which center around the problems and conflicts of the individual is not always easy. Too often the superficial attitudes are expressed while the significant and motivating attitudes remain unexpressed. Consequently special skill must be applied to provide release for the client to bring about an adequate expression of the basic issues in the situation. With the knowledge of the special techniques the skilled clinician may lead the patient to disclose segments of his experiences that would not be revealed to persons in the ordinary walk of life, because of shame or other forms of inhibition.

(5) Guidance. The skilfull psychiatrist seeks to turn his patient's confession to the central problem. Just as the physician cannot always accept the diagnosis of his patients, so the psychiatrist has to sift all the material presented to him and seek to get at the real cause of the trouble. He must perceive the real problem underneath the irrelevant statements and open the way for the patient to talk about the real difficulty. He seeks to get away from the symptoms to the underlying cause.

#### APPRAISAL

##### Good Points.

That catharsis is of curative value can no longer be

doubted. The values of uninhibited expression have long been recognized, especially when made to a trained worker, and we shall content ourselves here with a brief enumeration of some of the more obvious uses.

(1) It helps the patient to gain emotional release from those feelings and attitudes which he has been repressing. The mere fact that he has talked his problem out in the presence of an objective and understanding counselor has made him psychologically healthier. This does not mean that confession to any one will bring the same reward, for there are often repressed and otherwise inhibited parts of the individual's experience that are revealed only under the guidance of an expert. Because of its effect on emotional tension, the expressive method has often been designated as the release method. Emotional release following catharsis is often accompanied by a physical relaxation, which can readily be observed. Once the individual has been freed from such tension-creating feelings it has been made possible for him to view himself and the whole situation more objectively. As Rollo May says, "It has relieved him of some inhibitions; it has made possible a more ready flow from his subconscious to his conscious by flushing the channel; and it has helped him see his problems in the clarifying light of objectivity."<sup>4</sup>

(2) Another constructive effect of catharsis lies in

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4. Ibid., p. 143

the help it offers the patient toward his own integration. By his account of his experiences he is prepared to comprehend them as a whole and to evaluate them more objectively. The emotional factor has been reduced to a minimum and he can talk about his problems in an atmosphere designed to make defensiveness unnecessary. This tends to clarify the adjustments which he is to make and gives him a more clear-cut picture of his problems and difficulties.

But he is also led to a better understanding of himself. Talking freely about himself, he is enabled to behold the various aspects of himself without rationalizations and denial, something which he has not achieved before. His likes and dislikes, his hostile attitudes and his positive affections, his unrecognized conflicts, and his wishful goals have all been given a good airing in broad daylight. They have been exposed to the light of reason. He is enabled to take a frank look at himself and to make a more objective evaluation. Instead of struggling desperately to be what he is not he strives rather to develop what he has recognized as valuable in himself.

(3) Still another value of catharsis is that it may lead to a release of new forces within him. Forces that have been used heretofore to maintain defensive reactions are released for constructive work. Having been able to express his sentiments and feelings to one of whom he has the assurance

that he has understood and accepted him, he is now more competent to meet his life situations with renewed hope. He goes forth with the impression that he has a new lease on life.

#### The Weakness of Catharsis.

We do not want to be led into believing that catharsis or expressive therapy is a cure-all for all of man's ills. Nor do we want to admit that it affects a complete cure. From The Christian's point of view there is indeed much that he can learn from psychiatry and there will be times when he will consider it wise to consult a psychiatrist, but as a rule he will find that the plaster is not wide enough for the wound. Man's trouble is not only physical, nor is it only mental, but it is also spiritual. The three are most frequently inter-related and the healing of body and mind may assist in restoring spiritual health, but in themselves do not constitute the healing. It is especially in this respect that the weakness of catharsis is particularly manifest. Let me direct our attention to a few salient factors.

