The Theology and Practice of Confession of Sin in the New Testament and the Most Primitive Churches

by

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Chapter One

Introduction

With the modern recovery of the spiritual disciplines in the Evangelical church, confession of sin, which has never completely left the life of the Catholic tradition, has again become a topic of interest. This seems to be focused on the act of private confession of sin, a recovery of some aspects of the practice of private priestly auricular confession, though shorn of Tridentine theology of merit and Purgatory. While certainly the practice of private confession has deep historical roots and many testify to its value, it does seem focused on the individual as an individual, and not as an individual in community. A survey of the New Testament witness and the most primitive church texts reveals a strong testimony to public confession of sin. Indeed, public confession of sin, carefully considered in its first century context, seems intrinsic to Christian initial and continuing conversion. My thesis is: Confession of sin, as a public act of faith, was intrinsic to initial conversion in the apostolic and sub-apostolic church, and the practice of confession of sin was also intrinsic to the continuing conversion of the Christian life.

In the language and paradigm of Robert Hughes, confession of faith was intrinsic to conversion to Christ, confession of sin was intrinsic to conversion from sin, and both together were evidence of conversion by the Holy Spirit.\(^1\) The confession of sin belongs to, and is an expression of, the very nature of conversion. While deep reflection on theology is generally lacking in the apostolic and most primitive churches (AD 30-100),

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and while this lack of reflection extends to spiritual and liturgical practices, the texts bear 
witness to the intrinsic nature of confession of sin to both conversions (initial and 
continuing). This thesis will examine the practice and teaching regarding confession of 
sin in the apostolic and most primitive churches, as well as the background to the practice 
which would inform their presuppositions.

This thesis will examine the penitential practices and theology of Second Temple 
Judaism as background, exegete several New Testament and primitive church passages 
(Acts 19:18-19; 1 John 1:9; James 5:16; 1 Clement 51-52; Didache 4:14, 14:1), discuss 
the earliest understanding and practice of confession of sin, and briefly make some 
observations and applications for the modern church.

The New Testament passages have been chosen because they represent diverse 
Christian communities (in at least geography, culture and theological emphasis), yet they 
seem, in their admitted diversity, to bear witness to a common practice of confession of 
sin. The primitive church texts have been chosen because they also represent very diverse 
communities, yet they too seem to bear witness to the continuation of the New Testament 
practice in the wider array of earliest communities. I am not asserting or assuming a 
greater level of unity in diverse communities than is commonly recognized, but noting a 
common practice in the diverse communities and making a theologically constructive 
proposal regarding communal spiritual formation based on the practices of the earliest 
Christian communities.

My admittedly non-exhaustive survey of this subject has revealed a paucity of 
material dealing directly with the subject matter that I am considering. For example, there
are many studies on the apostolic/primitive churches (AD 30-325), but relatively few
deal directly with the topic of confession of sin. The literature does deal extensively with
“confession,” but it is mostly concerned with early Christian symbols and doctrine. Also,
the studies which do deal with confession of sin have mostly done so with private priestly
auricular confession in view and are apologetical for or against the practice, though this
has been changing in the last fifty years. While I will deal briefly with the history of
confession of sin in earlier church history, I will focus specifically on the practices of the
apostolic and most primitive churches and take a snapshot there, so to speak.

Methodologically, I will deal with primitive confession of sin in light of the
Jewish context in which it took place. Taking the Hebrew Scriptures (by which I mean
the Scriptures of the Jewish people in the first century), intertestamental literature, and
what we can know or reasonably assume about Second Temple Judaism, I will ask two
questions: 1) What is the background of the practice of confession which would frame the
expectations of Christian converts about the praxis of religion? and, 2) What is the
theology of confession of sin in the Old Testament, intertestamental literature and Second
Temple Judaic practice which would inform us of the meaning of the practices described
in the apostolic and primitive churches? Since we have neither extensive theological
reflection nor descriptions of the practice of confession of sin from this period, we are
dependent upon Jewish material to place the texts from the primitive churches in context.

In the narrower context of the passages themselves, I will examine the
representative passages with some level of exegetical care. Since the material is
somewhat sparse, the danger of being led astray is great if interpretation of the passages
is not done with care. The greater the volume of material, the more the material exercises a self-correcting influence over interpretation. The sparser the material, the more the conclusions are open to error by means of the carelessness of the interpreter. I plan briefly to subject the passages in view to rhetorical, textual and linguistic analysis.

**The Importance of the Topic**

Several considerations commend this topic for greater attention, to which I hope to make a very small contribution. First, the question of spiritual formation has become prominent in the modern Christian church in a way which has gone beyond the confines of the Roman and Orthodox (and to some extent, Anglican) communions, and become prominent throughout Christian traditions, both liberal and conservative, Arminian and Reformed, Charismatic and cessationist. Richard Foster notes, in his ground-breaking (in the Evangelical world) book, *Celebration of Discipline*, that he could not find a single book written on the subject of Christian fasting from 1861 to 1954.² A quick search on Amazon reveals over a thousand books on the topic currently in print. There are peer reviewed journals dealing with spiritual formation, training programs for spiritual directors and post-graduate programs in spiritual theology. Spiritual formation is a concern of the larger church.

Second, in my own background as a former addictions counselor I have seen what many Christians also recognize: that Christianity must be about more than a list of things we should believe. The Bible and Christian tradition say quite a bit about how people

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change and are set free from sin and brokenness. The Gospel offers freedom and too few find it. Confession of sin is one of the topics that Scripture and tradition bear witness to as a path to change.

Third, while wonderful work has been done in the area of “personal disciplines” and “spiritual direction,” these are individual and individualistic practices. The Gospel offers transformation within a community (and AA demonstrates this reality). There seems to be far less work done on thinking through spiritual formation within the community, especially within the setting of public worship. I am, of course, aware that the Puritans did work in this area and that liturgical scholars have addressed this throughout the history of the church; however, the work is not as prominent within the life and ministry of the church as is the recent work on spiritual disciplines. This is even more true of my own Evangelical tradition than others. More work needs to be done on the Scriptural teaching concerning communal spiritual formation.

Fourth, while much work has been done on the subject of confession, it is not directed at the practice of confession in the apostolic and most primitive churches. Much work has been done on “confessions” as early Christian symbols; far less work has been done on confession of sin in the earliest communities. Where study has been done on confession of sin, most of it takes private, sacerdotal auricular confession and looks for justification or antecedents in the ancient Church. This thesis will deal with the practice of confession of sin in the apostolic and most primitive churches (AD 30-100) and exegete, in as much as possible from select passages, what the practice was in these communities and what they believed about what they were doing.
Fifth, while the Evangelical and Reformed tradition does not reject tradition out of hand, far greater weight is given to grammatical-historical exegesis of biblical texts. There is a very high view of biblical authority which consequently means that exegesis must demonstrate precedent or justification for practice, especially within public worship. This is known as the “regulative principle of worship.” In order for the public confession of sin to reassume a place in worship in this tradition, exegetical study must be done explicating the practice and placing it within a Reformed theological tradition.

I hope this study will be a small contribution to a neglected area of studies within biblical/patristical studies and spiritual theology. Perhaps it will help lay some groundwork for communal spiritual practice, especially within the Reformed and Evangelical community to which I belong.
Chapter Two
The Background of Second Temple Judaism

In considering Old Testament beliefs and practices in regards to the confession of sin, I will focus upon Second Temple Judaism as the nearest precursor for primitive Christianity. This does not mean all pre-Exilic material will be excluded from consideration, but that all Old Testament and intertestamental texts will be considered in the context of Second Temple Judaism. I will not attempt to date the texts, but simply read them from the context of Judaism immediately prior to, or even contemporary with, primitive Christianity.

The passages chosen are representative of Second Temple penitential literature and practice, though not exhaustive. As a non-specialist in the field, I have allowed the work of Werline and Boda, current leading scholars in the study of penitential prayer in Second Temple Judaism, to guide the choice of passages.\(^3\) Where the secondary literature has focused on more passages than seems appropriate for this thesis, I have attempted to chose the passages most representative of the subject and germane to the topic at hand. These passages will not be given any kind of exhaustive exegetical treatment; rather I will rely heavily on current scholarship to get somewhat of a bird's-eye view.

The passages I will examine are Leviticus 16:20-22 and 26:40-45; Deuteronomy 30:1-10; 1 Kings 8:22-61; Ezra 9-10; Psalms 32:1-5 and 51; Tobit 3:1-6; the Prayer of Azariah; the Words of the Luminaries (4Q504; 4Q506); the Damascus Document (4QD);

and the Communal Confession (4Q393). The passages could be divided into communal/national confessions and individual confessions (sins of the community versus sins of the person), and perhaps specific and general confessions (sins versus sinfulness). However, it will be most helpful to look at them in the order just given, which is roughly chronological. Minor disagreements concerning the dating of some of these passages will not effect the understanding of the evidence as it relates to the argument at hand. I will note some particulars from each passage in relationship to: a) what is happening or being taught or modeled in the passage in regards to confession of sin; b) a theology of sin and remission of sin; c) how the theology implicit or explicit in the passage meets with the practice which is taught or modeled.

Old Testament Background

Leviticus 16:20-22

In this passage, Aaron the priest is instructed “not to come just at any time into the sanctuary,” “or he will die” (16:2). Instead, he must sacrifice a “young bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering” (16:3). After appropriately clothing and bathing himself (16:4), he casts lots on two goats. By this means he determines which goat will be “for the Lord” (the burnt offering) and which goat will be “for Azazel” (the scapegoat) (16:8). Aaron makes the offerings and places the blood on the altar, thereby making atonement for the sins of the people of Israel (16:16). After doing this, he moves to another type of rite involving a different, or complementary, method of atonement.

Aaron lays his hands on the head of the live goat and confesses “over it all the
iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat” (16:21). The goat is then sent away, symbolically bearing “on itself all their iniquities to a barren region” (16:22). This action removes their sin by transferring it to a substitute and is accomplished by the priest as representative of the people.

There are three main elements which comprise this rite. First, the priest lays his hands upon the goat as an action which will transfer the sin of the people to the goat. Second, the priest speaks as a representative of the people and confesses their specific sins, transgressions and iniquities. Third, the goat is sent out into the wilderness, carrying the sins of the people away so that the impurity of their sin is removed from the camp of Israel and atonement is thereby made with God.

The theology which seems to be behind this passage also has three main elements. First, the priest is functioning as a representative of the people. As high priest, appointed by God and anointed to the task, he speaks for the people to God and acts on their behalf.\(^4\) Second, the speech-action on their behalf is the confession of sin whereby their sin will be removed. This seems plainly to be a speech-act rite\(^5\) whereby the confession of specific sins is the means by which the sin is removed.\(^6\) It is important to note three things in this: a) the confession of sin seems very specific, even exhaustive; b) there is no set liturgical form given for the confession itself; it is assumed that the priest will simply know how to do this *ex tempore*; “the priestly task...is clearly unconcerned with the

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\(^5\) Hogewoed, 1:70.

\(^6\) As such it is an “illocutionary act,” Hogewoed, 1:73.
wording of the confession”;\(^7\) c) the act is verbal – only what is said is accomplished.\(^8\)

Third, the sin of the people (or its guilt), is able to be transferred to a substitute. This is true of the sacrificial system as well, but is worth noting. In this rite the sin of the people can be transferred to a substitute, who will bear it away, but only after a specific confession of sins. This requirement, as Boda notes, is tied to intentional sin, as opposed to unintentional uncleanness.\(^9\) For unintentional uncleanness, sacrifice alone is enough, but for intentional sins, “there is the added requirement that remorse be verbalized; the sin must be articulated and responsibility assumed.”\(^10\) This seems to be a process by which an “intentional” sin is converted to an “unintentional” sin. Perhaps the confession and repentance is the way by which the person or community changes and declares a new “intention.” Therefore, what was intentional before is no longer the intention.\(^11\)

**Leviticus 26:40-45**

In this passage, the Lord is speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai (25:1) and giving Moses a summary of the Law by which the Lord expects Israel to live. After a Deuteronomic-styled recitation of case law in chapter 25, chapter 26 begins with blessings and curses which also find a parallel in Deuteronomy 28 and 29. The curses (as in Deuteronomy) are far more extensive than the blessings, which gives the impression that the Lord never expected them to be able to obey. However, if they do sin, then there is a provision made for the people: “if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their

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\(^7\) Hogewood, 1:75.

\(^8\) Hogewood, 1:74.


ancestors” (26:40); “if then their uncircumcised heart is humbled and then they make amends for their iniquity” (26:41); “I will remember in their favor the covenant” (26:45). Confession and repentance will bring relief to Israel from the curses of the covenant.

This time the injunction is more general. Leviticus 16 is set on the Day of Atonement, this is instruction for an event at an unspecified time. There is no priest mentioned (though none excluded either). Unlike Leviticus 16, there is no mention of sacrifice at all. They must confess their sins and the sins of their ancestors in a like exhaustive fashion as before. Added to the spoken act of confession is the note that they must have “humbled” hearts and “make amends for their iniquity” (26:41).

It seems from this passage and its context the Lord expects his people to sin and is making provision for that sin, even while also intending to punish their disobedience. In this passage, the confession of sin (again verbal; a speech-act) is in itself enough to remove the sin of the people, provided their hearts are “humbled” and they make “amends.” The removal of the sin will also bring a removal of the discipline of the Lord. Neither a priest or a sacrifice is necessary for the atonement of their sins. The lack of sacrifice, which is modeled in other prayers as well, is most likely linked to the conditions of the Exile (during which Temple sacrifice is impossible), “under the conditions of exile, confession and humbling before God could be accepted for atonement with sacrifice.” It should not be forgotten that in light of Leviticus 16, et. al., sacrifice alone could never deal with deliberate sin.

12 I will not be dealing with the interesting addition of the sins of the ancestors in this thesis.
13 Boda notes that “it is possible that the sacrifice is equated here with their suffering in exile or that there was an expectation that once they were returned to the land they would sacrifice.” Seeking, 1:31.
The addition of the humbled heart and amends seems to indicate a theology of conversion underneath the rite of confession. The confession of sins is not functioning as “magical words,” but as a rite flowing from changed hearts. Their hearts were “uncircumcised” and now they are presumably “circumcised” and therefore their behavior is changed.

Deuteronomy 30:1-10

This passage, which is much like Leviticus 26, deals with the repentance of Israel after the Exile. The Israelites have abandoned the covenant of the Lord (29:25) serving other gods (29:26), and so God was angry with them and brought upon them all of his threatened curses (29:27), and finally “cast them into another land” (29:28). Again, it is emphasized that he did not leave them without remedy.

In this passage, confession of sin is not mentioned, but several important things are. Their relationship with the Lord will be restored if they “return” (šāḇû) to him. The restoration of their relationship, this returning (we could say “repentance” just as well) must be a return of “heart” and “soul” to the Lord (30:2). The heart and soul repentance reflects a heart change that results in obedience. “Then you shall again obey the Lord, observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today” (30:8).

The heart change, however, is not accomplished by the effort of the people alone, but by the work of the Lord, who will “circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendents” (30:6). The repentance of the people must be a repentance bringing obedience, a result of a “heart circumcision” accomplished by the Lord himself. Here the

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15 Hogewood, Seeking, 2006, 1:73.
16 This will become even clearer in Deuteronomy 30.
17 Hogewood notes that “to confess sin carries the force to change behavior...” Seeking, 1:74.
responsibility to repent and the sovereign divine enabling of repentance is mysteriously mingled together, a theme that shows up in the New Testament as well.\footnote{While two streams of theology, Calvinism and Arminianism, seek to resolve this mystery, I will not do so here.}

Sacrifice has almost faded from view in Deuteronomy, as is common in much of the later material as well. Again we see that prayer has become “a way to deal with sin in the absence of sacrifice.”\footnote{Rodney Alan Werline, Penitential Prayer in Second Temple Judaism: The Development of a Religious Institution. Series: Early Judaism and its Literature, Number 13, John C. Reeves (ed.). (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 194.} At a time of “national crisis,” when exile kept Israel from the ministry of the Temple and its sacrifice, Israel was told, not to set up an altar, but simply to “return,” or repent, to the Lord.\footnote{Werline, Penitential Prayer, 194.}

\textbf{1 Kings 8:22-61, Ezra 9-10}

These two passages demonstrate the theology and practice of repentance and confession in dealing with sin in the twin streams of the Priestly (Leviticus 16 and 26) and Deuteronomic (Deuteronomy 30) tradition. The penitential practices of Exilic and Post-Exilic Judaism within the canonical Old Testament reveal that the theology and praxis of the aforementioned passages is not peculiar, but a well-established tradition in Israel.

