

Weekly Confession and Forgiveness? We, as God’s People, Have Been Set Free

DAVID HOUSHOLDER

There seems to be a deep need, especially for longtime church people born before 1945—and a remnant of younger people—to do a familiar “choral reading” Confession and Forgiveness at the beginning of worship. I have no need to convince such people that their values need updating. But I do want to open the church up to the many people in my generation (my first memory is Kennedy getting shot) who have never resonated with liturgical choral readings and to create space in worship for those for whom such readings may never be meaningful. Thus the rite of Confession and Forgiveness should be genuinely “elective” rather than “required.” Why?

Formal choral readings are not the only way to experience the grace of God.

I can’t think of a single time in the New Testament where a choral reading confession and absolution occurs. The rite is a human construction (which doesn’t make it bad, just not essential). People can experience the grace of God in communion, during music, during the preaching, during prayer ministry time, and in many other parts of worship—and outside of formal worship, for that matter.

Why must the first thing we say together be about our being in bondage?

Sure, there is an element of truth in our being “captive to sin”; sin does indeed tend to ensnare us sinners. But biblically, it is only a half-truth. In fact, the Bible says that if the Son sets us free, we will be free indeed (John 8:36). It sometimes feels like we are speaking a curse over ourselves that negates what the cross has done. Starting the whole service this way sets us off on an unbalanced footing.

A weekly ritual of confession and absolution can imply that we somehow need to keep our forgiveness “up to date.”

We can project the idea, even if we don’t intend to, that forgiveness somehow can “lapse”—kind of like not keeping up your car insurance payments. Jesus died for all the sins I have ever committed or will ever commit. I received this free gift of forgiveness by saving faith in Jesus. If I should commit a nasty sin on a Tuesday and die (God forbid) on the following Friday without a service of Confession and Forgiveness, would I still go to heaven? If the answer is yes, then why do we need to do the ritual every week? Martin Luther drove himself crazy with this kind of thinking before his gospel breakthrough. He could never come up with a complete list of his

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TO FACE

Weekly Confession and Forgiveness? We, of All People, Know the Need

JOHN B. VALENTINE

Is a rite of Confession and Forgiveness necessary for Christian worship? The obvious answer is no. After all, for Christians the act of worship doesn't happen only in a sanctuary, and it certainly doesn't happen only on Sunday mornings. But, that being said, I can't for the life of me understand why people tasked with shaping corporate Christian worship wouldn't normally incorporate a form of confession and forgiveness into the worship life of the community.

Some have argued in recent years that rituals of confession and forgiveness ought to be abandoned because they are too "traditional" or "tired." Others have challenged us to consider such rites passé because talk of sin is itself rooted in an underdeveloped premodern worldview. Yet it strikes me that the most telling reason why those who shape corporate worship would be wise to insist on the inclusion of such words in the context of worship is thoroughly contemporary: we have forgotten—and are in desperate need of relearning—the particular form of speech that is confession and forgiveness.

Robert Fulghum may have pocketed untold riches in pronouncing that everything we need to know we learned in kindergarten, but the kindergarten playground is precisely that place where we may have first been exposed to that fraudulent form of speech that passes for confession and forgiveness in our society. Contemporary playground ethics require countless perfunctory non-contritional apologies on a daily basis. The kind teacher huddles with two conflicted children and pronounces, "Matt, you say you're sorry to Chris, and Chris, you say it's okay, and then the two of you may both go back to playing." Not wanting to further aggravate the teacher and desperately wanting to get back to the business of play, Matt stares at his shoelaces and mumbles "sorry" under his breath. Likewise, Chris—now feeling less aggrieved with Matt's behavior than uncomfortable with this distraction from recess—mutters something about it being "okay." The kindly teacher encourages both children to enjoy what is left of their recess, yet in so doing confirms for both children that confession and forgiveness is a simple verbal transaction that facilitates order in society, devoid of any deeper significance.

Perhaps nowhere have the long-term ramifications of such vacuous playground apologies been so evidently manifested as they have on our nation's sports pages. Consider the case of Pete Rose. Rose, a baseball superstar by anyone's defini-

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trespasses and was in terror of dying with unforgiven sin. Our worship may be furthering this kind of medieval mind-set.