(1) We find in this whole procedure, to begin with, an inadequate sense of sin. Sin is considered a maladjustment, an internal emotional conflict which affects the individual and society, but it is not considered seriously as an offence against God. The psychiatrist by means of catharsis may explore the problem deep enough to find guilt feelings, a conscience



haunted by fear, but he has no method to disinfect the guilty past. Instead of leading to peace via repentance and forgiveness he often seeks to help his patient to look at his whole trouble as something so common and familiar that it is considered no longer dangerous. As was indicated before, repeated catharsis is to make the situations described so familiar that they lose their mysterious, fearsome, and hopeless nature. The individual talks out his past life, looks at it, and says, "It was really nothing to be afraid of, it is only normal." Thus man is brought to a reconciliation with himself, with his environment and just too often with sin, but not to a reconciliation with God. Attempts have been made by unbelieving psychiatrists to relieve the patient of his feelings of guilt without really showing the way of forgiveness. There are those who look upon religion as the cause rather than the cure of man's maladjustments. It is a sad fact that the treatment of many patients with a marked religious concern has resulted in a complete indifference and even antagonism toward religion. Their's is not the peace of divine forgiveness, but the peace of indifference. Their conscience is not cleansed but seared.

(2) Secondly, there is an inadequate deliverance. Release of emotional tension is not sufficient. It may be enough to satisfy the individual and to keep him from seeking

for something better. But confession itself does not make sin less nor blot it from God's record. Since catharsis leaves God entirely out of the picture and does not figure with the supernatural, therefore reconciliation of the sinner with God does not come into consideration. What is attained is not a peace with God but a peace without God, if such is possible.

We notice also that the patient is put almost entirely upon his own resources. He is helped to help himself. The divine graces are not sufficiently emphasized.

## CHAPTER VI

### ELEMENTS OF PERMANENT VALUE OF CONFESSION

In the preceding chapters we were granted the right of entry as observers into the confessional, the pastor's study, the house party, and also the clinic. We have seen the devout Roman Catholic enter the confessional-box, kneel at the confessor's feet, whisper his confession into the ear of the priest through a latticed opening, and seeking absolution from the holy Father. We have also seen the Protestant crushed by his guilt and unable to find complete rest by a private confession to God alone, wend his weary way to the pastor's study to unload what weighed heavy upon his conscience. He hears no 'I forgive thee', but the words, "If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins," speak comfort to his heart. Then we also saw the life-changer, accompanied by his guest, go to the house-party. A jolly Group had met to witness of their experience and to change the lives of others. We heard our man recount how he had been a drunkard, a gambler, a vile person, till God had changed his life. He was successful, and soon his companion was brought under conviction and began his wash-out, telling the Group everything he had ever done, till he, too, experienced the change. Finally, we witnessed a man

who belonged to no church or else had no confidence in his spiritual superior, with emotions tense to the breaking point, going to the clinic to be relieved of some inner pressure. Seated comfortably after a warm welcome, he was encouraged to open up and give expression to his thoughts and feelings. It seemed to work and he went home with a lighter burden, much relieved.

We have sought to evaluate auricular confession, Protestant confession, the sharing of the Oxford Group, and also the catharsis of psychotherapy. In our judgement each had manifest weaknesses which radically reduced their curative value, but we also found certain elements of strength which appear to us to be of more permanent value in that they meet certain fundamental spiritual needs of man. It are these elements of permanent value that we would like to cull out of all these practices of confession and combine them into one system that will be characterized by a minimum of defects and be able to meet the spiritual needs of man. I expect that such a confession must be in essential agreement with the requirements of God as found in Scripture. We shall therefore find occasion to consult the Bible more frequently in this chapter.

The nature of the material to be presented in this chapter does not lend itself so well to the procedure that was followed in the preceding chapters. We are therefore

impelled to deviate from that procedure and consider our subject in the form of questions of vital importance.

### Does a Natural Human Need for Confession Exist?

We can derive an answer to this question from various sources, such as, the church, science, and Scripture. The consensus of the Christian church is decidedly 'yes'. Both Catholics and Protestants with varying degree emphasize the need of confession for spiritual health. Science has supported the church in its view. And where the church neglected it, science has succeeded largely to make the church more conscious and keenly aware of this neglect. It helped to bring confession back into its own. The church got its teachings originally from the Scriptures and has called upon them for support. Although the Bible has not received the same interpretation from the various Christian groups, as to the practice of confession, yet all agree that the Bible requires confession of sin in connection with divine forgiveness.

Man has to confess because he is so constituted, not only because God requires it. There is a basic urge in fallen man to confess. This urge is due to conscience -- that inner monitor which speaks on behalf of the higher self and of God, and rebukes us for wrong doing. Once it is awakened, it will inflict almost unendurable torment upon the individual who refuses to confess. Inwardly such a man carries the

fear that sometime he will have to confess. Confession in itself is not an invention either of science or of the church used for their own selfish ends, but is a divine requirement answering a fundamental human need.