I Kings 8:22-61 is the most developed of the passages. Solomon has completed the Temple and is presiding over its dedication. In the chiastic middle of the pericope of Temple dedication, Solomon utters a prayer which functionally addresses the Exilic and post-Exilic community. It will be enough to note here that Solomon's prayer combines both streams of penitential tradition. In accordance with the Levitical material, Solomon
is praying on behalf of his people (8:28-30) and emphasizing the need to confess specific sins (8:47). In accordance with the Deuteronomistic material, Solomon emphasizes heart repentance (8:38, 39, 48), the need for obedience to the Lord (8:35, 48) and the role of the Lord in working a change in the hearts of his people (8:57, 58). In keeping with clear teaching in both the Levitical and Deuteronomistic passages, repentance and confession of sin will bring relief from the difficult circumstances which the Lord has brought upon his people because of their sin (8:33-40; 44-45; 46-50).

In Ezra 9-10, Ezra the priest-scribe confesses the sins of the people of Israel in that they have violated the covenant by marrying their daughters off to people outside of the covenant community (9:10-14). Ezra then weeps and throws “himself down before the house of God” along with “a very great assembly of men, women and children” who “also wept bitterly” (10:1). Shecaniah speaks to Ezra and suggests that the people should amend their sin by sending the foreign wives and children away (10:3). Ezra decides then to issue a proclamation commanding that “all the returned exiles” “assemble at Jerusalem” or experience forfeiture of property and banishment “from the congregation of the exiles” (10:8). The people then argue that because of the weather, the number of exiles and the time involved that their officials should be able to make confession on their behalf and only the personally guilty will assemble, and then only by schedule with their own elders and leaders (10:12-14). The “fierce wrath” of God will thereby be “averted.” Ezra seemingly consents to the plan and the rest of the chapter is a list of of the men who took foreign wives.

In this passage the wrath of God has come upon the returned exiles because they
have broken covenant with God by taking foreign wives and thus polluted the land.\textsuperscript{21}

Since they have only recently returned from an exile which was occasioned by their own sin, this is especially egregious, adding ingratitude to covenant breaking.\textsuperscript{22} Ezra leads in the recognition and repentance from sin, but it is important that the people themselves share in both the remorse for sin and repentance from it. It is important that the specific sins of the community are enumerated.\textsuperscript{23} Again, sacrifice is missing from the equation and a prayer of confession, flowing from a contrite heart and leading to amends is what is required to escape the “fierce wrath of God.” Since the prayers and amends are all explicitly public, it would strongly suggest that the expectation for repentance\textsuperscript{24} which results in atonement must be sincere, verbal, personal, specific and obedient. And again, the prayers seem to be non-liturgical.\textsuperscript{25}

**Psalm 32:1-5**

Psalm 32, which is attributed to David, and certainly taken as such in the first century, describes the experience of having sinned and then “kept silence” (32:3), which seems contextually to mean, “didn't confess.” In language probably meant to describe conditions of spirit, emotions and body, the Psalmist describes his body wasting away and his strength being dried up. When he confesses “his transgressions to the Lord” (32:5), then he is “forgiven” and his “sin is covered” (32:1, 5).

Again we see the discipline of the Lord coming because of (presumably

\textsuperscript{21} Boda, *Sin*, 477.
\textsuperscript{22} Boda notes the theology of sin here is “intergenerational and cumulative.” *Sin*, 476.
\textsuperscript{23} Boda, *Sin*, 477.
\textsuperscript{24} While the term (שתב) is not used in Ezra 9-10, it is used in Nehemiah (1:9; 9:26, 29, 35) and is implicit in the narrative arc of the account. See Hogewood, 76.
\textsuperscript{25} Hogewood, 76.
intentional) sin and forgiveness (which entails removal of discipline) coming when the
psalmist acknowledges and confesses his sin (32:5). It is likely that this psalm would be
interpreted as a public confession because a) Psalms were used in corporate worship and
b) David's own sin and story would be linked to this psalm so that it would be read as
containing an implicit confession of sin. Since the psalm was intended for the whole
community, the confession would seem public.

**Psalm 51**

This psalm, similar in many ways to Psalm 32, has additional elements. This
Psalm is also attributed to David, but has the added ascription linking it to the
confrontation of Nathan concerning his sin with Bathsheba. This Psalm too would have
been read as a public and specific repentance, with the explicit ascription of the Psalm to
what Israelites read as an actual account of his sins.

The Psalmist acknowledges his sin before God and, in fact, writes that his sin is
against God and God alone (51:4). He explicitly agrees with the judgement of God
against his sin (a common feature in penitential literature but only implicit in Psalm 32).
He also affirms that he has been a sinner since conception (51:5). He does not list his
sins, but narratively he does not have to because the reader/hearer/congregant will
assume not only the sins of David with Bathsheba, but also that David is expecting that
everyone will assume his sins. It is, in effect, a particular confession of sin.

The Psalm affirms that God “desires truth” not only in outward observance, but
“in the inward being.” He asks God to teach him wisdom in his “secret heart,” a reference
to heart transformation (called *circumcision* in Deuteronomy) (51:5). His request of God
seems to include transformation of his heart, forgiveness of guilt, removal of discipline, and an assurance of God's (mystical?) presence. He then adds something else not present in Psalm 32, the rationale that by restoring him, God will enable him to worship (51:15) and use him to be God's instrument in bringing other sinners to repentance (51:13).

The Psalm closes with an explicit affirmation that sacrifices are only acceptable to the Lord when they are motivated by “a broken and contrite heart” (51:16-17). In fact, it seems that a “broken spirit” can function as an “acceptable” sacrifice all by itself.

These two psalms take the two deep streams of Israelite penitential practice and theology, the Deuteronomic and Levitical, which were already combined in the communal prayers of Solomon, Daniel and Ezra, and gives them as a pattern for individual repentance.

In Psalm 51, as throughout the Old Testament, sin brings God's judgement and sacrifice will not suffice to remove the consequences for sin. There must be a sincere confession of sin and a real repentance. Sacrifice will not atone for these intentional sins, but public, specific prayer and repentance seems sufficient in itself to accomplish the atonement. In addition, there is an explicit affirmation that repentance from sin cannot be accomplished without a cleansed heart, a new spirit, or in the language of Deuteronomy, a heart circumcision which only can be accomplished by God himself. So, in effect, this penitential practice of confession, both communal and personal, is the practice by which Israelites are to experience forgiveness of sins, a renewed relationship with God, and experience inner transformation by God himself.

This is the understanding of the different streams of Old Testament material on
penitential devotion in first century Judaism. Whether or not these practices carried forth and represent the understanding and practice of intertestamental and first century Judaism remains to be seen. So now the later passages will be examined.

**Intertestamental Judaism**

**Tobit 3:1-6**

The prayer of Tobit contains many of the themes which are present in the abovementioned Old Testament passages. He asks for forgiveness both for intentional and unintentional sins (3:3). There is no sacrifice. There is a recognition of the sins of his ancestors and a linking of their sin to the punishment of the Exile. Tobit takes that paradigm and applies it to himself saying that God has exacted “penalty from me for my sins” (3:6). While the prayer ends on a pessimistic note, asking that God “command my spirit to be taken from me” (3:6), even this is asking a boon from God on the basis of God's forgiveness. A sincere prayer of confession to God is the means by which Tobit expects to be forgiven.

Tobit affirms the forgiveness of sins by means of confession, rather than sacrifice. This confession is not only communal/national, but also part of the life of this character in the Persian exile. While the resultant transformation is not present in the prayer, the prayer exemplifies heartfelt repentance as a pathway to forgiveness.

**Prayer of Azariah**

While Tobit functions as an example of a personal confession of sin in line with the Old Testament material, the Prayer of Azariah (addition to Daniel) functions as an example of corporate confession of sin. It is set in the fiery furnace of Daniel's three
friends. Azariah stands in the furnace and utters the prayer in 22 verses inserted after Daniel 3:23.

Azariah affirms God's righteousness and acknowledges that their current condition is the result of their sins (4-5). He confesses the sin of Israel and enumerates their suffering (9). He calls on God for mercy on the basis of God's “name's sake” and the promise God made to Abraham, Isaac and Israel (12-13). Azariah emphasizes their condition and points out that Israel has in their day “no ruler, or prophet, or leader, no burnt offering, or sacrifice, or oblation, or incense, no place to make an offering before you and to find mercy” (15). Then Azariah makes absolutely explicit the substitution of prayer for sacrifice by then saying, “Yet with a contrite heart and a humble spirit may we be accepted, as though it were with burnt offerings” (16). He then shifts to a petition that they “may unreservedly follow you . . . with all our heart” (17, 18) and concludes with a worshipful petition for God's mercy and deliverance (19-20).

It is clear that the tradition given in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, and exemplified in 1 Kings, Ezra and Daniel, is present in this intertestamental material. Confession, contrition and repentance are functioning without sacrifice. Forgiveness from God is expected to bring deliverance from his punishments for their sin. God has given them this provision because he is merciful.

These two intertestamental passages should serve as a demonstration that a common conception of penitence existed in the intertestamental period and that the aforementioned penitential practices found in the Levitical and Deuteronomic material were current during that period.
But what about the Judaism of the first century? Aside from the New Testament and questionable projections made from the layered material in the Talmud, the sources available to us are admittedly sparse. However, the Qumran material does give us a window into at least one first century Jewish community and the material does include penitential literature. Before examining first century Judaism in general, I will look at three texts from the Essene community.

The Dead Sea Scrolls

Words of the Luminaries (4Q504; 4Q506)

The Words of the Luminaries are a collection of prayers meant to be recited daily, one set for each day of the week; not all have survived and those that have are not all entire. Paleographically, the Words of the Luminaries date at least back to 150 BC, placing them before the founding of the Qumran Community.26 This would make it at least possible that the Words represent an established liturgy with a broader usage than Qumran. Aside from the fact that the document seems to be unmistakably liturgical in nature,27 the prayers seem in the same stream of penitential tradition as the Old Testament and intertestamental penitential literature.

The prayers contain pleas for forgiveness, “[Take pity on us] [and do not] remember [against us the sins of] the very first in all their wicked [behavior, nor that] [they were stiff-necked. You, acquire us and forgive, [please,] our iniquity and [our sin]” (4Q506 131-132). As aforementioned texts emphasize, the petitioners have more than a

behavior problem, they need to be healed “of madness, blindness and confusion [of heart]” (4Q504 II.14-15). They look to God to free them from sinning against him (4Q504 II.16). Their problem is, in effect a “heart problem.” In Deuteronomic language, they need “heart circumcision” (4Q506 131-132).

Their forgiveness will not come from sacrifice, but from accepting God's discipline without abandoning the Lord (4Q504 VI.4-8). Presumably, since this passage calls upon God to forgive verbally and in the context of the general admission of sins, confession is a vital part of the repentance as well.

**Damascus Document**

The *Damascus Document* is one of the foundational texts of the Qumran Community. It is exists in several copies, some of which contain elaborations on the basic text and not all text preserve the same sections of the document.28

The copy known as CD-B contains a prayer found in column XX:28-34:

> Assuredly we have sinned, both we and our fathers, wanting contrary to the ordinances of the covenant; justice and truth are your judgments against us; and they do not raise their hand against his holy regulations and his just judgments and his truthful stipulations; and they are instructed in the first ordinances, in conformity with which the men of the Unique One were judged; and they lend their ears to the voice of the Teacher of Righteousness; and do not reject the holy regulations when they hear them; these shall exult and rejoice and their heart will be strong, and they shall prevail over all the sons of the world. And God will atone for them, and they shall see his salvation, for they have taken refuge in his holy name.

> Again there is a verbal plea for forgiveness paired with a confession of sin. The atonement for sin is not based upon sacrifice, but on the confession and request for mercy. The assumption implicit in the final clause, “for they have taken refuge in his holy name.”

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name,” is that the verbal confession and request for forgiveness represents an act of faith. The request is no mere recitation of words, but the expression of heart contrition and heart desire to be forgiven by God.

**Communal Confession (4Q393)**

The Communal Confession is a collection of prayers of which we only have fragments. The fragments represent a continuation of the penitential theology of earlier Judaism. In particular, the language of Psalm 51, Ezra (9:6-15), and Nehemiah (9:5-38) is reflected in the prayers. The themes and theology of the old biblical passages should probably be read into these prayers of confession as well.

Where does this leave us? The Dead Sea Scrolls reveal a community (and perhaps even more than that) which continues in the theology and penitential practice of earlier Second Temple Judaism (not that the material isn't even earlier than that). Sacrifice is not necessary for dealing with sin, but confession and contrition are. Sin is still a heart problem first, and a behavioral problem second. In order for the behavioral problem to be corrected, God must transform the heart. They call on God to do this, believing that through confession, contrition and repentance they will be forgiven of their sin and restored to a right relationship with God.

One plausible explanation as to why confession, contrition and repentance functioned to forgive sin without actual sacrifice, is that for Second Temple Jews, all the way to the time of Christ, there was a sense in which the people of God were still in exile. And “under the conditions of exile, confession and humbling before God could be

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30 Wise, Abegg, and Cook, 357.
accepted for atonement without sacrifice.”

So, as a First Century Jewish background to the literature of the New Testament and the earliest non-canonical Christian literature, we can note a few things about penitential practice which seem to be fairly common.

1. Sin and the consequences of sin were a major concern of Second Temple Judaism, through the entire period and up to the first century. Sin was seen as a cause of a breaking of the relationship with God, both corporately and individually. As part of that broken relationship, God was thought to discipline both the nation of Israel (exile) and the individual Israelite. Until the sin was dealt with, both the somewhat intangible “communion with God” would be lost and the tangible hand of discipline of the Lord would be upon them. First century Jews had at least a fair amount of motivation to seek atonement for their sin.

2. In Old Testament Law, intentional sin could not be atoned for by sacrifice. It was, after a manner of speaking, “unforgiveable.” This is presumably because intentional sin implied unrepentance. In order to make an intentional sin eligible for forgiveness, it had to be “converted” to an unintentional sin.

3. The mechanism by which a sin was converted from intentional to unintentional was confession, contrition and repentance. This three-fold act meant that the person's heart had changed so that the sin was no longer his or her intention. As an unintentional sin, sacrifice now could atone for

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31 Falk, 2:138-139.
4. The confession, contrition and repentance could only happen through a heart-change, variously known as “heart circumcision” or a “new spirit” or “a new heart.” Only a heart-change would represent a true change of intention and the three-fold act was also a demonstration of the new heart attitude. Perhaps it was even part of the mechanism for the changed heart. Certainly, part of the prayer of confession was a plea for God to provide the heart-change.

5. In the absence of a temple, where sacrifice would take place (such as during exile), confession, contrition and repentance would suffice to provide an opportunity for atonement.

6. The form for this act of confession, contrition and repentance was not liturgical from the earliest times, though there is a liturgical formulation showing up in at least the time of Qumran. There is no evidence that the liturgical formulation completely superseded extemporaneous confession of sin but probably is a testimony to how much confession of sin was resident in the unconscious religious architecture of first century Judaism.
Chapter Three

Texts of the New Testament and Primitive Churches

Turning to the New Testament and sub-Apostolic texts under consideration for this work, it can be seen then how an understanding of confession of sin could be remarkably consistent across Christian communities separated by great distance and culture. Also, it would be a mistake, given the long and deep traditions of penitential practice in Judaism, the Jewish roots of Christianity, the self-understanding of being in the stream of Judaism, and the common reliance upon the (Septuagintal) same Jewish texts from which this penitential practice and theology grew, to discount the Jewish understanding and practice as a background to Christian understanding and practice.