Weekly confession and forgiveness promotes a culture of sin management.

Sin management and life transformation (called for in Rom 12:2) are not the same thing. If the liturgy is always a rerun and never fresh, then it is especially hard to move people from sin management to life transformation. What started out as an aid to getting closer to God can become an obstacle if it isn't kept fresh. This is true of a lot of our symbols and rituals. Just like farmland, the crops need to be rotated to keep the soil from getting exhausted.

Regular absolution before communion weakens the forgiveness we receive in the sacrament itself.

There is a common misconception that if we receive communion without having our sins forgiven we might get sick and die. To be sure, we have to examine ourselves and “discern the body” (1 Cor 11:17–30). But the sacrament itself is *for the forgiveness of sins*, so forgiveness before the sacrament is a bit of a redundancy.

Starting each service with sin and forgiveness implies that the main purpose of life, spiritually, is getting absolution.

Sin is our primary problem as humans. But receiving forgiveness is not our central purpose. Our central purpose is to live out our calling, our destiny. It is to serve God in healing the broken creation. God did not create us first and foremost so that our sins could be forgiven someday. Forgiveness restores God's primary purpose for us, to spend our lives serving God's world.

We should not require a particular ritual that takes up no space in the mind of God.

We can tell from Scripture what things take up space in the mind of God. Justice, deliverance, freedom, liberation, salvation come back over and over in the word. We can imagine God very concerned about a little girl in Africa who has no access to education or even clean water. We can imagine God very concerned about people dying while having rejected him eternally. We can imagine God very concerned about the violence in the Middle East. But can we imagine God concerned with the uniformity of the rituals that we use to open a service?

We should not require any liturgical form!

Article seven of the *Augsburg Confession*, in my opinion, forbids Lutherans from requiring *any* human liturgical form. What a profound irony that the movement that bears Luther's name fails to grasp the radical nature of his interpretation of Paul's core teaching in Galatians, that we must be willing to abandon all forms of the law that prevent the free proclamation of the gospel to the human condition. ☩

DAVID HOUSHOLDER is senior pastor at Grace Lutheran Church and church planter at Robinwood Church in Huntington Beach, California.

tion, has been consistently denied admission into the Baseball Hall of Fame because he is alleged to have bet on baseball games while serving as manager of the Cincinnati Reds. In an attempt to prove himself a worthy nominee to that Hall of Fame, he has insisted that he once said that he was sorry and therefore ought necessarily to be forgiven and granted entrance into the Hall. In other words, confronted by the baseball authorities, Rose put his head down, mumbled something about being sorry, and now expects Major League Baseball to declare in response that it is “okay.” Inherently, our nation’s sportswriters knew something was amiss with Rose’s confession, but they couldn’t articulate what or why. They were left questioning Rose’s sincerity, arguing among themselves about litmus tests of true contrition, and noting that there is a difference between being “sorry for one’s actions” and “sorry that one got caught.”

In a world littered with such playground and sports-page confessions, we who shape worship would be well served to consider the following words of Frederick Buechner: “To forgive somebody is to say in one way or another, ‘You have done something unspeakable, and by all rights I should call it quits between us. Both my pride and my principles demand no less. However, although I make no guarantees that I will be able to forget what you have done, and though we may both carry scars for life, I refuse to let it stand between us. I still want you for my friend.’”^{*} Approaching a ritual of confession and forgiveness from this perspective raises the stakes from a trite exchange of “sorry” and “whatever” to the death-pronouncing, life-restoring acknowledgment and declaration that it is.

Liturgical confession well-crafted invites worshipers to acknowledge our actions of failure and our failures to act. It invites reflection on the truth that God should by all rights “call it quits between us.” Confession moves us beyond presumptive posturing about how wonderful we are to the vital awareness that we—of all people—are a people in desperate need of the good news that God offers. Likewise, liturgical declarations of forgiveness well-shaped are bold proclamations of the gospel. They are radical declarations that divine pride and divine principles matter less to God than God’s children do. They celebrate the Johannine awareness that “if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:8–9). ⊕

JOHN B. VALENTINE is pastor of Holy Shepherd Lutheran Church in Orinda, California.

^{*}Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) 28–29.