### What is the Purpose of Confession?

Does it serve only one purpose or more? If it serves more than one purpose, is one primary and the others secondary, or are they all of equal importance? Our study has revealed that the different groups have stressed confession for different purposes. Catholics have used confession as a means of discipline; Protestants have emphasized it as a condition for forgiveness; Buchmanites have regarded it among other things as an effective means of witnessing, while psychiatrists aimed largely though not exclusively at a release of tension. It is evident that confession has been useful along all these lines, though probably in varying degrees. If we add to this what Scripture teaches by precept and example we arrive at the conclusion that the main purpose of confession is to qualify the penitent sinner for divine forgiveness. The other purposes of confession might be considered as secondary. They are really by-products which can be put to good use. Let us review the purposes of confession in this order.

(1) To obtain mercy. This is the highest goal. One may be disciplined or experience reduced tension by means of ~~con-~~

fession, but unless confession leads to an inward peace with God based on divine forgiveness, it fails to accomplish its ultimate purpose and may lead to ultimate disappointment. Penitent and contrite sinners are seldom satisfied with any thing less than the assurance of forgiveness. Their appeal has therefore been an appeal to mercy. Thus Solomon says, "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper, but whose confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy."<sup>1</sup> David also desired God's mercy when he prayed, "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy loving-kindness according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions."<sup>2</sup> David wanted cleansing. In Psalm thirty-two he tells us what he got. "I said, I will confess my transgression unto the Lord; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin."<sup>3</sup> The Publican also sought the protective covering of the divine mercy seat. "God be merciful to me a sinner."<sup>4</sup> His confession was short and to the point, and he got his request, for he went out of the temple justified.

John writes, "If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."<sup>5</sup>

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1. Proverbs 28:13

2. Psalm 51:1

3. Psalm 32: 5

4. Luke 18:13

5. 1 John 1:9

In the foregoing passages of Scripture we have the promise of mercy, the appeal to mercy, and the result of divine mercy, all wonderfully brought to our attention in connection with confession.

(2) A means of discipline. The church has long recognized the value of confession as a discipline. The Church of Rome has made particular use of it for that purpose. An ex-priest has this to say, "The real reason behind the Roman prescription of obligatory confession of sins to a priest, is to keep all Roman Catholics under constant submission and authority of the priests of Rome... Confession in the church of Rome, keeps individuals under control and its leaders can exercise a more effective authority over the penitent."<sup>6</sup> For the priest the confessional has been a source of information which he can use to clamp down on activities subversive to the church.

Many Protestant churches have utilized confession for the same purpose though not in the same way. They have as a rule not used it to ferret out information from their members, but once a serious breach of the church code has been detected, the offender is required to go through the humiliating experience of public confession to the church. This is done partly to maintain the authority of the church in disciplinary matters and also partly for the value of confession as self-

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<sup>6</sup>.Vinet, Lucien, I was a Priest, Canadian Protestant League, 1949. p.59



discipline. Individuals have found confession an efficient means to greater victory.

(3) Confession as witness. If confession is to serve as a means of witnessing to the grace of God, then it must be taken out of the private office and brought out before the public. It must also concern those sins for which forgiveness has already been received. The Groupers would call the sin a dead specimen which is brought out into the open as a proof of what God can do. The relating of such experiences is, however, not limited to the Oxford Group. As was observed earlier, Peter and Paul have both referred to their own past which had been brought under the blood. It is understood that such a confession must not be in the form of boasting if it is to be in any way effective.

We would warn against the danger of an over-emphasis of the value of confession in this respect. To get someone who has been guilty of robbery, drunkenness, rape, debauchery, dishonesty, and every other conceivable sin, but now gloriously saved, into the pulpit and relate to an audience, given to sensationalism, how God saved him from a life of sin is indeed valuable. But it is just as much a witness of God's grace if you and I can make our appearance before a multitude and tell them how God has kept us out of such a life of dissipation and abandonment to sin.