The New Testament

Acts 19:18-19

Authorship, Provenance and Dating

Luke-Acts was likely composed by a companion of Paul “probably between 80 and 85, though possibly earlier.” Johnson characterizes the attempt to date Luke-Acts in the second century as “excessive.” The provenance and audience of Luke-Acts are impossible to fix precisely, though the style of the text and frequent allusions to the Old Testament (in Septuagintal form) indicate the readers would be very familiar with the

33 Johnson, 404.
34 Johnson, 405.
Greek Old Testament.

Text

There are no significant issues with the text of this passage. The next passage has one issue, a reading which substitutes *hē pístis tou theou* (the faith of God) for *tou kuriou ho logos* (the word of the Lord). Since “the word of the Lord continu[ing] to increase and prevail mightily” means basically the same thing as “the faith of God” increasing, it doesn't effect the meaning of the passage.

Translation of Acts 19:18

Also, many who had believed came, confessing and announcing their practices. And a number of those who had practiced occultism collected their books together and burned them in front of everyone. And they figured the value of them to be 50,000 pieces of silver.

The NRSV rendering *anaggellontes* as “disclosed” is probably weak. The Lukan use of the term in Acts (14:27; 15:4; 16:38; 20:20; 20:37) seems to refer to a more forceful act than “disclosure.” All of the uses in Acts emphasize the deliberate and bold public nature of the act. “Announced” seems more appropriate and so I have rendered it thus.

I have used “occultism” for “*ta perierga*” to avoid the many different referents of “magical.” It also seems to hint better at “undue or misdirected curiosity” in pursuing

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36 “*pepisteukotōn,*” a genitive perfect active participle.
37 “*anaggellontes,*” from *anaggellō,* “to provide information, disclose, announce, proclaim, teach,” BDAG.
38 “*ta periega,*” literally “undue curiosities,” BDAG.
39 “*periergos,*” BDAG (3rd).
magic as “occult” both denotes and derives from the idea of “hidden.”

**Context and Exegesis**

This section of Acts gives an account of part of Paul's ministry at Ephesus. Paul arrives in Ephesus at the beginning of chapter 19. He quickly found some disciples of John who had believed, but had not received the Holy Spirit. After receiving the baptism of Jesus and the laying on of hands by Paul, they “began speaking in tongues and prophesying” (v. 6). Paul then preaches first from the synagogue and then from the hall of Tyrannus over the course of two years.

During the time he is in Ephesus a series of events occurs which bring many to faith in the Lord. Some Jewish exorcists attempt to use Jesus' and Paul's names to cast out demons and get publicly stripped and injured by a demoniac. This public event causes quite a stir resulting in a mass conversion.

The mass conversion seems to be linked to the events with the Jewish exorcists. Though it is possible that the converts had believed previously and then came forward publicly after the exorcist incident, it is more likely that the exorcist event brought them to faith and the confession was roughly contemporary with their conversions.\(^{40}\) “Luke seems unaware that according to his wording these Christians still continued their 'practices' even after their conversion.”\(^{41}\)

By enumerating the amount of money involved, Luke is emphasizing the sincerity of their repentance and how there is a concrete amends. “These people recognized that

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genuine discipleship involved letting go what they treasured in order to enjoy the blessings of God's kingdom."\(^{42}\) This is a new practice, but one which is found in the account of John the baptist. When John preached, people came “confessing their sins” to be baptized (Matthew 6:3).

In the wider context of the book of Acts, it is also extremely important to keep in mind that the entire book is framed by the “expectation for the outpouring of the Spirit.”\(^{43}\) It is the story of “the people [who are] to be constituted and empowered by the Spirit.”\(^{44}\) Everything that is happening is a demonstration of the power of the Spirit in creating the people of God.

**Observations**

Witherington writes that this confession and public repentance are acts of “public renunciation” which are “the proper negative response to pagan religion by those who have turned to the Christian faith.”\(^{45}\) Haenchen emphasizes the narrative goal of demonstrating the victory of the “mission church” over “demons.”\(^{46}\)

So, in this section of Acts, Luke is demonstrating a conversion event, wherein these new believers in Ephesus, after (or nearly contemporaneously) believing in Jesus as Lord, make a public display of confessing their sins and repenting from these sins, even at very great personal cost. This dramatic act emphasizes the genuine nature of this conversion; their hearts now value the Lord more than money or occult practices.

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43 Johnson, 415.
44 Johnson, 415.
It cannot be said conclusively what this event says about Luke's portrayal of whether open confession of sin was normative for Christian conversion. "Many" of the converts in Ephesus did this, and while it seems that the "many" indicates a large percentage of the total conversions, the language doesn't seem to bear that clear of an understanding. Equally possible is that "many" of the Ephesian converts were involved in occult practices and all of these came confessing their sins. A few of the other converts perhaps did not participate in these practices and so did not need to participate in this event.

The event is depicted as unscripted, a communal act undertaken in the unction of the Spirit. That may be overstating the case, but there are no identified "ringleaders," and even if there are, it is significant that Luke ignores them. The event is certainly non-liturgical (not in the context of a worship service and also unscripted). Interestingly, no commentary that I consulted considered the percentage of Ephesian converts (the question of normativity) or the issue of scripting (written versus extemporaneous). These two questions are extremely important in understanding the role of public confession of sin in conversion, but few seem to be asking the question.

The possible delay between "believing" and "confessing" is not really that important. The distance between the two might be very close, and there always must be some distance between the two.

Looking to the understanding of penitence in first century Judaism, there are several connections. There is a confession of sin, which is public. There is an emphasis on the condition of the heart (shown narratively). The Ephesians, in accordance with
Jewish practice, amend their behavior (quite dramatically). Is this reflection of Jewish praxis and theology accidental? In keeping with the theology of Second Temple Judaism, there is also the implicit involvement of the direct work of God in the event, the Spirit working in the actors as they repent and confess. It would seem that more is going on here than simply a demonstration of the triumph of the Gospel or the incipient church.

1 John 1:9

Authorship, Provenance and Dating

1 John is formally an anonymous letter, though tradition ascribes it to John, the author of the Fourth Gospel. Modern scholarship generally eschews that idea, placing the author instead in a community that had been founded upon the tradition of the Fourth Gospel. Ephesus is the most likely locale, though some place it closer to Palestine.

The most common understanding of the date of composition is within ten years after the Gospel of John, which would place it AD 90-105, though possibly much earlier.

Text

The text of 1 John 1:9 is very stable with no textual issues.

Translation of 1 John 1:9

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous so that he might forgive our

48 Kysar, 907.
49 Kysar, 907.
50 Kysar entertains quite lucidly the possibility that John could have been written any time from the 40s onward, while conceding modern scholarship still, by a slim majority, accepts the 80-95 dating. Robert Kysar, “John, the Gospel of,” The Anchor Bible Dictionary, vol. 3, ed. David Noel Freeman (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 918-919.
52 “ dikaios.”
sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.\textsuperscript{53}

\textit{Context and Exegesis}

The first letter of John begins with four verses introducing the message of the letter. It is something that they have “seen” and “heard,” therefore it is meant to be taken as a true message about Jesus coming within history, and the writer is claiming to be a witness to this history – the Jesus event.\textsuperscript{54} This message is about the “eternal life” that “was revealed to us.” They (the author and his community) have fellowship with God and his Son Jesus, and they proclaim that it will bring them joy for others to receive the message so that others may have fellowship with John and his community and fellowship with the God. The two types of fellowship go hand in hand.

The next paragraph (verses 5-10) deals with the reason that the readers/hearers of John's letter need the message; they are sinners. Because they are sinners, they are cut off from fellowship with God. They need forgiveness of their sins. If they (the audience) claim not to be sinners, they are deceiving themselves. If they walk in the light, then they have fellowship with fellow believers and Jesus' blood “cleanses [them] from all sin” (v. 8). This is sacrificial language, the cleansing of sin by blood, and Jesus is the victim whose blood is shed for the forgiveness of sins.

Verse 9 then states that receiving forgiveness is conditioned\textsuperscript{55} (\textit{ean}) upon confessing (\textit{homologōmen}) sins. If “we confess our sins he will act because he is

\textsuperscript{53} “\textit{adikas}.” Note the play on words between “righteousness” and “unrighteousness” which is also present in Greek.


“faithful” (pistis) and “righteous” (dikias). Now, while the clause is conditional, it also surely carries the weight of a command.\(^56\) It is not “sinfulness in general . . . but to confess each specific sin.”\(^57\)

The impressive utterance of R. Simon and R. Jehoshua ben Levi in the name of R. Shim 'on ben Halaphta, that we should confess “like a robber, who is brought before a court for judgment. So long as he resists, he is beaten, but if he makes a confession, he receives his sentence. God, on the other hand, does not treat us like this; rather, as long as people refuse to confess their sins, they receive their sentence. But as soon as they do confess, the are acquitted. (Pesiq. 159a; see Billerbeck, *Kommentar* 1:170)\(^58\)

He is faithful presumably in that this is a promise which can be trusted. God will keep his promise to forgive penitent sinners.\(^59\) He is just either in the sense of the saving righteousness of God or in the sense of the sacrificial victim already having been slain for the sin, God will not require the debt to be paid twice.\(^60\) The challenge to the juridical view is that the emphasis is explicitly on cleansing.\(^61\) Brown believes that the two terms are synonymous, but takes it in the opposite direction and holds that “forgiveness” as well as “cleansing” refer to a real inner change in the individual.\(^62\) “Forgiveness is rooted in the very character of God: 'The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and truth, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and wickedness (LXX adikia) and sin (LXX harmartia),

\(^{56}\) Marshall, 113.  
\(^{58}\) Schnackenburg, in *Johannine Epistles*, notes in a footnote that this was an inheritance from Judaism which also is demonstrated in the ministry of John the Baptist, 81.  
\(^{59}\) Schnackenburg, 83; Marshall, 114; Yarbrough, 64.  
\(^{60}\) Marshall, 114.  
\(^{61}\) Schnackenburg, 83.  
\(^{62}\) Brown, *Johannine Epistles*, 211.
but he will not purify (LXX *katharizō*) the guilty.* Exod 34:6-7.*\(^{63}\)

The sacrificial system must be in view here because in that Jesus is in some sense, according to 1 John, analogous to sacrificial victims in the Old Testament.\(^{64}\) “The language of purification (*katharizō*) . . . suggests the removal of that which leads to separation from the presence or the purposes of God.”\(^{65}\) But as in the Old Testament, the sacrifice cannot atone for sin, “there can be no automatic equation between the sacrificial shedding of blood and the granting of forgiveness.”\(^{66}\) (atonement language and forgiveness language are the same in meaning) by itself. Confession of sins (the word *harmartias* is plural) actuates the forgiveness held out by the sacrifice. In Second Temple language, confession converts the intentional sin to an unintentional sin, as it is no longer the person’s intention to continue in the sin.

“It is not simply the theoretical denial of sin that the author challenges but the refusal to share in the act of confession. While it may be human sin that calls forth God's forgiveness, it is the reality of God's forgiveness that ultimately exposes human sin for what it is.”\(^{67}\) “The verb “to acknowledge” (*homolegeō*) is not commonly used of sin.\(^{68}\) . . . what is in mind here is not just the acknowledgment of the fact of sin, but the declaration of them before God”\(^{69}\) and others.\(^{70}\)

If the sins are confessed in penitence, two promises come to bear. The first is the

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63 Lieu, I, II, & III John, 58.
65 Lieu, I, II, & III John, 56.
66 Lieu, I, II, & III John, 56.
67 Lieu, I, II, & III John, 57.
68 Thomas F. Johnson, 33.
69 Lieu, I, II, & III John, 57.
70 Lieu, I, II, & III John, 58.
promise of forgiveness (atonement). The second is the promise of cleansing. The cleansing seems to be distinguished from forgiveness/atonement. The cleansing seems to carry the idea of removal - not of the break in fellowship with God or the removal of the penalties of discipline, but instead of the reality of sin itself. The acts which bring defilement will be done away with.\(^{71}\) The confession of sin brings (or invites God to perform) a change of heart which results in sin no longer being committed (to read this through the lens of Second Temple theology). Marshall notes that while the most common interpretation of “cleansing” is that it is a parallel term with “forgiveness,”\(^{72}\) that “it is possible that purification signifies the removal not only of the guilt of sin but also of the power of sin in the human heart.”\(^{73}\) Yarbrough starts with a hat-tip to the synonymous view before writing that confession brings “transformation that frees from wrongdoing via cleansing.”\(^{74}\) Reading the two terms as synonymous seems to under-read the passage, over-emphasize the juridicial aspect of atonement, and ignore the stream of Judaic thought that places a strong emphasis not only on guilt, but behavior and the condition of the heart from which behavior flows. Is it really possible to read 1 John without noting the profound emphasis on actual deeds?

How does the cleansing occur? How does it work? John “grounds it in the nature

\(^{71}\) John Painter, 1, 2 and 3 John, Sacra Pagina Series, Daniel J. Herrington, ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008) 145.

\(^{72}\) C.f. Thomas F. Johnson, 33 and Georg Strecker, 32.

\(^{73}\) Marshall, 114. Yarbrough seems to agree with the common interpretation of forgiveness and cleansing being synonymous, but then quotes Schlatter, “Because God loves justice, he puts an end to our unrighteousness and invests his righteousness with the victorious power that makes righteousness dwell in us and that transforms our conduct toward God and others.” (64)

\(^{74}\) Yarbrough, 65. His somewhat nuanced argumentation attempts to maintain the primacy of the manifestation of righteousness in the forgiveness of sin while admitting the real change in the heart and life of a sinner.
of God, who is 'faithful and just to forgive'."  

How was the confession done? Schnackenburg notes that, since the passage emphasizes God's action in absolving sin, that it is "unlikely that the community itself or their leaders are standing in the background hearing the confessions and pronouncing absolution. It is, however, possible that there was already a liturgical custom of confessing one's sins before the congregation or before a smaller group of church members." It seems that Schackenburg, while certainly very insightful in his careful reading of the text, may be under-reading the context, where confession of sin is never depicted as private (see Acts 19:18-20 and Matthew 3:6).  

Raymond Brown argues for public confession based upon a) all the other references to confession or sin are public, b) use of "homologein" in John (while only here referring to confession of sin) is public, c) While Schnackenberg notes that while God alone is the agent of forgiveness, this does not prove that the confession is private as verses 1:3 and 1:7 "show that relations to God are in a community context". Yarbrough concedes the possibility, though he calls it "only a hypothesis." Kruse notes that since all other confessions of sin in the NT are public (Matt 3:6; Mark 1:15; James 5:15; Acts 19:18) this confession is likely public as well. This confession, unlike the confession of

75 Yarbrough, 63.
76 Schnackenburg, 82.
78 R. E. Brown, Johannine Letters, 208.
79 And "Heibert helpfully suggests that 'the confession of any act of sin should be as wide as the knowledge of the sin'." Robert W. Yarbrough, 1-3 John, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008) 63. Strecker calls it “an open question,” 32.
sin at conversion (which is arguably the emphasis in Matt. 3:6, Mark 1:15 and Acts 19:18) is ongoing. “The author . . . portrays authentic Christian living as involving honest and ongoing acknowledgment of one's sins.”

It should also be noted that, with the language of “sins” (hamartias) in contrast with “sin” (hamartia) a general confession of sinfulness is not in view here, rather an accounting of specific sins.

Observations

1 John 1:9, very much like Acts 19:18, shows remarkable connections and affinities with Second Temple penitential practices. Confession of sins is presented as essential to forgiveness and atonement. With the Second Temple Judaism in the background, it is highly likely that heartfelt confession of sins not only follows the pattern of confession of sins inherited from Judaism, but carries with it a substratum of presupposition that it is part of the conversion of intentional sins to unintentional.

