

The Confessing Church

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the first Sunday after Easter, April 7, 1991. Scripture Lessons: Acts 4:32-35; Psalm 133; 1 John 1:1-2:2; John 20:19-31.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

I was talking to a man on the streets of Oxford. I don't know how it came up but he said, "You Presbyterians are so high and mighty. You think you're so good and holy. But let me tell you this. I know some of the fine upstanding members of your church and they're no better than people who don't go to church. They swear, they get drunk, they lie, they tell dirty jokes, they're just as mean and hateful as us people who don't go to church."

What do you say in response to such a comment? Do we who go to church think we're better than people who don't go to church? That's what a lot of people think.

Two hundred years ago there was a theological controversy in the Church of Scotland. As you may know, the Church of Scotland is Presbyterian. It was in the Presbytery of Auchterarder. It was a controversy over what a person had to do in order to become a Christian. Some said, "You must first turn from all sin in your life before you come to Christ for salvation." Others in the Presbytery loudly protested. They said, "No! You're undermining the grace of God. You're undermining the Good News of the Gospel. There's nothing a person should do before coming to Christ for salvation. You must not try first to get rid of your sins. You must not first try to straighten out your life. You must not first wait to receive a religious experience. You should come as you are to Christ, with all your sins and faults. It's the job of Christ to take away our sins. That's not our job."

I This was the position that was finally adopted by the Presbytery and by the Church of Scotland. A Christian is not someone who claims to have no sin. "If anyone says they have no sin they are a liar and the truth is not in them. But if we confess our sin, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

The Church of Jesus Christ is a confessing church. It's the fellowship of people who confess they're sinners. We don't claim to be without sin. We're a fellowship of people who've come out of the darkness where our sins are hidden from ourselves and into the light where all our sins are exposed in God's presence.

Maybe you've never thought of it this way but Church members should never have a 'holier-than-thou' attitude. We can have that kind of attitude only if we're completely oblivious to what we do and say in the worship service. Simply coming to church and being a member is a confession of sin and a confession of our need of Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. Anyone who thinks he or she doesn't need a Savior should find out differently, very quickly, in the church.

You can't join the church apart from a confession of sin. You must be baptized to join the church and merely being baptized is a confession of sin. The water of baptism reminds us that, just as water washes us physically, God cleanses us from the defilement of our sin. And when you eat the Bread and Drink the Cup of the Sacrament of Holy Communion you confess before everybody that you're a sinner who needs Jesus. Merely participating in the worship service involves a confession of sin. Near the beginning of the worship service we confess our sin. It reminds us that we're here, not because we think we're better than those who aren't here, but because we

need forgiveness. And when we confess our sins, God forgives us our sins and he cleanses us from all unrighteousness.

II But let's be sure what that we understand what it means to confess our sins. Confessing our sin isn't the same as talking about our sins. Our society is good at talking about our sins. It used to be that, back in Victorian times, people didn't talk about their sins. Today, everybody talks about their sins. Nearly every week there's a new book written by some movie star in which they talk about their sins. Talking about our sins isn't confessing our sins.

And confessing our sin isn't the same as explaining away our sins. I like to explain away my sins. "If you only knew the disadvantages of my childhood, if you only knew how uncontrollable my passions are, you'd understand the crazy, hurtful things I do." Confessing our sin isn't the same as explaining away our sins.

Well, if confessing our sins isn't the same thing as talking about our sins or explaining away our sins, what does it mean to confess our sins? Lewis Smedes, a Reformed Minister, lists three ingredients that he believes are necessary for a true confession of sins. At the risk of oversimplification, just listen to what he says about what true confessions involve.

First, confession is an acknowledgment of our responsibility. Smedes, however, writes, "as I get older and see more tragedy, I grow more convinced that people are often more sinned against than sinning, more often victims than culprits. We're victims of many forces, and no one can tell us just how much our own wills are responsible for what we decide to do. I do not know how much you can blame on the anemic genes and chromosomes you inherited, or on the fouled-up psychic training they foisted on you in your childhood. But I am sure of this. Somewhere within

the personal dynamics of the wrong you do, somewhere inside the working of your mind and will, you make a choice for which only you can give an answer."

When I confess my sins, then, I'm saying, "I chose, Lord. I acted. I failed to act. I'm accountable. It's not my father, it's not my mother, it's not my wife or husband, or children... It's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer." I haven't really confessed unless I accept responsibility for the wrong I do, or the good I fail to do, to my neighbor and to God.

Second, Smedes writes that confession is a shared pain. When I truly confess my sins to God or my neighbor I'm saying, "The hurt I caused you, now hurts me also. I feel the pain I inflicted on you. I wounded you, and now I'm wounded by the cuts that I sliced into your life. I share your pain." A painless confession is a sham and a contradiction.

Third, Smedes writes that confession is a gamble on grace. I remember very well a young couple in Buffalo, New York. Two weeks before their marriage the bride-to-be gambled away her happiness. She risked everything by telling him about a tragic mistake in her past relationship with another man. She wanted to be honest. She wanted to be open. She gambled on his love, and lost. Although they went through with the wedding it never worked because he had no grace powerful enough to forgive. Confession is a gamble on grace.

But when we gamble on God's grace we can't lose. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins..." God can be counted on to forgive. "If we confess, God forgives." This is the way God is. He forgives those who confess their sins. The Bible doesn't say that if we do not confess we won't be forgiven. It only says that if we *do* confess we most surely shall be forgiven.

Sometimes members of the church fall into public sin and the entire community hears about. "Did you hear about so and so... did you hear what she did... do you know what he's doing?" And then those outside the church wonder how it can be that these public sinners can continue to be members of the Church. What they don't understand is that church members shouldn't be surprised by sin; we should be saddened by it, but we shouldn't be surprised. We ~~we~~ shouldn't be shocked by it because we know its reality and power. So when a person falls terribly, the church is able to open its arms to them and announce the forgiveness that's possible through what Jesus did on the cross.

If you're a member of this church... remember... just by participating in this service, by being baptized, by receiving Holy Communion you have made a public confession of your sin and your need for Christ.

And if you're not a member of the church... if you, in fact, have kept yourself at arm's length from the church, don't stay away. The church is the place where confessing sinners go to celebrate their forgiveness. Come out the darkness and come into the light of God's love and forgiveness and grace.

Lewis B. Smedes, *How Can It Be All Right When Everything Is All Wrong*, chapter 3.
Dr. Joel Nederhood, *The Confessing Church*, 10-17-82