(4) Confession as a release of emotional tension. As

was noted before, this will always be a by-product of a good confession. It will inevitably accompany the forgiveness of sin. David pronounced that man blessed whose sins were forgiven. As long as he kept silence he was tied as with a thousand strings. But once he had made his confession unto God, he experienced that emotional release which he anticipated in his penitential prayer in Psalm fifty-one. The joy of his salvation was restored; his tongue was loosed to teach transgressors God's ways and to show forth His praise.

However this feeling of release can also be experienced without real forgiveness. This is often what happens at the wild and spurious revival meetings. People who are otherwise not ready for a decision are worked up to such a degree by the hyper-emotionalism that when the altar call is extended, they find themselves drawn in with the rest to make a public confession of their intention. This confession need not necessarily be a confession in words. Rising, or raising the hand, or coming forward to the mourner's bench in response to an altar call is a confession in itself and is so understood by the public. Such a confession does not constitute regeneration and the individual himself may not have been brought to an appropriation by faith of Christ as Saviour. Yet he will most likely have experienced a release of emotional tension, which release has often been taken by the individuals as regeneration. Later on when the expected fruit of the new life

is not in evidence we speak of so many backsliders, whereas in reality they have never occupied that forward position from which they could slide back. The disappointment is then great, not only to the evangelist, but to the deceived souls themselves.

In our study of the therapeutic value of confession the distinction between what is primary and what is secondary should always be borne in mind.

#### To Whom must Confession be made?

Various answers have been given to this question in the preceding pages. One says, confess to the priest; the other says, confess to God; a third one emphasizes confession to the Group; and still another advises to go to a psychiatrist. Any confused soul caught between these opposing voices might well become worse confounded. To whom must I finally confess if my confession is to contribute to my spiritual health? Again we would like to assemble here what is of value in the various beliefs and practices.

(1) Confession to God. First and foremost confession must be made to God. This is perfectly Scriptural. When God sent the prophet Nathan to David to reprimand him for his sin, David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord."<sup>7</sup> In his penitential prayer he says, "Against thee, thee only have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight."<sup>8</sup> Likewise

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7. 2 Samuel 12:13

8. Psalm 51:4

in Psalm thirty-two he says, "I acknowledged my sin unto thee... I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord."<sup>9</sup>

In the parable of the lost son, the wayward son returns to his Father with this confession on his lips, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son."<sup>10</sup>

It is also understood from 1 John 1:9 that the apostle John had nothing else in mind but confession unto God when he said, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins." He who only confesses before man really sidetracks the issue. One cannot circumvent God in repentance and still obtain forgiveness. We have an example in Saul. When he could no longer hide his sin and was forced to own his disobedience, he said to Samuel, "I have sinned: for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord, and thy words... Now therefore I pray thee, pardon my sin."<sup>11</sup> He confessed to man only and expected pardon from him and was disappointed in the results. He remained a rejected king.

The one strange prescription of Romanism which puzzles not only Protestants but also Roman Catholics, is the necessity

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9. Psalm 32: 5

10. Luke 15:21

11. 1 Samuel 15: 24.25

of auricular confession to a priest in order to obtain forgiveness of sin and eternal salvation.

(2) Confession to those who have been wronged. This is evidently what was meant by James when he exhorted, "Confess your faults one to another." Jesus also enjoined it in Matthew 5:23,24 when he said, "Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift."

There is also a social aspect to sin insofar as it affects our fellowmen. It is therefore incumbent on us that confession be made also to those of our fellowmen who have been wronged and that restitution follow and accompany confession. Such reconciliation is given priority to worship by Christ himself.

Such confession may be private or public but in any case it involves only those who have been offended either directly or indirectly. Private offences should be privately confessed. There is no particular merit in a public announcement of sins. Jesus has not enjoined his converts to go to the market places, gather a company of people together and pollute their ears by a recitation of their sins. However, where the offence has been public, the confession ought to be as public as the offence. Where a churchmember, through his public offence has brought

shame and disrepute to the body of Christ, he ought to have the courage to make a public confession before the church.

(3) Confession to our fellow men other than those who have been wronged. This may be confession to priest, minister, parent, or friend. Such confession often becomes a necessity for those who find their solitary search for forgiveness unsuccessful and do not arrive at an inner peace. The reason for this may be twofold. In the first place, God seems unreal to many people. They find it difficult to realize that he is present and consequently don't receive the relief and recaptured power which confession brings. In such cases the right man may help to make God real to them and persuade them as to the authority and reality of divine forgiveness. In the second place, there are those who have been so entangled in their sins that a confession to one in whom they have confidence may bring forth counsel that will help them to find their way. It must be remembered that all a friend can do is to put us in touch with God, who alone cleanseth the heart.