With the language of cleansing added to the language of forgiveness/atonement, there is a development of confession from being simply a demonstration of a changed heart to the mechanism by which a heart is changed. But this is not completely innovative because both in Second Temple Judaism and in 1 John 1:9, it is God who accomplishes the transformation of the heart, with human participation.

Within 1 John, the confession of sin functions, as in the Jewish penitential inheritance, to actuate the atonement held out by sacrifice. The difference in 1 John is that the sacrifice is Jesus.

80 Kruse, 68. Emphasizes the nature of the present tense.
81 Kruse, 68.
82 Rensberger, 54. C.f. George Strecker, 32.
James 5:16

Authorship, provenance and dating

The letter of James, while considered by some commentators a late letter because of its lack of eschatological concerns and alleged “catholicism,” can also be arguably dated very early. The lack of eschatological concerns is debatable. Dan McCartney sees the implicit (5:7) and explicit (5:17-18) references to rain as being eschatological.\(^{83}\) The catholicism argument is up for debate as well as it relies heavily on presuppositions about the first century church. Bill Brosend, following the work of Luke Timothy Johnson, opts for a date in the 50s, “making it one of the earliest writings in the NT.”\(^{84}\)

Since the argument for a later date of the letter is one of the chief reasons cited for pseudonymous authorship, a return to an early date shifts the burden of proof to those who would deny traditional authorship.\(^{85}\) The most likely author is the brother of Jesus.

Since James is associated with Jerusalem and tradition assigns the provenance thusly, a Jerusalem locale is the most likely place of composition.\(^{86}\) Likewise, traditional belief has held that James was written to Jewish Christians because of the stated audience, “tais dōdeka phulais tais en tē diaspora chairein.” James is most likely a letter written by a Jewish Christian to other Jewish Christians.\(^{87}\)

Text

The text of James 5:16 is stable except for the word “eucheste,” which the

\(^{85}\) Brosend, 4-5.
\(^{86}\) Brosend, 7.
\(^{87}\) Brosend, 8.
editorial committee of the United Bible Society chose over the vastly more common “proseuchesthe,” considering the latter “scribal conformation to the customary Christian usage.” Given that the majority of the witnesses attest to “euchesthe,” the unlikelihood that a scribe would replace such a common word as “proseuchesthe” with a term rare in the NT, and the confidence of the United Bible Society committee, the UBS text is certainly correct. The author may have chosen his language with stylistic concerns in mind, but either way, the meaning of the discourse in not effected as the terms are virtually synonymous.

Translation of James 5:16

And so confess to one another [your sins] and pray for one another in order that you may be cured.

Context and Exegesis

5:16 comes near the end of the letter of James. As the letter opened with a concise listing of the letter's concerns, the letter closes with a recapitulation of the same concerns: the rich and poor, patient endurance, the tongue, prayer and forgiveness, right judgment and faith. In verse 14, James instructs his readers (or likely, hearers) with something...

88 Metzger, Textual Commentary, 685.
89 BDAG, “euchomai,” 1. “to speak to or to make requests to God, pray”; “euxē,” 1. speech or petition directed to God, prayer.” I think James possibly used the term because of the slightly elevated language and the closer connection between the two words. “proseuchē,” 1. “petition addressed to deity, prayer”; “proseuchomai,” 1. “to petition deity, pray.”
90 “allēlois,” from “allēlōn,” designates mutuality. See “allēlōn,” BDAG. This seems to rule out one-way confession of sins.
91 “iathēte,” from “iaomai,” “heal, cure,” BDAG. I translate it as “cure” to distinguish it from “sōzō,” which often has layers of meaning making it hard to distinguish between “healing” and “salvation.” James may be designating only physical healing here, or he may be using the term because the second layer of meaning is not “salvation,” but “restoration.”
92 Brosend, 130.
that would for them be very normal,\(^93\) they should call the elders of the church for prayer and anointing\(^94\) if they are sick.\(^95\) He reminds them that a “prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up.” By “prayer of faith” he surely means that the prayer must be heartfelt and believing that God will act,\(^96\) though not in such a way as if humans were in control.\(^97\) This is not a little cryptic as “save” could be read as “heal,” and then James introduces language of “raising” which calls to mind thoughts of resurrection. Probably the reader is meant to take this as physical healing and raising from sickness with some allusion to eschatological concerns as well.\(^98\) As a conclusion, and surprisingly for modern readers, he exhorts his readers, on the basis of what he just wrote, to a) confess their sins to each other, and; b) pray for each other; so that they may be cured. Then he re-reminds them that “the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.” He closes the section with an illustration concerning Elijah.\(^99\)

The first striking thing in this passage is the relationship between sin and sickness. James seems to clearly draw a line connecting sins and sickness. While in verse 14

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93 Brosend, 160.
94 I cannot elaborate on the anointing in this narrow thesis, but Moo points out the parallel with Mark 6:13, “Mark says that the Twelve 'drove out many demons and anointed sick people with oil and healed them,'” 238.
96 McKnight, 440.
98 McKnight, 442. Dibelius disagrees and takes the language as dealing wholly with healing, which seems to under-read the letter a bit, 254; c.f. Moo, 243.
99 Brosend has a fascinating section on James’ use of Elijah and the teaching of Jesus, making a strong argument that his use of Elijah was influenced by his brother’s teaching and use of the same. See pp. 155-156.
sickness is simply an occasion for prayer, in verse 15 there is an implicit link between sickness and sins because the “prayer of faith” will help both. In verse 16, this becomes even clearer as they are told to “confess their sins” (exomologeisthe . . . tas hamartias) in order to be cured. James clearly links sickness and sin in the passage. Sin brings sickness as a form of discipline from the Lord. When the sinner repents, not only is the sin forgiven, but the discipline (sickness) is lifted. In this situation, it seems that healing is not just admitted as a possibility; it is expected. The belief in the relationship between sin and suffering (especially sickness) is not only found in James, but elsewhere in the NT (1 Corinthians 11:10) and, as has been mentioned before, in Second Temple Judaism (Psalm 32:3-5, Ezra 9:13 and others). This connection does not mean that James took sickness always as the result of sin, but that it is a “possible, but not inevitable, association rather than a direct cause and effect relationship.” The NRSV obscures this with the translation “anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.” The Greek text makes explicit that sins may not be involved in sickness, “. . . kan hamartias hē pepoiēkōs” (and if he has sinned). The attempt to emphasize the inclusiveness of the masculine grammatical gender in Greek by rendering it as a plural does so at the expense of some clarity in this clause. “Despite the best intentions of the NRSV and the TNIV,

100 Davids's importation of evil spiritual powers into the context is surely eisegetical, 194; Martin Dibelius does this as well, even reading the “in the name of the Lord” as an invocation that the demonic power must submit to. Since there is nothing like that in the context of the text, Dibelius especially seems to be reading his view of first century culture into the text. For an opposing view see Laws, 229; and McKnight, 439.
101 Brosend, 161.
103 McKnight notes several intertextualities concerning this: Deut. 28; Lev. 26-27; 2 Kings 17; Testament of Reuben 1:6-7; Testament of Gad 5:9-11; m Shabbat 2.6; b Shabbat 31b-32b; Ps 103:3; Mark 2:5; John 5:14; 1 Cor 11:30. The Letter of James, 443-444.
104 Laws, 229; c.f. Moo, 243.
James addresses a singular 'you' and focuses on individual responsibility.  

Krabbendam takes the situation in the passage as physical sickness standing as an example for the general category of “suffering” (kakopathei). The sick expects healing from the faith-filled prayer of the elders (on the basis of the elders’ faith). But sometimes the sickness (or other trouble) is the result of sin, so healing does not happen and indicates that confession is necessary. I think it is more likely that the healing is expected precisely because it comes as God's discipline. Because it is disciplinary, it only lasts as long as needed to provoke repentance (in James's mindset). However, the insight of Krabbendam that James is dealing with two categories of events through this section (vs. 13-18), suffering and blessing, is very helpful and should be retained.

Confession in this passage is “exomologeō”, the same term used in Acts 19:18. Exomologeō and homologeō are linguistically parallel terms. As in Acts and 1 John, a general confession of sinfulness is not in view but a specific account of specific sins (hamartias).

The sins confessed are either to the elders (tous presbuterous) of the church (tēs ekklēsias) (verse 14) or to a general group of fellow believers, the “one another” (allēlois).

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107 Krabbendam, 820; Davids, 194.
108 Krabbendam, 822.
109 Krabbendam, 812.
110 BDAG, “exomologeō” 1. to indicate acceptance of an offer or promise, promise, consent. 2. to make an admission of wrong-doing/sin, confess, admit (middle). 3. to declare openly in acknowledgment, profess, acknowledge. “homologeō” (homologos, of one mind) 1. to commit oneself to do something for someone, promise, assure. 2. to share a common view of be of common mind about a matter, agree. 3. to concede that something is factual or true, grant, admit, confess. 4. to acknowledge something, ordinarily in public, acknowledge, claim, profess, praise.
of verse 16. The *presbuteroi* in view are most likely church leaders\(^\text{111}\) and the *ekklēsia* is most likely the Christian congregation.\(^\text{112}\) Attempts to avoid all formal Christian understanding of the two terms is misguided. Brosend wryly remarks, referencing S. Laws, that “‘the elders of the church' then while not the same as 'the pastoral staff of the local Christian congregation,' were certainly more akin to that than 'some old people in the town square’.”\(^\text{113}\)

In favor of the confession of sin in verse 16 being to the *presbuteroi* is that there is an implicit confession of sin to the elders in verse 14 and 15. The near context leans toward confession to a group of elders. However, there are some strong reasons for reading the passage otherwise. The language of “one another” (*allēlois*) would most naturally read “members of the congregation,”\(^\text{114}\) which could include the elders, but also others. To take “one another” as the elders alone would sound as if only the elders were to confess their sin, and that to each other, since *allēlois* signifies mutuality. The congregation as a whole is in view throughout the entire letter, it would make more sense to read the “one another” generally.\(^\text{115}\) McCartney interprets the “calling of elders” as to their capacity to “represent the church as a whole, and their prayers are an expression of the prayers of the entire congregation or community,”\(^\text{116}\) but he may be harmonizing the larger passage a bit much.

Perhaps a natural way to take the passage is that James is exhorting Christians to

\(^{111}\) Davids, 193.


\(^{113}\) Brosend, 159.

\(^{114}\) Laws, 233.

\(^{115}\) Krabbendam, 826.

\(^{116}\) McCartney, 253.
confess their sins to one another so that God does not place his disciplinary hand upon them. Then they would need to call for the elders to seek forgiveness and healing. Also, James has moved from a specific instance involving the elders to a general application. James wishes for the “community to be involved regularly in mutual confession and prayer.” Moo points out that this is also a subtle way of reminding believers that the power to heal rests in God, not in the elders.

Is this passage describing a private confession? It would seem to strain the meaning of the language and context to take it that way. We have already seen that confessions tended to be public. Confession to the elders in verse 14 is at least to a group of elders, if not in front of a congregation. The “one another” in verse 16 strongly implies a group context. “Personal accountability partners” would be an extremely anachronistic reading of the passage.

Theologically, an interpretation which assumes individualistic rites of confession may be missing the point in James. Noting the dynamic that it is the faith of the presbuteroi (who in this reading represent the community), and not the sick person him or herself, which accomplishes the healing, “the prayer of the community for the sick person is itself the prayer of the sick person, because when one is sick, all are sick. Thus too, even the result of forgiveness of sin . . . comes about by the intercession of the church.”

Is the healing only from sickness? In light of Krabbendam’s observation that

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117 Though restricting this to “a way of treating sicknesses that might arise” ignores the language of forgiveness of sins, 246.
118 Moo, 247.
119 McKnight, 447.
120 Davids points out that public confession in the congregation was normal, see 1 Clem. 51:3; 52:1; Did. 4:14; 14:1; Barn. 19:12; Hermas Vis. 1.1.3; 3.1.5-6; Sim 9.23.4. The Epistle of James, 195.
121 McCartney, 256.
“suffering” is a larger category of which “sickness” is only a representative example, perhaps not. Laws does not believe it should be read restrictively as sickness either. The healing now thought of is healing from sin and its consequences. McCartney is again insightful:

The word “save” can, of course, refer either to physical healing (cf. Luke 8:50, where the faith of a girl's parents leads to her physical resuscitation) or to the rescue of a person from guilt and condemnation (e.g., Eph. 2:5, 8) or to the eschatological salvation in the judgment (e.g., Rom. 5:9-10). The context here in James at least partly has healing in view (Ropes 1916:308), but the connection with forgiveness of sins (5:16) demonstrates that James has both in mind or perhaps does not sharply distinguish between them, and eschatological salvation is elsewhere in James (1:21; 2:14; 4:12). Again, the distinction that we generally draw may be more the product of our dualistic mind-set.

Observations

As James is our most “Jewish” New Testament author, we would expect him to have close affinities with Judaic beliefs and practices, and he does not disappoint. James, with Acts and 1 John, continues in the stream of penitential practices of Second Temple Judaism.

As with Second Temple Judaism, there is a relationship between confession of sins and forgiveness. Confession of sin is given as a normal practice. Just as in Second Temple Judaism, this confession has a strongly communal aspect. Sin and its remedy are a communal affair. While sacrificial language is absent from this passage, this occurs in Old Testament passages as well.

While heart-change is not explicitly in James, it certainly is so implicitly.

122 Laws, 233. For an opposing view, see Dibelius, who characteristically reads the text as more straightforward with only one layer of meaning. Dibelius admits that houtōs iathète can carry the idea of forgiveness of sins, but that James did not intend it to be read so, 255.
123 McCartney, 256.
Confession itself is a demonstration of the heart-change necessary for a sin to no longer be intentional. As in 1 John, there is strong evidence that the confession itself (and here, with added prayer) is instrumental in bringing heart-change. Forgiveness and healing are paired and the healing is likely more than physical. We have not moved far from Psalm 32, except that the community is now Messianic.

*Texts of Primitive Churches*

**Didache**

*Authorship, Provenance and Dating*

While the internal and external evidence for the locale of the *Didache* are scant, most accept a provenance of Syro-Palestine, largely because of the reference to “mountains” (9:4) and the very Jewish character of the material, especially chapters 1-6.125 While a late date near the close of the second century used to be common among scholars, a much earlier date has now gained acceptance. And while the document in its final form likely dates to around AD 100 (some go as far as 150), the sources in the document itself may date back to the 50s and 60s.127 A few scholars date the completed document itself to that time.

The reasons behind the recent re-dating of the document to an earlier period are several. The theological reflection which characterizes later Christian documents is

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126 See Barnard, 101.
127 Holmes, 337.
missing from the *Didache* as one would expect in a early document. The organization of
the church seems very primitive. There appear to be two offices in place and there is a
tension between itinerant charismatics and established officers. And there is still a heavy
emphasis on distinguishing themselves from the Jews, something that would likely be out
of place after AD 70. There are close affinities in the document with the Gospel of
Matthew. It used to be common to cite the *Didache’s* dependence upon Matthew, but
now the movement seems to be toward an understanding that Matthew and the *Didache*
drew from a common tradition, possibly within the same community.

For my purposes, I will assume that the *Didache*, whether it was compiled near
AD 100 or much earlier, represents older material, probably from the 50s and 60s, and as
such, represents an earlier tradition even than *1 Clement*, which was composed about AD
95. It is a document with strong ties to Judaism, both in its explicit attempts to distinguish
Christians from Jews in a way which assumes an intimate connection between the two
and in its use of the very Jewish Two-Ways material in the first six chapters. I will also
assume, that whatever the source history of the text, the author/editor/redactor had a
purpose and intention in what he wrote and that purpose involved promoting the practice
that he understood as normative and was informed by his own coherent, if unexpressed
and unsystematized, theology.

