

Confessing Faults and Sins

written by Tim Jennings, M.D. | February 26, 2011



You presented a really moving and challenging set of seminars at Midport SDA. I had a couple of questions that arose out of your first presentation on Guilt. Unfortunately, we ran out of time and you could not take any more questions. I would really appreciate it if you could respond here.

*I got this quote from your website, and it relates to my questions, but I'm trying to wrap my mind around it: "The only solution to legitimate guilt is repentance and restoration. This includes more than simple confession. It includes an internal change of heart desire where one no longer even wants to do such behavior again, **and restoration only when such reparation would add no further harm.**"*

My questions are

- 1. When is it inappropriate to confess guilt to humans? (For instance, I have seen where spouses admitted to having affairs, and this only complicated the situation, resulting in more hurt, anger, and divorce. Some clinicians recommend confessing while others don't.)*
- 2. What is the difference between confessing "faults" and "sins" to humans?*

Thank you for your time. And yes, my understanding of God's character has been strengthened. I

After Adam and Eve sinned they ran and hid because they were “afraid.” Fear is part of the infection of sin. We are all born defective, wired with insecurity, fear, doubt, as well as physical and genetic defects. Because of this we all have various faults and sins. These lead us to “fear” no one could ever love us if they “really” knew us. We create walls and masks to hide behind, which only increases our fear of being discovered and found out for who we really are in heart, thus increasing the fear and intensity in which we try to hide our true selves from others. This is a vicious reinforcing cycle. Think of how comfortable you would be discussing your addiction with most of your church members. Would you not fear their shock and disappointment rather than expect their love and support.

Confessing faults to one another is part of the healing process of acknowledging our brokenness, weakness, need for a savior, and then experiencing the loving acceptance of others. It is the process honestly acknowledging your faults and then experience genuine love and acceptance that healing occurs. This is one of the key elements in 12 step recovery groups. Fear of rejection is reduced and we are able to love others in a healthier way and in so doing fear is reduced and we are healed in the process. This is part of God’s plan to break down walls of prejudice and bias as we come back into the unity of love in the knowledge of God. Faults include our sinful nature, fears, inabilities, mistakes, habits, regrets and sometimes specific sins are included. But not all specific sin is included – some specific sin is between the individual and God.

There are generally three types of sin – public, individual to individual, and private. Public sin requires public confession in addition to repentance of heart, which is a gift from God, and restoration if possible. Sin against an individual requires we go to the individual and confess/repent, ask forgiveness and restore as far as possible what was taken. Private sin, which is not only sin within the heart, but also sin which has remained private from the one offended, requires confession to God, repentance but not necessarily making such sin public or confessing to another person, even if the another was wronged. It should also include restoring anything taken, if possible, if it can be done without adding harm or injuring.

The example you gave is a perfect illustration of this. A man/woman cheats on their spouse, after the event there is conviction of wrong, with subsequent confession to God, repentance of heart, and perhaps asking the person they cheated with to forgive them. Then years pass with ongoing loyalty and faithfulness to their spouse. What would happen to the innocent spouse if this sin were subsequently confessed to them? It would injure the innocent spouse. The spouse who was wronged, but doesn’t know it, when they find out will have anger, fear, insecurity, doubt, and will have to struggle with resentment and forgiveness issues. A seed of bitterness and hurt will be planted into the heart of the innocent spouse by the confession of the guilty spouse. This does no good and causes positive further injury, risking not only the integrity of the marriage, but the spiritual health of the innocent spouse and perhaps injuring their children and other family members.

Therefore, IF, and I emphasize **IF**, the sin is historic, the heart of the sinner is repentant and changed through God’s grace so that the cheat is no longer a cheat, then the confession to the unaware injured party would do harm and therefore, should not be done. However, IF the heart of the one who cheated has not changed and they remain a cheat then the innocent spouse needs to know so they can make love based decisions upon that information. Such decisions would include confronting the spouse who cheated, in love, seeking their repentance and restoration in grace, and if the spouse refuses to repent

and become faithful then to leave the marriage lest by staying they endorse the unhealthy and destructive behavior of the cheating spouse.

Ultimately, though, the principle here is love – when we love others we seek to bless them and not cause injury. When we remain self-focused and adhere to a rule oriented belief system, then we feel compelled to “confess” such sin in order to “ensure” our “record” is clear in heaven and we can be saved, regardless of the injury to others. Such religion is selfishness disguised as righteousness and only spreads damage and doesn’t heal either the offender or offended.

When we put love first, we quickly realize that we cannot prescribe a cookie cutter behavior that fits every situation, but understand some situations will be best served by a confession, whereas others are best served by remaining silent, for we are interested not in self, but in loving others more than self.

One of the founders of my church put it this way:

The apostle says, “Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed.” James 5:16. Confess your sins to God, who only can forgive them, and your faults to one another. If you have given offense to your friend or neighbor, you are to acknowledge your wrong, and it is his duty freely to forgive you. Then you are to seek the forgiveness of God, because the brother you have wounded is the property of God, and in injuring him you have sinned against his Creator...

True confession is always of a specific character, and acknowledges particular sins. They may be of such a nature as to be brought before God only; they may be wrongs that should be confessed to individuals who have suffered injury through them; or they may be of a public character, and should then be as publicly confessed. But all confession should be definite and to the point, acknowledging the very sins of which you are guilty.

Many, many confessions should never be spoken in the hearing of mortals; for the result is that which the limited judgment of finite beings does not anticipate... God will be better glorified if we confess the secret, inbred corruption of the heart to Jesus alone than if we open its recesses to finite, erring man, who cannot judge righteously unless his heart is constantly imbued with the Spirit of God... Do not pour into human ears the story which God alone should hear. — Faith I Live By, pg. 128