It is important to choose the right person as our confessor. It should always be one in whom we have the confidence that he is able to help us to recover spiritually. Bonnell says,

He who reveals his sin to any one but a minister of God is not confessing in the religious meaning of that word. He is telling it either in a social way, as in the instance of a friend, or in a professional way, as to a physician or a lawyer...

Physicians and lawyers play their parts in assisting individuals who are in trouble, but ordinarily they do not

minister to the spiritual needs of the individual or point out the moral significance of so-called secular behavior. Hence he who shows his wounds to others than a spiritual healer receives secular inspection and secular therapy. 12

### Must Confession be General, Specific, or Detailed?

There is a sense in which general confession of sin is a requirement. We have within our churches and communities those who have confessed individual acts of sin and have turned away from them. We must commend them for their effort to turn away from vice, but that in itself is not sufficient. Repentance is not only a socio-ethical, but a religious concept. Repentance is to help us not only to get rid of certain sinful habits but to bring us into fellowship with God. This necessitates that we not only acknowledge that we have done evil but that we are evil. We are sinners before God. The confession of specific acts alone is therefore not enough. Peter confessed in general terms when he said, "Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, o Lord."<sup>13</sup> The Prodigal son said, "Father, I have sinned." Likewise, the publican prayed that God be merciful to him, a sinner. In all three instances there is no enumeration of individual sins but an acknowledgment of their own sinfulness.

On the other hand it is possible for men to be satisfied with a general statement in confession while no intention to

12. Bonnell, J.S., Pastoral Psychiatry, Harper Brothers, 1938, pp. 187-188

13. Luke 5:8

to break with sin is to be found in their minds. This danger is not as real as that of confessing single acts without realizing one's own sinfulness. A confession can be too general and also too much in detail to be most satisfactory. There are times when confession must at least be specific. "Confession which purges the personality of moral impurities must focus attention on specific wrong doing which has created a conflict."<sup>14</sup> When David confessed his sins to God he did not burden him with many details but he at least was specific in his confession. He prayed, "Deliver me from blood-guiltiness o God, thou God of my salvation."<sup>15</sup> He had found a name for his sin and he confessed before God that he was a murderer. There is little value in saying that one has borrowed something when in reality it has been stolen. It is remarkable how people who are known for their descriptive language experience such difficulty in finding the right word when they are to make a confession.

The question now arises, is it necessary to confess in detail? The Roman authorities say yes, but only on the basis of their own logic. The Scriptures nowhere indicate the necessity of detailed confession, neither by precept nor by example. God certainly does not require any penitent to rehearse before him the details of his private life.

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<sup>14</sup>.Stolz, Karl R., Pastoral Psychology, Abingdon-Cokesbury 1940, p.223.

<sup>15</sup>.Psalm 51:14



### What Must Accompany Confession?

A mere admission of a wrong doing does not in itself result in divine forgiveness. The confession of sin is not just an announcement to somebody of wrong doing. Such might be advertising or even boasting. Neither is it merely talking about one's sins to somebody who is equally guilty and who will offer no rebuke whatever. It is more than just telling it in either a social or professional way. Confession, to be genuine must be accompanied by at least five things: (1) Self-criticism, (2) genuine sorrow, (3) forsaking of sin, (4) restitution, and (5) an acceptance of divine forgiveness.

(1) Self-criticism. He who would be helped by means of confession must accept the responsibility for his misdeeds. This is basic. There is no room whatever in confession for an attitude of self-justification. The sinner must own his guilt, he must stand condemned in the court of his own conscience and plead guilty. No excuse for sin is accepted. One of the characteristics of impenitence is the refusal to acknowledge one's guilt. When David pleaded God's mercy he made it very clear that he alone assumed full responsibility for his sin and that he acknowledged the justice of God's judgement upon sin. Thus he says, "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight; that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest and be clear when thou judgest."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>. Psalm 51:4

The repentant thief on the cross also fully accepted the verdict when he said to him who railed on Christ, "Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss."<sup>17</sup>

The facing of failure with candor and the condemnation of oneself are the preconditions of divine forgiveness and the renewal of the will. Unless confession is accompanied by this self-criticism, a spiritual bankruptcy, and a great desire to be helped, no complete cure can be effected.