*Text*

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128 Holmes, 337-338.
129 The “Little Apocalypse” in chapter 16 is “apparently based on Matthew 24. Goodspeed, 12. Also
there are references to “the gospel” and the form of the Lord’s Prayer in chapters x-x is in the Matthean
form.
130 Holmes, 335; cf. Robert A. Kraft, “Didache,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York:
131 While most older scholarship on the Didache holds that it is “a collage lacking any consistent
internal structure or coherence,” others, such as Milavec are arguing otherwise. Holmes, 337.
As is well-known, the text of the *Didache* comes to us complete only in an eleventh century manuscript. Therefore, textual questions are mostly eclipsed by questions of source, redaction, dating and so on. It is beyond this study or the abilities of this author to investigate the hypothetical sources behind this document. As this is the case, I will confine myself to a few short comments regarding the current scholarly consensus regarding the *Didache* and my working assumptions in that regard.

*Translation of Didache 4:14 and 14:1*

In the assembly confess your trespasses, and do not approach your prayer in an evil conscience. This is the way of life.

On the Lord's Day gather together and break bread and give thanks, first having confessed your trespasses, so that your sacrifice might be pure.

*Context and Exegesis*

The Didache divides easily into coherent units. Chapters 1-6 constitute a Two-Ways teaching which has affinities both with Judaism and some NT texts. It is strongly moral and ethical in tone and exhorts readers to right living. Chapters 7-10 contain instructions regarding worship practices: (7) Baptism, (8:1) fasting; (8:2-3) prayer; (9-10) eucharist. (11-13, 15) church government; (14) Lord's Day worship; (16) the “Mini-Apocalypse.”

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132 Found by Philotheos Bryennios in 1873. Holmes, 334.
133 For an example of this, see Barnard, 99-107.
134 “ekklēsia.”
135 “ta paraptōmata,” the same term used in Matthew 6:14, 15.
136 The translation of “kata kuriakēn . . . kuriou” is a matter of some dispute, but Milavec is probably right in giving the reading in the Apostolic Constitutions weight in staying with the traditional rendering: Aaron Milavec, *The Didache: Faith, Hope, & Life of the Earliest Christian Communities, 50-70 C.E.* (Mahwah, NJ: The Newman Press, 2003) 533. Cf. Holmes, 365. This reading is also attested to in other literature, “kuriakos,” BDAG. Interestingly, this the first testimony to a Sunday Sabbath outside of the New Testament.
The overwhelming weight of scholarship on the Didache has concerned itself with questions of date and form/source criticism and the tentative verdict has been that the completed text of the Didache is a composite document of a variety of sources over a period of time. These sources are not seen as being smoothly incorporated into a text with a cohesive plan or theology. Some scholars explicitly deny that there can ever be a “theology of the Didachist.” This forces the interpreter to read the discrete units of text, instead of in the context of each other and the rhetorical flow of the document, in light of a hypothetical source history. Some of these textual units, including one under consideration here, are quite short. These assumptions would seem to condemn the interpreter to a) an endless cycle of source criticism, which is of very little practical use to the church, especially if issues cannot come to a conclusion, and most cannot; and b) dealing with only the textual units of greater length, and considering them without their surrounding units. This type of reading of the Didache severely limits its usefulness in a study such as this.

But, not all interpreters have such a pessimistic view of the Didache’s author/editor/redactor. Aaron Milavec is one recent scholar who has attempted to demonstrate an internal consistency and cohesiveness to the document.\footnote{Milavec, xiii. Milavec's entire massive commentary is an outworking of this thesis. I would not agree with his conclusions on the nature of the unified document, however, he has demonstrated that the document can be responsibly read as a unified whole.}

And so, since this work is more a work of theological construction than a definitive account of primitive Church history, I tentatively put forward a proposal for reading the Didache as a cohesive document, making no claims as to the redactional or editorial process aside from those things which are almost universally accepted among...
scholars. My proposal, in simple form is this, that the *Didache* flows from beginning to end in three movements:

1-6 The What of the Path of Life (a description of the Path)  
7-15 The How of the Path of Life (a description of the means to walk the Path)  
16 The Why of the Path of Life (the reason to walk the Path)

In the first movement of the *Didache*, the author introduces the “Two Ways,” the “way of life” and the “way of death” (1:1). This type of practical theology has its roots in Judaism, as has been observed, but also is found in the NT on the lips of Jesus. Echoes of it are possibly behind of some of the material in Ephesians and Colossians. Luke identifies Christians first as “followers of the Way.” It may be a Jewish way to introduce a spiritual path, but it is also Christian.

The Didachist frames this section as an exposition of Christ's teaching on the two greatest commandments: loving God and loving others. The Way of Life is the way of loving God and loving others, even one's enemies. The Way of Death is a rejection of God's love and his laws, a love of self which abuses others, especially the weak. On the way of Life we love our enemies, on the way of Death we abuse the weak.

In the second movement, the Didachist, who has already assumed that his readers will fail to perfectly keep to the Way of Life, enumerates how a Christian is to stay on the Path. In the first movement he draws the boundaries of the Path; in the second he describes how to follow it. A person cannot follow the Path with unaided moral conviction and strength of will; one needs the grace of God (to describe it in un-Didachal, but still NT terms). I doubt very much the Didachist thought about it consciously in these
terms, but unconsciously and underlying the structure of the work is this fact: Christians need baptism, fasting, prayer, the eucharist, charismatic ministry of the Word, confession of sins, and wise leaders if they are to keep on the Way of Life.

The third movement states explicitly (and in a very NT way) the reward and consequences for keeping or not keeping to the Way of Life. There is an urgency to this. This is a typical way of motivation in the NT, eschatalogical rewards and punishments, paired with an urgency that the time of accounting is near. Aside from the fact that there is not a great deal of theological exposition given as a basis for this work, it is obviously in the stream of NT teaching.

So, if I am correct (and to some extent, even if I am not) the passages under consideration deal with confession of sin as both telic (an end to itself, though not a final end) and instrumental (accomplishing the Christian life by means of laying hold of the grace of God). Within this tentative scheme for understanding the Didache’s structure (which I think does no violence to modern scholarship regarding the Didache), I will first examine Didache 4:14.

**Didache 4:14**

As is mentioned above, the Didache is a document strongly influenced by a Jewish context and possibly Jewish sources. It is also well-known that classical and Semitic writers had rhetorical conventions different than our own. Of course, Jewish and classical rhetorical conventions are not identical and often vastly different, but there are overlaps, especially where Judaism became Hellenized and also perhaps by happenstance.
where the conclusion brings the reader to them or the material simply comes to a climax. In chiastic structures the middle of the argument can become the most important, but the beginning and end still have a prominence.

*Didache* 4:14 is placed within the “Two Ways” section of the document (1-6). Within the “Two Ways” section, it is at the very end of the larger of the two divisions: the “Way of Life” section (1:2-4:14). It seems to function in a sub-section concluding the “Way of Life” section (4:12-14). In verse 12, the reader, after a long list of specific positive and negative commands, is told to “hate all hypocrisy and everything that is not pleasing to the Lord.” Then, in verse 13, following with the shift from specific to general, he gives the non-specific admonition to “not forsake the Lord's commandments” and “guard what you have received, neither adding nor subtracting anything.” Then, right before shifting to “The Way of Death” (5) section, he tells them: “In the assembly confess your transgressions and do not come to your prayer with an evil conscience. This is the way of life.”

Given the existence of an author/editor/redactor who saw fit to place this verse at this point in the text and given that he had some purpose for doing so, if we ascribe even a moderate intentionality to his work, what relationship did he (and his first readers/hearers) give to verse 14 in relationship to the section which it closes? Or, more simply put, what is the function of confession of sins in the Christian assembly to the moral/ethical life they are called to live?

It should first be noted that not only does verse 14 come immediately following summary, general exhortations, but also itself does not fit the list preceding it. Confession
of sin is not constitutive of righteousness in the way that generosity, good parenting, submission to leaders, humility, etc. are; it is a way to deal with sins and failures when one hasn't been living in righteousness.

Confession of sin, in Second Temple Judaism, is the normal way, for hundreds of years (at least) preceding, of dealing with intentional sin. It “converts an intentional sins to an unintentional sin.” So, naturally in the discourse the passage could be interpreted as follows: “Keep to the way of life. Here is how you keep to the way of life, by doing these righteous acts and avoiding these unrighteous acts. In sum, keep the whole thing, don't neglect any of what God has commanded. When you do sin, confess your sins before you come to pray in the assembly of Christians.” Since confession of sin involves a change of intention, only by confession of sin can an individual come before God with a good conscience.

The atonement image is not explicit in this passage, but it might be implicit, as the later passage on confession of sins mentions sacrifice and the implication in this passage is that the person should not come before God (why else would one pray?) with an evil conscience? It seems that having broken God's laws, fellowship is restored through confession of sins. Milavec disagrees, and holds that since the word "thusia" is used to describe the sacrifice referred to in 14:1, the sacrifice must be a fellowship meal and have nothing to do with atonement or forgiveness of sins (538-539).139 This seems an egregious exercise in special pleading, as the overwhelming Christian and Jewish usage of the term is atoning. Matthew, which most commentators other than Milavec is

139 Milavec, 538-539.
literarily related to the *Didache*,\(^{140}\) uses the term in 6:14, 15, quoting Hosea 6:6 (LXX), in which *thusia* is placed in parallel to *holokautōmata*, which is without doubt an atoning sacrifice.\(^{141}\)

Again this event is public, as it takes place *en ekklēsia*. There is no mention of the role of elders or bishops, so the most natural understanding is that this is taking place openly in the service. There is no set form or prayers given for doing this, as there are for the eucharist, so the confession is probably extemporaneous. This seems to fit the model given in the New Testament texts and sits in the stream flowing from Second Temple penitential practice.

It should also be noted that, unlike some later practices, while the standards for righteousness are high, the expectations on Christians are realistic and gracious. Christians should live under high standards and should repent and confess their sins when they do not. But, for the most part, repentance and confession is all that is required to be restored before the assembly and God.

*Didache* 14:1

Following my proposed construction for reading the *Didache*, the next confessional passage is in the section offering the means by which Christians live the life of righteousness. The means given are: Baptism (7), fasting (8:1), prayer/Lord's Prayer (8:2-3), the eucharist (9-10), itinerant (or “charismatic”) teachers (11-13), repentance and confession (14), regular (institutional) leaders (15).

The two forms of ministry given the greatest attention are the eucharist and the

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\(^{140}\) Holmes, 338-339.

\(^{141}\) Hebrews is another instance (among several) where the NT usage is *thusia* as an atoning sacrifice: 5:1; 7:27; 8:3; 9:9, 23, 26; 10:1, 5, 8, 11, 12, 26; 11:4; 13:15, 16.
teaching of itinerants. It is possible that much attention is given to itinerants because there was a great need for instruction arising out of a great problem. But it is also possible that with, or even contrary to, that a charismatic ministry of the word was very important. Without a doubt the eucharist occupied a central place in the worship of the Didache community.

To say that chapters 9-10 are “about the eucharist” and chapter 14 is “about confession and repentance” is accurate, but misleading because the instructions on repentance and confession of sin concern coming to the eucharist. The language of sacrifice here is almost universally taken by commentators to refer to the eucharist. The participant is told to “break bread and give thanks” after “having first confessed your sins.” It would not be inaccurate to say that chapters 9-10 are about the administration of the eucharist, probably by assembly leaders and chapter 14 is about preparing oneself to partake of the eucharist. So in order to prepare for this eminently important part of the worship of the community of the Didache, one needs to reconcile with “a companion” if one has a quarrel and confess sins to God. In order to come to the most central part of the worship of the community, one must reconcile with God and fellow worshipers.

If one does not reconcile with a companion, the sacrifice offered “is defiled.” It is difficult not to see a commonality with Paul's admonition in 1 Corinthians 11, where by abusing their poorer fellow worshipers and getting drunk, some of the Corinthian Christians have come under the Lord's discipline and become sick and a few have died. There seems to be a threat behind the language of the “defiled sacrifice.” Does that threat also hold true for unconfessed sins, or is it just in place for not being reconciled with a
companion. I think there are at least four reasons for taking the language of defilement and the threat of judgement to apply to unconfessed sins as well as unreconciliation.

1. It is hard to imagine a first century Christian, let alone a Jewish-Christian, not believing that a defiled sacrifice brings divine displeasure and real disciplinary consequences.

2. It is equally hard to imagine that the Jewish-Christian writer of the *Didache* would intend to say, or believe, that unreconciliation with a companion is more defiling than coming to the eucharist with unconfessed sins.

3. The passage could legitimately be read giving two sets of instructions regarding an undefiled and pure sacrifice: confession of sins and reconciliation with companions.

4. Since unconfessed sin brings means that a worshiper comes into the prayer of the assembly with an evil conscience, would that not be defiling?

It seems that unconfessed sin brings defilement to the sacrifice of the eucharist and the act of prayers in public worship. Confession, then makes the sacrifice pure, and we could say, effectual.

Again the importance of confession of sin is seen in the stream of Second Temple Judaism. Confession actuates the atonement of sacrifice.\(^{142}\) This happens not by a mere external rite, but an actual cleansing of the conscience. It represents a real, internal

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\(^{142}\) It is interesting that the nature of the sacrifice has changed. But with the eucharist, though the worshipers are making fundamentally a thanksgiving offering, they are doing so in celebration of the atonement sacrifice of Christ. This means the imagery is not very far removed from the OT or some of the NT imagery.
turning away from sin. The confession of sin is specific, verbal and public. We have a continuation of penitential practice, only in light of the messianic fulfillment of Christ.

1 Clement

Authorship, Date and Provenance

While most ancient writers believed that the author of 1 Clement was Clement, bishop of Rome, and some modern writers still follow this, the letter is formally anonymous, although the manuscripts identify the author as Clement. Whether or not he is the Clement mentioned in the letter of Paul or whether he was formally a bishop in Rome is unknown, all ancient and modern speculation to the contrary. All that can be known or assumed is that the letter seems to have one author, the author's name was most likely Clement, and he seemed to be a representative of the Roman church. “Clement, according to Hermas Vis. ii.4.3, was a kind of foreign secretary of the Roman Church.”

Clement shows a wide familiarity with NT literature. “The influence of Hebrews on the Letter of Clement is very marked. It is here that we first find Hebrews reflected in Christian literature, for Clement is largely interspersed with thoughts and expressions from it.” “The acquaintance of Clement with the collected letters of Paul is also clear; he is the first Christian writer to quote one of Paul's letters expressly [chapter 47, 1 Cor. 1:10-12].” “Not only 1 Corinthians but Romans and Ephesians are clearly reflected in Clement.” “The resemblances of the Letter of Clement to 1 Peter are generally, and

144 Goodspeed, 7.
145 Holmes, 35.
146 Barnard, 9.
147 Goodspeed, 8.
rightly, taken to show Clement's use of that letter.”

Clement's letter was well-known and loved in the ancient Church. The *Shepherd* of Hermas quotes 1 Clement in about AD 100 (*Vision* ii.4.3), as does Dionysius of Corinth (170), Hegesippus (180), Irenaeus (181-189), Clement of Alexandria (several times), Origen, and Eusebius.\(^\text{149}\)

The use of Clement by writers such as Hermas and Clement's use of NT material place the date of 1 Clement between AD 80-140. Internally, the evidence narrows the window even more: “the Neronian persecution...is an event of the past,” and “some of the leaders appointed by the apostles” are still living. Holmes takes this evidence to indicate a date no earlier than 68 and no later than 100.\(^\text{150}\) Because of his mention of misfortunes (*sumphoras*) many have placed his letter during the reign of Domitian (95-97). While Domitian did not openly persecute Christians as did Nero, Domitian did engage in a kind of Stalinesque persecution, which included Christians, though mostly Christians of means.\(^\text{151}\) While this interpretation of the evidence for dating is common, it is by no means certain, but a 95-97 date is not unreasonable.\(^\text{152}\) No matter what, the material in *1 Clement* is older than the *Didache*.

**Text**

The text of *1 Clement* was discovered in its complete form, though defective copies existed, in the same set of manuscripts as the *Didache*, by the same scholar,

\(^{148}\) Goodspeed, 9.  
\(^{149}\) Goodspeed, 11.  
\(^{150}\) I am simplifying and interpreting Holmes somewhat in this. Holmes, 35.  
\(^{151}\) Barnard, 8.  
\(^{152}\) Holmes, 36.
Bryennius. 153 With a few exceptions, it is not generally considered to be a composite
document. In fact, “the letter is conceived...as a symboulē, or deliberative discourse,
regularly discussed by writers on rhetoric after Aristotle.” 154 This would fit the stated
occasion of the letter, which is an attempt to persuade the members of the church to
resolve their conflict and restore their leaders to office. 155

Translation of 1 Clement 51:3; 52:1-2

For it is good for a man to confess his transgressions 156 rather than to harden his
heart, just as the heart of the rebels against Moses, the servant of God, was hardened.

The Master, brothers, is completely self-sufficient. He requires nothing of
anyone 157 except to confess to him. For the elect David says, I will confess to the Lord
and it will please him more than a young calf growing horns and hoofs.

Exegesis and Context

The sections of 1 Clement in view in this paper are chapters 51-52 which fall after
a long discourse pointing out the sin of deposing the leaders of the church and placing the
conflict in a theological and ethical context. Those who have supported the replacement
of the leadership, which appears to be the majority of the church, have sinned and need to
repent. The conflict is no mere conflict in regards to preference, it is sin motivated by
jealousy (5-6), it shows that the Corinthians have “abandoned the fear of God” (3:4).

Jealousy has caused good people to suffer and “overthrown great cities and uprooted

153 Goodspeed, 10.
154 Laurence L. Welborn, “Clement, First Epistle of,” Anchor Bible Dictionary, David Noel Freeman
155 Holmes, 34.
156 “paraptōmatōn,” as in Didache 4:14 and 14:1.
157 Lit. “nothing of no one.”
great nations” (6:4). Clement calls them to repent and tells them that repentance will bring atonement with God (7). Repentance will cleanse them from their sins (8). He gives examples of upright behavior: Enoch (9), Abraham (10), Lot (11), Rahab (12). He exhorts them to obedience “to God rather than follow those who in arrogance and unruliness have set themselves up as leaders in abominable heresy.” (14) Clement encourages them to humility (15) of which Christ is the supreme example (16), and also Elisha (17), David (18). He notes how even nature lives in obedience to God (20). “Faith in Christ confirms all these things, for he himself through the Holy Spirit...calls us.” (22:1) God is merciful, but judgement will come with the return of Christ (23:5). Several examples point out the glory of the resurrection at His return (24-26). Since God sees all things, we should fear him (27) and he gives abundant counsel on why they should repent (28-35) and the glory of Christ (36). Because Christ is glorious, they should honor Christ's soldiers (37) and live in love and harmony with Christ's body (38). Instead of boastfully disregarding God's commands (39), they should follow God's order (40-41) especially when it comes to the bishops and deacons (42-43). The congregation at Corinth disregarded this when they overthrew officers that were appointed by the apostles themselves (44:3). Only the wicked persecute the righteous (45). We side with the righteous and not the wicked (46), as schism is the way of wickedness (47-48), and the love of God knows no schisms (49) so we should live in God's love and turn to him for forgiveness (50).

Clement states that there are two types of sinners in the church in Corinth: those who have been led into sin by “the tricks of the adversary,” and those “who set themselves up as leaders of rebellion and dissension.” Both should repent and both have
offered to them the forgiveness of God. In Second Temple thinking, they are alike both
guilty of intentional sin and God holds out hope for each.

The sinner has a choice: “Confess his transgressions” (exomologeisthai peri tōn
paraptōmatōn) or “harden his heart” (sklērunai tēn kardian autou). Clement reminds this
readers/hearers of the awful consequences which Pharaoh and Egypt suffered from
hardening their hearts.

“The Master” (ho despotēs, by whom he means the Father158) does not need
anything from a sinner in order to forgive him (or her). He quotes two Psalms (attributing
them to David) to illustrate this: “I will confess to the Lord, and it will please him more
than a young calf with horns and hoofs” (68:30-31, LXX). “Sacrifice to God a sacrifice
of praise...call upon me in your day of affliction, and I will deliver you, and you will
glorify me” (49:14-15, LXX). “For the sacrifice to God is a broken spirit (pneuma
suntetrimmenon)” (50:17, LXX). It is interesting, and perhaps significant that Clement
changes the wording for Psalm 68:30 (LXX) from “I will praise the name of my God
with a song, I will magnify him with praise” (ainesō to onoma tou theous mou met' ōdēs,
megalunō auton en ainesei), to “I will confess to the Lord” (exomologēsomai tō kuriō).
Given the context of the passage, he must be writing about confession of sin, which
means that he has re-interpreted an OT passage for use in the public confession of sin.

What can we glean from Clement concerning a theory and practice of repentance
and confession? Is Clement articulating basically the same doctrine and practice of
confession of sin as Acts, 1 John, James, and the Didache?

First, confession is clearly a part of the repentance that obtains forgiveness of sins.

158 See 7:5; 8:2; 9:4; 11:1, et al. It is a favorite term of Clement's for God.
It is a necessary part. Clement writes, “Let us ask that we may be forgiven” (51:1). If we don’t ask, we will not receive. Confession is the opposite of heart-hardening (51:3), without it one comes under condemnation (51:3-5). God “requires” (*chrēzei*\(^{159}\)) that we confess our sins.

Second, the confession is a confession from the heart, not a bare rite. A true confession comes from “a broken spirit” (52:4). As has already been noted, confession is a sign of the opposite of a hard heart (51:3), and is instead the sign of a heart soft to the Master.

Third, the confession again seems to be public for the following reasons: a) The required confession of sins comes in the midst of a very public controversy; b) The call to confess their sins is given in a public letter to the entire church at Corinth; c) The repentance required will necessitate a public recognition and restoration of the former officers of the church; d) The word “confess” (*exomologeōmaί*) carries with it a strong connotation of public acknowledgment;\(^{160}\) e) That the repentance, as Clement spells out in chapter 63, is explicitly public: “It is right for us . . . to bow the neck and, adopting the attitude of obedience, to submit to those who are the leaders of our souls,\(^{161}\) so that by ceasing this futile dissension we may attain the goal that is truly set before us, free from all blame” (63:1).

Fourth, the confession does not have any written liturgical formulation explicitly or implicitly attached to it, though it was likely liturgical in that it was probably going to

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\(^{159}\) BDAG, “*chrēza*,” “have need of.”

\(^{160}\) In the middle, the term means either “to make an admission of wrong-doing/sin” or “to declare openly in acknowledgment.” I would argue, and usage bears out, that often both of these meanings are present. See “*exomologēo*,” BDAG.

\(^{161}\) Note the allusion to Hebrews 13:17.
take place in public worship.

Fifth, even though submission to the leadership of the assembly is at the heart of the issue in *1 Clement*, there is no reference to the leaders forgiving, pronouncing forgiveness or otherwise restoring the Corinthian church members.

Sixth, there is no penance, but there is an explicit requirement for repentance and amends.

Seventh, there is a recognition in *1 Clement* of the necessity of the internal work of God which both opens “the eyes of our hearts that we may know” God (59:3) and which also “turn[s] back those . . . who wander” (59:4) and cleanses them which allows them to “walk in holiness and righteousness and purity of heart” (62:2).

Eighth, the placement of the language of cleansing after the language of repentance gives a strong indication (though not explicit) that repentance and confession of sin is instrumental in bringing about the inner cleansing. It is hard to not draw that conclusion from the progress of the letter.

Ninth, the language of cleansing with the references to sacrifice, in the context of the “blood of Christ . . . being poured out for our salvation” (7:4), gives at least some evidence that there continues to be an understanding of confession of sins being linked to sacrifice. Simply put, Christ's sacrifice has obtained salvation, and confession of sins in repentance lays hold of that sacrifice.

Tenth, the Holy Spirit is the unseen, and often unnamed operator in the hearts of Christians in *1 Clement*. Clement reminds the Corinthian church that they experienced “an abundant outpouring of the Holy Spirit” (2:2). He reminds them that the Spirit of the
Lord (pneuma kuriou) constantly is at work searching hearts (21:2). In warning he tells them that the Spirit of God pursues them everywhere (28:3). He reminds them that the apostles had been sent out “with the firm assurance that the Holy Spirit gives” (42:3) and appointed from the first converts officers for the church, whom they had “tested . . . by the Spirit” (42:4). And amidst all of this direct reference to the work of the Spirit are references to the work of God which can only be accomplished by the Spirit (such as the discipline of the Lord, 56:5). The Holy Spirit gives the Word of God (47:3 and many others), converts them through the Spirit, and brings them to repentance through correction by the Spirit. The confession of sin is part of the Spirit-enabled act of repentance. In 1 Clement, the Spirit is the constant “hand of God” in the lives of Christians.

Eleventh, the confession of sin brings a forgiving atonement which lifts the hand of correction off of the Christian. Clement brings this up in two ways, in the threats of eschatological judgement, such as the reference to the Egyptians being sent “down to Hades alive” in chapter 52, and in the explicit references to the discipline of the righteous in chapter 56. “The Master . . . is a kind Father, he disciplines us in order that we may obtain mercy through his holy discipline” (56:16).

It would seem that Clement demonstrates almost every element found in the theology and praxis of penitential practices of Second Temple Judaism, with the recognition that the understanding of sacrifice has been transformed by the work of Christ.

162 To borrow the phrase of Irenaeus.
Confession in the Primitive Churches – Synthesis and Summary

Below is a chart summarizing the passages dealing with confession of sin which have just been surveyed. This demonstrates visually the consistency found in these different texts in regards to confession of sin.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acts 18</th>
<th>1 John</th>
<th>James</th>
<th>Didache</th>
<th>1 Clement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provenance</td>
<td>Antioch?</td>
<td>Ephesus</td>
<td>Jerusalem</td>
<td>Syro-Palestine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recipients</td>
<td>Grk Xtiens</td>
<td>Asia Min. Xs (^{163})</td>
<td>Jewish Xtiens</td>
<td>Syrian Xtiens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasion</td>
<td>Conversion</td>
<td>Repentance</td>
<td>Repentance</td>
<td>Eucharist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liturgical</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Not Explicit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contrition</td>
<td>Implicit</td>
<td>Implicit</td>
<td>Implicit</td>
<td>Implicit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divine Discip.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecc. Discip.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Possibly</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amends</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiveness</td>
<td>Not explicit</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Not explicit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normativity</td>
<td>Probably</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What an examination of these texts reveals is a remarkable continuity in the practice and theology of confession of sin in these selected texts of these most primitive

\(^{163}\) Probably Greek speaking Christians in Asia Minor.

\(^{164}\) Corinth was a Roman colony founded by Roman soldiers. Under Roman law, Corinth was Rome. Socially and historically, the citizens there were Roman, as the Greek city had been destroyed and rebuilt a hundred years later by Romans.
churches. Though these communities are separated by at least 50 years (perhaps much more) and span Rome, Asia Minor, the North Levant, Syria and Jerusalem proper, as well as consisting of a wide variety of ethnicities and religious backgrounds, the practice and theology in this matter seem to be parallel, in much the same way that baptism functioned. Confession of sin was a common practice across different communities and was arguably considered a base-line Christian marker and practice. A summary of this praxis and theology could be made as follows:

Confession of sin happened both at conversion and in ongoing repentance. Indeed, it is very likely that there was not always a very sharp distinction between the two, especially in dealing with Jews/Jewish Christians. People confessed their sins when they responded to John the Baptist, they confessed when they had the (apparent) conversion at Ephesus, and they certainly confessed their sins when they felt they were under God's discipline, had sinned publicly, needed freedom from sin or approached the Lord's Table.

Confession of sin was fundamentally non-private. There would have been times a Christian confessed to God alone, but all discussions of confession seem to indicate confession to other Christians, or in the worship service, or in public generally. This is so prevalent, especially when compared to an utter lack of comparable passages clearly indicating private or secret confession, that it has to be meaningful. The foundational practice of confession of sin was non-private.

Confession of sin was, as far as can be evidenced in the earliest churches (pre-100), non-scripted, though there might have been liturgical space given to do so. For example, when the Gospel was proclaimed there was likely an encouragement to confess
sins; likewise, at the Eucharist, there may have been a time set aside specifically for confession, but the confession in both instances was unscripted.

Confession of sin was, at least ordinarily, non-disciplinary. Confession was not happening at the insistence of presbyters/bishops. It was not to relieve ecclesiastical discipline. It seems quite voluntary and extemporaneous.

Confession of sin seems to be linked to a demonstration of a heart-felt repentance. Others know that a conversion and/or repentance is heart-felt and genuine because of the confession of sin that accompanies it. This is not stated explicitly, but it is demonstrated implicitly. For example, in the narrative of Acts 18, the confession of sin seems to function as a demonstration both of the Spirit’s work and the heart-felt and genuine nature of the repentance.

Confession was evidence that the Spirit was working in the life and heart of a believer and a community. In one sense the Christian confessed his or her sin, but in another, the confession was a work of the Spirit and was enabled by him. The same Spirit who moved in a Christian to proclaim Jesus as Lord, convicted the world of sin.

Confession of sin was part of the conversion/faith experience in the same way that “confessing Jesus as Lord” was. Positively, Christians confessed Jesus as Lord (believing in their hearts that God rose him from the dead); negatively, Christians confessed their sins and part of leaving their sins and claiming Jesus as Lord. This type of paradigm can be seen clearly in Acts 2:38, where Peter exhorts those present to “repent and be baptized.” Confession of sin and confession of Jesus as Lord were two sides of the same coin.
Confession of sin was part of the means by which the Christian received forgiveness of sins. It could be said that their sins were atoned for by confession with repentance, to speak biblically. To say it in more careful Reformation language, it could be said that the faith which receives Christ is the faith which claims Christ and publicly forsakes sin. While there is no evidence that Christians thought that they could manipulate God by confession, there seems to be an understanding that confession of sin is the normal way to seek forgiveness and atonement with God.

Confession of sin was a means for Christians to continue to appropriate forgiveness and stay in a proper relationship with God even as they continued to be broken and struggling sinners. Confession was part of the means by which the relationship between a holy God and sinful people was conducted. It was how faith was lived out. Since God disciplines those whom he loves, confession invites God to remove his hand of discipline.

Confession of sin was a means for overcoming sin and being cleansed of pollution brought about by sin and repairing corruption which bore the fruit of sin. Confession was, in Reformation language, a “means of grace.” Confession of sin was not only an act of forsaking sin, but enlisting the Spirit's aid in doing so.

While there seems to be a commonality in regards to confession of sin across these communities, it must also be acknowledged that the topic is not pervasive throughout the literature. Why is this so if it was a foundational practice? There are probably several reasons why it was both foundational and only infrequently addressed.

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165 “Means of grace,” is a larger category than sacraments in Reformed theology. The sacraments are means of grace, but not all means of grace are sacraments.
The first reason is that the practice is apparently non-controversial. Unlike questions of circumcision and Jewish law, or even more so questions of faith and justification, the confession of sin was something that was simply accepted. It shows up as something evidential of the work of the Spirit (Acts), but why the Spirit would work in that way is not addressed. It does not have to be. In 1 John and Acts believers are encouraged in the practice, but the practice is not argued for and there is no elaborate justification for it. In the Didache, it is the regular practice with the Eucharist and in 1 Clement it is the natural means of repentance from sin. It is consistently presented as if it were normal.