(2) Genuine sorrow. Sin must not only be intellectually perceived but also emotionally felt. There must be a genuine heart sorrow for having grieved Almighty God. This feeling of sorrow must definitely go beyond a mere fear of the consequences of sin. It ought to be produced by a true evaluation of the nature of sin rather than by the fear of results.

Weatherhead has also warned of a confession that is without true sorrow. He says,

Another danger is that confession should be separated from penitence and be regarded as an escape from sin without deep and true sorrow for it, and determination to have done with it. Confession by itself does not make sin less, nor expunge it from God's record; such a confession is a trading on the eternal, loving patience of God, constituting in itself a sin. Moreover it leads people to suppose that forgiveness has taken place when really nothing has happened. Too glibly we conclude that to confess a fault is to make atonement for it and have done with it."<sup>18</sup>

17. Luke 23: 40.41

18. Weatherhead, L.D., Psychology in the Service of the Soul, Epworth Press, 1929. p 96

The Publican smote upon his breast, as a sign of his sorrow, when he made his confession. David came with a broken and contrite heart. "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise."<sup>19</sup> "For I will declare my iniquity; I will be sorry for my sin."<sup>20</sup> Paul writes to the corinthians, "Now I rejoice, Not that ye were made sorry, but that ye sorrowed to repentance: for ye were made sorry after a godly manner, that ye might receive damage by us in nothing. For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of."<sup>21</sup> It is not necessary that every confession be accompanied by a flood of tears, though tears are a natural expression of sorrow and as such are permissible, but the sorrow for sin must be present.

(3) Forsaking of sins. It is never enough to perceive and abhor sins; they must also be abandoned. "He that confesseth and forsaketh them(sins) shall have mercy." Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon."<sup>22</sup> John the Baptist exhorted those who came to him, confessing their sins, to "Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance."<sup>23</sup>

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19. Psalm 51:17

20. Psalm 38:18

21. 2 Corinthians 7:9.10

22. Isaiah 55:7

23. Matthew 3:8

Insincerity in confession effectively blocks the accomplishment of the fundamental purpose of confession. A person who at heart clings to evil for some fancied advantage does not receive the full value of his confession. The relief which such person derives from confession is the relief which proceeds from the technical and formal compliance with an accepted requirement. A confession which is made apparently only in order to resume sinning with impunity is not only without moral and spiritual value, but actually detrimental to spiritual health.

(4) Restitution. Amendment for wrong doing is a vital part of the experience of confession and forgiveness. The individual who is truly penitent will be willing to make all the restitution that is possible. Zachaeus needed not to be urged to make restitution, for he was ready to do so immediately upon the assurance of salvation. It was the natural thing to do. Restitution will often take the form of an apology to persons who have been offended. It may also mean the restoration of maney's unlawfully gained. A young Christian once remarked to me, "My conversion has cost me money." Often times it will also involve the relinquishing of honors to which one was not entitled.

There are instances, however, where it is beyond the power of the individual to make restitution as in the case of the death of the injured party. In such cases penitent in-

dividuals have often sought to make amends indirectly to society. They have devoted all their energies to the promotion of righteousness and thus makes their lives useful. Restitution still remains as one of the acid tests of genuine confession.

(5) An acceptance of divine forgiveness. God offers to every penitent soul the blessing of his forgiveness. Full contrition on our part brings God's forgiveness to us and it need only be accepted with the hand of faith. This does not mean that all penalties which sin brings upon the individuals will immediately be annulled. Physical and even mental consequences of sin remain, but our attitude to these is altered. They are accepted not as punitive but rather as reformatory in their effects.

However, it is often difficult for man to accept divine forgiveness. Stolz, commenting on this difficulty has the following to say,

They acknowledge that they have erred; they profess that they are highly resolved to lead a better life; they avow faith in a living God; but they are exceedingly reluctant to receive divine pardon. Some are unwilling to forgive themselves and therefore do not believe that God has forgiven them. That it is positively unchristian to reject God's mercy and ~~grace~~ does not occur to them. Others take a morbid pleasure in inflicting upon themselves a kind of religious self-torture- which they mistake for piety. The procedure is spiritual masochism. <sup>in</sup>an experiences difficulty in delivering himself into the hands of a forgiving God. If the church would be true to its founder, it must teach by precept and shining example within its fold that when contrition for, and repudiation of, fault have occurred, refusal of pardon is sheer

secularism." <sup>24</sup>

Must Confession of the same Sins be Repeated?