The second reason is that comes to Christians as a basic inheritance from Judaism. While the details of the practice might be distinct and while some groups or people may not practice it frequently (or at all), it is part of the basic praxis and theological “package” of Jewish religion. This was something Jews had done for a very long time. Even if a particular Jew or Jewish group didn't do it, they were very familiar with it, both from their Scriptures and extra-biblical literature. It did not need explaining or justification.
Confession of sin is rarely examined in its primitive and Jewish context because of the great controversy surrounding the sacrament of sacerdotal auricular confession, and the eschewing of it, from the High Middle Ages until today. The extreme polemicism has lead to three unhelpful characteristics in the study of confession of sin in its earliest context. First, there is a tendency to use the earliest material as grist for the mill of justification for later practices, which has the consequence of never examining the primitive material in its own right. Second, anachronistically reading Thomistic theology back into the ancient texts became the rule for some Roman writers, finding, for example, priestly confession in James 5:16, “Confess your sins, one to another.” Third, with the desire to reject Roman distinctives, such as purgatory and the exclusive right of priests to absolve sin, Protestant writers have read the material with a jaundiced eye and have rejected what their forbears have affirmed, the fundamental biblicalness and helpfulness of verbal confession of sin. Thankfully, there is significant movement among both Roman and Protestant Christians to examine the material on confession of sin more critically and less polemically.

It is now generally accepted that the practice of sacerdotal auricular confession

168 I mean especially those characteristic of Trindentine Roman Catholicism
does not develop directly from the practices of the most primitive churches, but from Irish penitential confession in the sixth century. Although there is some evidence of a private penance . . . in the East and of the practice of merely separating those guilty of lesser sins from the Eucharist, the documents of the first five centuries refer almost exclusively to public penance. For this reason many contemporary historians, both Catholic and Protestant, trace the origins of private penance as a normal discipline to the churches of Ireland, Wales, and Britain. The practice of private confession became so popular that it displaced canonical confession, a public practice which seemed to develop from the most primitive churches. Older Roman writers often argued that New Testament and primitive texts (such as 1 Clement and the Shepherd) describe sacerdotal auricular confession as a sacramental practice. Alternatively, older Roman writers admitted the historicity of canonical confession, but denied its sacramental character. Generally, Roman and Protestant writers now concede that there were, in reality, two streams of confessional practice and that the Irish practice won out and developed into the practice of sacramental penance.

Canonical confession developed from the tradition of public confession and the

171 Tentler, 10; cf. Clark Hyde, To Declare God’s Forgiveness: Toward a Pastoral Theology of Reconciliation (Wilton, CT: Morehouse Barlow, 1984) 6.
172 Tentler, 4; though the ancient practice was not always public; see Bingham, II, 1066.
173 Hanna, 629-630.
174 Hanna, 631.
175 For a Protestant example, see Hyde, 6.
176 Hyde places this in the fourth century after the Peace of Constantine, 11.
understanding of the difference between grievous and non-grievous sins. When a Christian committed a grievous sin, he or she would take the sin to the bishop, who would prescribe a period and course of penance so that the Christian might be restored and forgiven. It seems that the concern was both for restoration to the community (ecclesiastical) and assurance of true contrition (atonement). Depending upon the severity of the sin, the period of penance could be quite long, many decades in fact, and also could include fasting and other acts of self-denial.

Violations of the sixth commandment were punished with the greatest severity; the penance varied, according to the nature of the sin, from three to fifteen years, the extreme penalty being prescribed for incest, i.e., fifteen to twenty-five years. Whatever its duration, the penance included fasting on bread and water, either for the whole period or for a specified portion.

The penitent journeyed through stages of penitence, “enrolled in the order of penitents,” gradually having his or her rights to the community and worship restored over time. Penitents progressed through stages (proskaiontes or mourners, akroōmenoi or hearers, hupopiptontes or kneelers, sunistumenoi or co-standers) as they moved to restoration. Some penitents were only restored when near death. And restoration from a grievous sin, even in fairly early practice, could only occur once. It is not

177 Though, the confession of sins was not uniformly public as the practice developed. Bingham cites Tertullian, Chrysostom and others. Bingham, I, 437.
178 There was also an office of “penitentiary presbyter” who helped Christians determine whether a sin was grievous or not and therefore whether it mandated canonical repentance. Bingham, II, 1073; Palmer, 75.
179 Hyde, 9.
180 Willingness to perform the penance was evidence of the sincerity of contrition. For the penitent, “the consolation of the system lies in its difficulty,” Tentler, 14.
181 Hanna, 633.
182 Palmer, 75.
183 Bingham, vol. 2, 1058.
184 Tentler, 6.
185 Tentler, 5.
difficult to see why this practice, given its severity, would not be as functional or as popular as the practice of private sacramental confession.

It should be noted that a key difference in the practices of canonical and private sacramental confession is that in canonical confession the penitent is restored after the penitential period is complete, whereas in private confession the penitent is first absolved and then prescribed penance. Functionally, whether or not the bishop's declaration is taken as sacramental in canonical confession, the emphasis is placed upon the contrition of the penitent. The willingness to complete a period and plan of penitence confirms to the penitent, the bishop and the community that the contrition/repentance is genuine. The rite functions *ex opere operantis* instead of *ex opere operato*.

How closely does the practice of canonical confession in the early Middle Ages resemble what can be known about the primitive practices of liturgical confession? Certainly a developmental progression can be seen, where aspects of the older practice are evident, but also changes which go beyond simple development and contextualization to a somewhat different rite with elements which seem to be entirely new.

There is no evidence from the passages surveyed above that the practice of confession in the most primitive churches was a fundamentally “ecclesiastical” practice, in the sense of being practiced at the exclusive direction of, and in the private presence

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186 Tentler intimates that the diminution of the severity of the punishments of canonical penance may have had something to do with the change in reliance upon the priestly power for assurance. See Tentler, 18-19.

187 Tentler, 14.

188 Tentler, 25-26. “From the work of the one working,” as opposed to “from the work worked.” The first places the emphasis on the faith of the penitent, the second upon the sacramental authority of the priest or bishop.
of, the church hierarchy. Indeed, it was, on the face of it, fundamentally communal. There is no mention of presbyter or bishop (or, presbyter-bishop) involvement in any of the passages. One could argue their involvement should be assumed, but the immediate question is, “On what basis?” The only substantive argument that I have read concerning this is the granting of “the keys of the kingdom” and the power to forgive sins means the rite would have been presided over sacramentally by a bishop functioning as the ecclesiastical heir of the apostles. This is, of course, an argument from silence and it is striking that something that would have been an innovation from Jewish practice would have no narrative or didactive support.

Acts 19:18-20 omits priestly involvement; James 5:16 seems to preclude it (although the presbyters had been summoned, interpreting “one another” as “to the bishop or priest” does not seem correct, as argued above). 1 John 1:9 is silent one way or another. 1 Clement mentions presbyters, but the submission mentioned in the letter is inherent in their repentance. The sin of the Corinthians is unlawfully deposing their presbyters so their repentance involves acknowledging the authority of the presbyters once again. This is different than repenting from, for example, idolatry, and taking the confession to the bishop for restoration. 1 Clement argues neither for nor against ecclesiastical confession.

There is no mention of only a single opportunity for repentance found in the passages surveyed, though the teaching that there was only a single repentance available

189 Though the presbyters certainly would have provided oversight.
190 Hanna, 619.
after baptism is undoubtedly very old, as both Hermas and Tertullian speak of it.\footnote{Bingham, vol. 2, 1074.} Hebrews 6:4-6 is perhaps a place in the New Testament where this teaching might be found (and Clement clearly knew Hebrews\footnote{Holmes, 37.}), but it would seem that it would be found throughout the New Testament if it were the universal primitive practice. The lack of mention of such a standard in the \textit{Didache} and \textit{1 Clement} is telling. It would be natural to qualify the confession of sins in the \textit{Didache} to “those not grievous” and a lack of warning in the eschatological chapter of the \textit{Didache} about a single opportunity would be surprising if it were the practice. Even more so, with the plethora of warnings and admonitions in \textit{1 Clement}, the omission of a warning concerning a solitary opportunity for repentance probably means that it was not a universal teaching.

The long periods of penitence are missing from the earliest material, as is a system of grades of penitents. Both are assuredly developments from primitive practice, though fasting and other penitential practices might have been part of the original process.

Sacerdotal auricular confession (private and sacramental) is clearly a far different rite than the public confession found in the the most primitive texts and this seems no longer in debate.\footnote{See J. Daniélou, “Penance, Sacrament of” in \textit{New Catholic Encyclopedia}, 2nd ed., vol. 11 (Pau-Red) (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 2003) 68-71.} While the practice might well have roots in the New Testament, it comes from different texts entirely. Attempts to marry the two streams of tradition in the original springs are probably misguided. Several differences highlight the distinction between the two.
First, private sacramental confession, especially in Tridentine theology, functions *ex opere operato*. It is difficult to over-emphasize the importance of this. The emphasis is upon the sacramental authority and power of the priest. While a lack of contrition is a barrier to true forgiveness, the primary emphasis is upon the priest functioning as a representative of Christ. This priestly sacramental function is not found in the texts surveyed either implicitly or explicitly.

Second, the priestly sacramental authority (or something like it) is found in the New Testament, but it is found in different texts, notably Matthew 16:19 and John 20:21-23. This is where all Roman writers (again, especially Tridentine) build a sacramental theology for reconciliation and it is a powerful set of texts upon which to make the argument. However, these texts, and the reality to which they bear witness, are never mentioned in the texts surveyed concerning public confession of sin, and this is striking. There is no priestly absolution in Acts 19:18-20 or James 5:16. It has to be read into 1 John 1:9, the Didache and 1 Clement. Given that some Roman authors proclaim that sacramental confession is the only means of forgiveness of post-baptismal sin, one wonders what the point is of the obviously non-sacramental confessions (which the same Roman authors acknowledge). Perhaps a resolution could be found in constructing a third way between the Roman, exclusivist, position and the Protestant, dismissive-ist, position. Indeed, as Marion Hatchett has pointed out, “the Lutheran and Reformed

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194 Tentler refers to it as “intentional fraud,” 26.
196 Hanna, 625-626. Tentler documents the doubts about this in the Roman church until the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, 20-21.
197 Hanna, 625; Tentler writes, “The energy spent on these arguments suggests a nagging doubt,” 59.
churches attempted to restore the ancient public penitence through church discipline and the 'fencing of the table,' and general confessions, as well as absolutions, became part of their rites.

This third way would acknowledge the sacramental reality of the keys of the kingdom, but not view it as exclusive and while those keys are placed in the hands of the elders and/or bishops, they are placed generally in the assembly of believers as well.

Third, while the distinguishing between mortal and venial sins does have precedent in both Testaments and Second Temple Judaism, it has been appropriated to serve a function foreign to its original usage. The ancient distinction between “intentional” and “unintentional” sins does correspond to “mortal” and “venial” sins (a correspondence Protestants should note), and the idea that they are treated differently is also biblical. Indeed, according to the theology of mortal sin in Roman theology, a “deliberate sin” places one in great danger. As is noted above, there was no sacrifice in Judaism for a deliberate sin. At this point, however, there is a great difference as the deliberate sin requires confession as part of repentance, thus “converting” the sin into something unintentional, which means that the sacrifice can now cover the sin (see above). In Roman teaching, the mortal sin requires sacramental intervention. Instead of the contrition of the penitent restoring the efficacy of the sacrifice for atonement, it is the sacramental absolution and “the priest's prayers [which place] the admittedly inadequate

198 Hatchett, 450.
199 This type of theology and praxis is described in a booklet of the Order of the Holy Cross: Nicholas Radelmiller and Elizabeth Canham, Confession: Reconciliation & Forgiveness (Pineville, SC: Priory Publications, 1986) 5-6.
200 Roman theology has developed substantially since Vatican II and this statement requires much qualification to take in all of the current nuance, development and debate in this issue in Roman Catholicism.
201 Hanna, 618, 628.
works of the penitent...in relationship to the merits of Christ." 202 "Only the absolution of the priest, St. Thomas argued, can apply the passion of Christ to the forgiveness of sins." 203 Again, contrition is not missing from the Roman system, but it is placed under the sacramental power of the priest. 204 Vatican II proposed serious theological and practical changes to the Tridentine tradition and so modern Roman Catholicism this can be presented very differently, though Tridentine theology is still very influential.

Fourth, the theology of private sacramental confession assumes a different theology of divine retribution. Both private and public confession assume that deliberate/mortal sin places the sinner in great danger (how that works is beyond the scope of this thesis, but is an interesting study). However, the difference is in the construction of the non-eschataological punishment of God, punishment which does not send one to final punishment. Here the traditional Roman system assumes a bifurcation between final and “temporal” punishments. In the Roman system, the sacrament of confession relieves all of the first and only part of the second. Therefore, most penitents can expect to spend time in Purgatory satisfying the temporal punishments for their sins. 205 “This bill of suffering could also be paid in part or in full on earth by doing satisfaction, that is, works of prayer, self-denial, and charity.” 206 Repeated sacramental confession can theoretically remit all of that punishment. “The oftener one confesses the more is the (temporal) penalty reduced; hence one might confess over and over again until the whole penalty is canceled, nor would he thereby offer any injury to the

202 Tentler, 23.
203 Tentler, 24; cf 66.
204 Tentler, 25 (referring to the teaching of Thomas Aquinas).
205 Hanna, 628; cf Tentler, 23.
206 Tentler, 23.
sacrament. Framed in this way, the Roman system constructs this temporal punishment as somewhat like satisfying a debt. The canonical (especially early) and primitive public rites construct the non-eschatological punishments of God as disciplinary and therefore lifted upon repentance. God's discipline is not a debt to be satisfied in Purgatory, but is the hand of the Father upon his children to bring them to repentance. When his children turn from their sin, he lifts his hand, and the discipline ceases. As argued above, this is clearly in focus in James 5:16 and is a constant theme in Second Temple Judaism.

Fifth, the system of penance functions very differently in the Roman sacramental system as opposed to the canonical and primitive public rites. In the primitive and canonical rites, penance functions to confirm to the penitent and the community that the contrition is genuine. Indeed, in Second Temple Judaism, and perhaps also in the most primitive Christian communities, this aspect functioned more like “amends” in Twelve-Step recovery. Amending the wrong is simply intrinsic to repentance. One who has done a wrong, who now hates his or her wrongdoing, will desire to repair whatever damage he or she has done. In the (Tridentine) Roman sacramental system, the penance occurs after the absolution, so it does not function to demonstrate repentance, and it often, but not exclusively, is comprised of acts not organically related to or called for by the sin itself, such as a litany of prayers. Its function is satisfying the temporal

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207 Hanna, quoting Thomas Aquinas, 628.
208 Tentler, 14; and, quoting Luther, “In former days canonical penances were imposed before, not after, absolution – as tests of true contrition,” 15.
210 Tentler, 16.
punishment for sin, a notion entirely absent from the most primitive rite, the canonical rite, and the confessional texts surveyed (as well as Second Temple Judaism).

From all of this, it is clear that the primitive rite of public confession of sin is an entirely different rite than sacerdotal auricular confession and the development of the primitive rite resulted in the canonical rite, supplanted eventually by the private rite originating from the Irish churches.

Chapter Five

A Tentative Constructive Theology and Praxis

for Liturgical Confession of Sin in the Modern Church

The Three Conversions and the Place of Confession of Sin

Robert Hughes has helpfully noted that there are not one, but three types of conversion/s. \(^{211}\) Within conversion, we are converted from “the domain of darkness”; we are converted to “the kingdom of his beloved Son,” \(^{212}\) we are converted by the Father, who acts through the person of the Holy Spirit. \(^{213}\) This is given far too little emphasis in the Church. While different Christian traditions tend to emphasize one of the conversions at the exclusion or marginalization of the others, all three are elements of true conversion. \(^{214}\)

Most of modern Reformed evangelicalism focuses on the conversion to Jesus Christ. This corresponds to Romans 10, “because if you confess with your lips that Jesus

\(^{211}\) Hughes, 71.

\(^{212}\) Colossians 1:13 (ESV).

\(^{213}\) Hughes, 106.

\(^{214}\) Hughes, 71.
is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” In its less sophisticated form, it manifests in an emphasis on “getting saved” by accepting Jesus as Savior. In the more sophisticated form, it manifests in an emphasis on entering and living in the Kingdom (“reign and commonwealth”\(^{215}\)) of God. In conversion, we are drawn to the beauty and goodness of God and his Kingdom.

But we not only drawn to something, we are drawn away from something. The Westminster Shorter Catechism expresses this clearly in Question 87:

Q. What is repentance unto life?

A. Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience.

The question captures both the movement to and the movement from in Christian conversion. These movements are not separate, but part of one and the same transformation in the life of a Christian. Conversion is a declaration of one allegiance while renouncing another. This is captured (albeit not as balanced as one might wish) in the Westminster Confession of Faith chapter “On Baptism:”

Baptism is a sacrament of the new testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible Church; but also to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life.\(^{216}\)

Baptism signifies and seals a “giving up unto God.” It is both an oath of allegiance and a renunciation. As an oath of allegiance, Christians affirmed, from the earliest times, that

\(^{215}\) Hughes, 99.

\(^{216}\) Westminster Confession of Faith, XXVIII.i (italics added for emphasis).
“Jesus is Lord.” This is of course a way of saying, “Jesus is my Lord.” But baptism, with its sacramental washing, also signifies the renunciation of the world, the forces of darkness. Both allegiance and renunciation are therefore intrinsic to conversion, of which baptism is the sacrament.

But these conversions are not something that a human can accomplish without aid. This is why humanity was not sent a book, but a Savior, who could accomplish salvation for sinful humanity. Or, as Hughes writes, “Not even Jesus as an ideal, but by a particular, concrete, historical life, that of Jesus of Nazareth, the Word and Wisdom of God made flesh,”217 And accomplishing salvation, he ascended to heaven and sent the Spirit to move in human hearts to receive what is offered by Christ. The Father sends, the Son accomplishes, the Spirit applies; the Triune God moves in gracious love to save. This is the conversion by. In a sense the conversion to and the conversion from bear witness to the secret work of the Spirit, the actor in the conversion by.218 As the persons of the Trinity move as One with a single will and purpose, the conversion of a human being returning to the Creator is also triune, three conversions that are actually one movement into the life of God: “The external works of God (the divine economy as a plan for the universe) are indivisible, that is, engaged by the entire Trinity.”219

And so, returning to the conversion from, of which confession of sin is an intrinsic part, it can be seen that in the doubly Trinitarian flow of initial conversion, confession is the outworking of the details of renunciation. In initial conversion, a believer names his or her sin as a concrete affirmation of what is left behind in renunciation. The general is

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217 Hughes, 109.
218 Hughes, 106.
219 Hughes, 6 (footnote “b”).
found in the *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979) (though missing from the baptismal vows of the Presbyterian Church in America, *Book of Church Order*):

Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?

Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?

Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?

But the specifics are found in the conversions of the New Testament, such as the masses who responded to John the Baptist, “And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.” Or the mass repentance examined from the book of Acts (vs. 18–20), where the Ephesian believers came and “confessed and disclosed their practices.” The renunciation is, in a sense, a theory that then works itself out in the naming and rejecting what is renounced. The experience of the world, with its varied sin and brokenness, is different for all, and so the naming of what is renounced personalizes the renunciation. It is an end of one citizenship, “To this country, I no longer belong.”

It does not work as cleanly as one could wish. Christians have the hope of their own resurrection, when the flesh is raised “imperishable,” but they can only live currently in the reality of Christ's resurrection, the “first resurrection” (Revelation 20:6). They cling to the hope of their own resurrection while experiencing ongoing (and often haltingly painful) transformation as they are formed by the cooperation of their will with the work of the Spirit, who continually invites, equips and enables them to live more in

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220 Mark 1:5.
221 1 Corinthians 15:42.
the reality of the age to come. This is the ongoing conversion of the Spirit-filled life.222

A Christian is called to an ongoing confession of sins because a Christian remains a mixture of pollution and sacredness. The Spirit brings the Christian to life, but old habits of the flesh and deep sinful affections remain along with the nature that is made new. In the famous dictum of Luther, we are “simul iustus et peccator.” Our conversion does not end with baptism, it begins. It is the sign of the moment, “Well, we've actually started this journey.”223

The Christian then lives a life of reaffirming his or her conversion. When sin is confessed, it is both a declaration and reality of a change of intention. The sin is intentionally set down. We walk away from it. This is true even though we are wont to pick it back up again. This is the dynamic described in the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous, part of the biblical inheritance of that movement, that while we “made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves,” and “admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs,”224 the process does not end with one tidy cleaning, but with the “spring cleaning,” we continue the regular maintenance of “personal inventory”225 and, the house being subjected to an initial cleaning, we begin a life of deep cleaning by the power of the Spirit, who invites us into an ever greater trust and experience of forgiveness which bears the fruit of loving obedience.

It is important to understand the nature of the obedience as loving obedience,

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222 This is described beautifully in M. Basilea Schlink, Repentance – The Joy-Filled Life (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1984).
223 Hughes, 72.
224 Alcoholics Anonymous, 59.
225 In A.A., this is the eleventh step.
servile fear has no place, only awe before a Father in whom we experience absolute
acceptance in Christ. Our life of acknowledgment and renunciation of sin (ongoing
confession) is a participation in the loving relationship of a parent and child. While it is
true that we are undeserving of his grace, we confess our sin to learn more of his love.
“Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.”

As an act of participation in the relationship with have with our Father, the
confession of sins is a means of grace. This means that the act is more than a
humanistic therapy, though those things are often God-given manifestations of common
grace which are a blessing. As a means of grace, God works through and beyond our will
in a holy mystery. In a sense he says, “Show up for this and I will meet you there and do
something that you cannot.” We come to confession in response to the promise that “he
who is faithful and just will forgive us our sin and cleanse us of all unrighteousness.”

This is not something that we do alone; we have been called to a Kingdom, which
Hughes very helpfully terms a “commonwealth.” There are others there. We are
citizens, members of God's family. We experience God in the context of a family. We are
drawn together into the Triune life of God. Salvation is a family affair. Therefore the act
of confession of sin, the outworking of our ongoing conversion, is a family affair. It
is true that our relationship with God is personal, but it is more than personal. It is
communal.

Too little attention is paid to this in the Reformed Evangelical communion,

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226 Romans 5:20.
227 I mean this in the sense of the “outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us
the benefits of redemption,” in the Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question 88.
228 1 John 1:9.
229 Hughes, 99.
probably owing to our tremendous debt to the inheritance of the Great Awakenings.\textsuperscript{230} If we as people are to be more than “saved” (meaning, in Reformation terminology, “justified”) but also “formed,” (meaning “sanctified”) then we also are to be “formed” as communities – manifestations of the Body of Christ on earth. Family systems theory (Virginia Satir and Bowen theory and others) has reminded us that sin is not only personal and social, it is relational.\textsuperscript{231} And in the act of confession within a community, the community is given space and encouragement to heal and repent and believe and trust. Perhaps the movement of hyper-individualism, constantly a bane in Western Christianity, brings with it the stagnation of formation of the community. Public communal confession is a renunciation of that hyper-individualism and a concrete recognition of the mystical Body of Jesus.

The practical outworkings of this are likely much simpler than one may expect given our current culture of programs and specialized trainings. While this is true of my own tradition, I expect that it is hardly unique in Western Christendom with our idolization of specialization and certified experts for all things worth doing. Indeed, the recovery of this means of grace in our communities starts not with a program, but with the decision and act to create a liturgical space for confession of sin. What this means is that just as we already create a space for communal prayer and communal worship in song, we need to create a space for communal, unscripted, confession of sin.

In my own congregation, this was accomplished by creating a loosely scripted, if

\textsuperscript{230} Richard F. Lovelace, \textit{Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal} (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979) 27.

unwritten, liturgy for Lord's Supper Sunday. We celebrate the Lord's Supper once a month, in the evening and after a common meal. The Friday before we have a day of prayer and fasting. The Sunday morning of the Lord's Supper, instead of a general confession of sin (often taken from the *Book of Common Worship*, 1946), I give a short explanation which tells newcomers what we are doing and why we are doing it:

> On most Sundays we have a general confession of sins, where I, as your pastor, lead you in a confession of sins of our congregation. But on the Sunday we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we take time to confess our particular sins to God. We don't do this to be righteous, we do this laying hold of the righteousness of Christ which he grants us by faith. We come to God bearing our brokenness and need. Just a patient pleads her sickness to a doctor and a client pleads the depth of his troubles to an attorney, we plead our sin before our Savior, knowing that "he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us of all unrighteousness." I will open us in prayer and you can confess your sins to God, whether in the secrecy of your heart, or out loud before your brothers and sisters.  

We never know how long the period of prayer (with 125-200 congregants) will last; it can go from five to fifteen minutes (rarely, even longer). There are mornings where the confessions are subdued but sincere and mornings where, often after a period of silence, brokenness bursts forth seeking grace. The men have a more difficult time voicing their sins than the women. Children sometimes participate with great honesty. Our practice has stunned several Presbyterian pastors, one of whom said, “My elders would never have done this.” I am not so sure that is true.

It is important for Reformed Evangelical Christians to note that the confession of sin is not simply a “Catholic practice,” something that denies the riches of the Reformed faith. Instead, it is part of the warp and woof of the original worship of the Reformers. As mentioned above, the magisterial Reformers, notably Calvin and Luther, both recognized

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232 There is a great variety of ways in which I do this, but this example gives a general sense.
the importance of confession of sin. The English Puritans were noted for taking seriously their role as “curers of souls,” and as an outworking of that calling spent a great deal of time hearing confessions. The Westminster Confession of Faith explicitly calls for open and particular confession of sin in two sections of Chapter XI.v-vi:

Men ought not to content themselves with a general repentance, but it is every man’s duty to endeavour to repent of his particular sins, particularly.

As every man is bound to make private confession of his sins to God, praying for the pardon thereof; upon which, and the forsaking of them, he shall find mercy; so, he that scandalizeth his brother, or the Church of Christ, ought to be willing, by a private or publick confession, and sorrow for his sin, to declare his repentance to those that are offended, who are thereupon to be reconciled to him, and in love to receive him.

Reflecting on our practice and the life of our congregation and its members, I have seen several benefits begin to manifest over several years, some more fully than others. As I conclude this study on the ancient practice of public confession of sin, I think it would be helpful to note them as an encouragement and confirmation of the value of this even in modern congregations.

Confession of sin completes the biblical practice of the laying on of hands of the elders of the Church. We have had members who have been greatly comforted by seeking prayer for sickness and other afflictions while acknowledging and repenting of their sins. This has been particularly powerful for those struggling with life-controlling sins (addictions).

Public confession of sin plays down the idea that the pastors or elders are the only

233 Palmer, 77.
ones who can offer a chance for biblical transparency and absolution. In the words of Luther, to the perpetual offense of Tridentine Roman Catholics, confession can be heard by any believer, including a woman or a child.

Public confession attacks legalism because the heart of legalism is making the law of God “keep-able,” converting it into some kind of opportunity for boasting. Confession publicly destroys the myth that any of us ever deserve God's grace.

Regular public confession provides a time where trembling sinners, convinced of their need for public restoration, can naturally bring their sin before the body and be restored. In revivalistic churches, members know that they can “walk the aisle” at the end of the service. In our congregation, members have a natural opportunity, which they anticipate, to confess their sin openly.

Regular public confession eases the discipline of the Church by making public confession of sins (especially public sins) “normal,” so that the admonition of the elders is not unduly jarring. This has been crucial in enabling the restorative practice of church discipline, as formal discipline is not a very opportune time to convince a broken sinner that confession is not an exercise in shame but in restoration. After several years, many members of our congregation are beginning to understand intuitively that, after public sin, public confession is the path to public restoration and reconciliation with the community.

Conversely, consistent, though hopefully very infrequent, ecclesiastical discipline\(^{235}\) provides part of what is necessary to ensure a level of safety in confession of

\(^{235}\) To give a context, in the past fifteen years we have had two excommunications, three public admonitions and perhaps a half dozen public confessions of sin (which do not happen in the morning.
sin. In the nearly ten years that our congregation has been practicing this, we have never had an incident of betrayal arising out of a confession of sin. We had discovered that with appropriate and healthy formal discipline, that “a little bit goes a long way.”

Public confession of sin provides an atmosphere of safety all by itself because it, over time, promotes grace. It is probably true that a substantial amount of teaching on not just confession but grace in relationships is necessary to successfully start such a practice, but the practice itself promotes an atmosphere of grace and provides a “positive feedback loop.” In addition, the public confession of sin removes some of the motivation for gossip. It is hard to gossip about someone who openly acknowledges sin. To some extent, when I confess sin in my community, I am inviting people to talk to me about it. And the truth is, they often already know. For those who might never talk with me about the sin, the confession gives the community the permission and the encouragement to move on, where hiding sin can promote a climate where it is hard to move on.

Public confession of sin within liturgy gives people a chance to tell their sin without the details of their stories. When people confess their sins in public prayer it promotes a different kind of monologue than when they confess them directly to the community outside of prayer. Prayer confessions are more to the point, less laden with detail than are public confessions. Often the confessions are about heart attitudes rather than behaviors: “Father I confess my anger and impatience towards my children; please forgive me.” While the confessions can be very emotional, they are almost never detailed.

Public confession of sin functions best where there are layers of opportunities to confess at different levels of privacy and safety. When confession is directed towards the

worship service, but a much more tightly controlled Lord's Supper service).
community, for example, we have it in the evening Lord's Supper service, where we take care of “family business.” There confessions are introduced and closed with admonitions regarding confidentiality and gossip. Even more sensitive confessions happen with the member and elders in private, where something much more akin to a “confessional seal” is in place, except regarding the abuse of children. It seems that the public confession promotes the more private confessions.

Public confession of sin helps those struggling with the shame of “terminal uniqueness” by helping all understand the common-ness of our sin. It is difficult for someone to understand how encouraging it can be for a fellow sinner to hear that someone is struggling with the same sin and that the shame is not a barrier to grace or restoration.

Public confession of sin is a powerful reminder of our constant need of the atoning work of Christ and constantly points to him.

Particular and public confession of sin drives home an understanding of personal sinfulness, rather than a general admission of sinfulness which is often the admission of no particular sinfulness at all. The admission, “I'm just a sinner” can sound very pious in a way that “I can't quit eating even though it is killing me” never can.

Public confession of sin brings humility by destroying the foundation for pride, which is self-righteousness. There is no more repugnant characteristic of congregations in the hearts of truly broken sinners than self righteousness. To put it plainly, sex addicts and the severely mentally ill avoid self-righteousness congregations like the plague. There are few more effective cures for self-righteousness than open confession of sin.
Public confession brings humiliation which is often needed in repentance and missing in private confession of sin. We often cannot be free of our sin until we overcome our pride. Open confession of sin is humbling and therefore destroys pride. It can function as the “break through moment” for some.

Public confession is an excellent means of striving for authentic, rather than false, community. Many churches never strive for true community, but instead settle for a religious or social club or even a community service organization. Of those churches that do strive for community, many settle on a pseudocommunity “by being extremely pleasant with one another and avoiding all disagreement.” 236 These communities never pass the difficult and painful stage of examination of sin and relationships (which Scott Peck calls “Chaos” 237) and thereby enter authentic community. By publicly naming sin and conflict in a redemptive and honest way, which never happens in pseudocommunity, 238 a community can become authentic.

By practicing public confession of sin we teach our members an important spiritual discipline. One of the underlying principles of worship is that we do together publicly what we believe is vital in private. Liturgical prayer teaches private prayer. Liturgical Scripture reading teaches private Scripture reading. Public confession teaches private and secret confession of sin. 239 It is a means of training the entire body at one time instead of shepherding every member in this area privately.

237 Peck, 92.
238 Peck, 89.
239 Of course, whether a matter is taught and whether it is learned are somewhat separate matters. Human beings are not like vending machines when it comes to these things.
Public confession of sin is also a witness to non-Christians of the power and worth of the Gospel because it demonstrates our confidence in a gracious God who both forgives our sin and heals our infirmities.\textsuperscript{240} It is the movement from claiming something is true to relying upon it, and relying upon it in a way which bears testimony to his love, his power and his way of Life.\textsuperscript{241}

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\textsuperscript{240} Psalm 103:3, paraphrased. \\
\textsuperscript{241} Adapted from the third step prayer of Alcoholics Anonymous, 63.
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