Repeated confessions, are often made necessary for devout Roman Catholics when they feel that they have not made a 'good' confession. The patient in the clinic is occasionally encouraged to tell his story over and over again, to extinguish the conditioned response. Protestants also find it difficult at times to be satisfied with one confession. Whatever the practice of some individuals, the renewal of confession and contrition for sins abandoned is neither Scripturally nor psychologically sound.

I find no Scripture reference which enjoins us to confess the same sin twice. God seems wholly satisfied with one honest confession. To repeat the same confession to God more than once is to make God a liar for his word tells us that "If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins." Sins that are confessed and forgiven are taken off the record and we should not confess sins to God which he has put out of the way.

However, repeated confessions are also psychologically unsound. Weatherhead states that "we should not confess the same fall twice, lest dwelling on it forms a false auto-suggestion concerning it in the mind, reminding us unduly of its power."<sup>25</sup> Stolz points out that repeated confessions are often

<sup>24</sup>.Stolz, K.R., The Church and Psychotherapy, Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1943, p.136

<sup>25</sup>.Weatherhead, L.D., op. cit., p.96

related to a persistent clinging to an unsavory past which the individual is loathe to forsake. There are moral implications involved. He says,

The repetition of confession of the same deplorable situation may afford unwholesome satisfaction and partake of the nature of boasting. In fact, it can become a form of exhibitionism. The individual may let his imagination transform minor faults into major vices and glory in the enormity of fictitious iniquity. In other words, insincerity, dishonesty, hypocrisy, combined with lip-service to religion, prompt such corrupting attitudes and practices. 26

The advice of Scripture and psychology is that sins which are forgiven should also be forgotten. This brings us to our final question: can sins be forgotten?

#### Can Sins be Forgotten?

Forgetting of sin is intimately linked up with forgiveness of sin. We feel certain that unless sins are forgiven they cannot truly be forgotten. They may be forgotten for a time but they will come up again in memory to torment the soul. They may be repressed into the subconscious, but from there also they will come up in disguise. Man is not allowed to forget what God remembers. And God remembers every unforgiven sin. To answer our question we must therefore ask another: What does God do with the sins he has forgiven?

We will let Scripture answer.

"I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions

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26. Stolz, K.R., The Church and Psychotherapy, Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1943, p.137

for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins." 27

"Behold, for peace I had great bitterness: but thou hast in love to my soul delivered it from the pit of corruption: for thou hast cast all my sins behind thy back."<sup>28</sup>

"...I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."<sup>29</sup>

"...Thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea."<sup>30</sup>

"As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us."<sup>31</sup> North and South meet at the poles, but east and west are forever separated. One may travel east forever and never come to the point where one will start going west. Thus far God has removed our sins from us.

Now if God does not remember our sins, what reasons are there that we should continually rehash them? It is a great mistake to renew repentance for sins that have been forgiven and forsaken. A man, having been raised from the dead, has no right to come back and sit down on his old gravestone. A continual brooding over the past and talking

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27. Isaiah 43:25

28. Isaiah 38:17

29. Jeremiah 31:34

30. Micha 7:19

31. Psalm 103:12



to others about its failures, are practices damaging to the spiritual life. Superfluous repining just makes the trespass the focal point of attention and induces injurious tension. We must learn to look away from the past. Paul, rather than clinging to the past, exclaims, "Not that I have already obtained, or am already made perfect: but I press on, if so be that I may lay hold on that for which also I was laid hold on by Jesus Christ."<sup>32</sup> Morbid introspection is not an indication of piety but of perfidity. Christ exhorted the woman whose sin he had forgiven to "go in peace." Peace and not anxiety is the result of sins confessed and forgiven.

"Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven  
Whose sin is covered.

Blessed is the man to whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity,  
And in whose spirit there is no guile."<sup>33</sup>

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32. Philippians 3:12

33. Psalm 32:1-2

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SOME of these Books  
are an INSULT TO  
intelligence.

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