



Confession and Healing in Small-Group Community

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Karen stood anxiously behind the pulpit, yet certain of her call to proclaim the grace of God by means of her own story. Through tears and frequent references to biblical texts, Karen recounted her addiction to alcohol and her struggle to be free from crippling guilt and shame. She and her fiancé (now husband) had aborted their pregnancy twelve years previously. Though still mourning the loss of their twins, she talked of God's forgiveness and her consequent ability to forgive herself. Not one of the two hundred persons attending that morning worship service stirred during her homily. Few eyes were dry. At the end, Karen and the pastor invited congregants forward to light a candle in remembrance of any child lost through abortion, illness, or miscarriage. Fifteen minutes later, over two hundred tealight candles burned brightly on the Lord's Table.

Karen had experienced profound emotional and spiritual healing in her small-group meeting a few months earlier. During group prayer, she was overwhelmed by the knowledge of God's love and forgiveness. She fell to her knees and wept as her self-hatred washed away. Fellow group members did not know why Karen was crying, but they trusted that she was experiencing profound release from sorrow. At the next group meeting, Karen openly shared the story of her abortion and her alcoholism. She shared how she had heard the message of God's grace in myriad forms—in words of absolution during worship services and in her

In honest confession we experience a fellowship through which God heals our contemporary loneliness and fragmentation. Such confession and healing can and do occur in the context of small-group community.

pastor's unconditional acceptance of her—but that grace never seemed to reach the depths of her suffering and sin until the previous meeting. In response to her story, group members embraced her physically and emotionally. Karen then asked her pastor for an opportunity to share her experience with the congregation so that, as she put it, other women and men might be healed. Six months later, Karen started an outreach ministry, a grief support group, for others in the church and community who had experienced the loss of an infant.

Karen's story of healing, though dramatic, is not abnormal or even atypical for small-group members. As presented below, research demonstrates that small groups can provide space for people to create meaning out of their suffering, to discuss openly their fears and failures, and to experience radical acceptance by fellow members of the body of Christ. Of course, not all small groups function this way.¹ Nor do they guarantee such freedom from guilt and healing of shame. But they can and often do provide an opportunity for Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to bind up the wounds of his people and to send them forth into the world as witnesses to this healing.

SMALL GROUPS AND THE MINISTRY OF HEALING

Small groups are a distinctive marker of the religious landscape in twenty-first-century America. In 2002, 25 percent of all Protestants and 53 percent of Evangelicals in the United States attended a weekly small group.² Discipleship, care, and mission often occur in these settings. In order to understand how small groups form community, I researched well-developed small-group ministries in six congregations. Each of these small-group ministries was embedded in an overall congregational ministry design, had intentional mission or covenant statements, and carried out training for small-group leaders. I discovered that these groups practice communion with a personal God, provide intimacy and friendship, help married couples develop common spiritual practices, encourage mission, and establish space for persons to weave their life story into the Christian narrative.³ Most pertinent to the topic at hand, these small groups contribute to the healing ministry of the church in at least three ways.

First, small groups are a significant venue for congregational care. Sometimes they function as ministry teams commissioned to participate in the congregation's ministry of care. More frequently, group members care for one another as a natural overflow of their life together. They nurture each other holistically, that is, emotionally, spiritually, and often financially. They compassionately support one another and others in the congregation during crisis and bereavement. Examples abounded in my interviews of group members and leaders: one group of retired

¹For a full assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of small groups, see Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community* (New York: The Free Press, 1996).

²George Barna, *The State of the Church 2002* (Ventura, CA: Issachar Resources, 2002) 31.

³Theresa F. Latini, *Practicing Koinonia: A Practical Theology of Small Group Ministry* (forthcoming).

men supported a member in the midst of his painstaking decision to admit his wife of fifty years to a nursing care facility; another group prayed for and informally advised a couple considering divorce; and another provided meals, transportation, and visitation for a group member's family as he slowly wasted away from cancer. Pastors, along with group members and group leaders, recognize that such caregiving is not the sole responsibility of the church staff. They admit that compassionate service depends upon active participation of lay leaders and upon the ministry of small groups. As one pastor remarked, "Usually when someone's fallen ill, and I visit them at home or the hospital, their small-group members have already been there, praying with them, listening to them, and bringing food for their family. Small groups are the 'first responders.' They excel at caring for each other in Christ's name."

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Second, small groups provide a social solvent, a means of enduring detachment from traditional forms of community life. People today are separated from their families and disconnected from local communities. They uproot multiple times, often leaving them with a sense of inner fragmentation. "Friendship is tethered to loss."⁴ In a context of perpetual displacement, small groups meet basic human needs for belonging, trust, and intimacy. Group members socialize, share their problems, and provide emotional support for each other. They convey acceptance of one another through mutual, free, vulnerable conversation. As they accept one another, they can trust that God embraces them as well. It is not surprising, then, that many describe their group as "closer than family."

Third, small groups create space for people to share their sin and suffering in a community of compassionate accountability. Group members tell their personal stories of loss, trauma, failure, and disappointment to one another. They are seen and heard in their full humanity. They are affirmed, and their self-esteem is bolstered. Consequently, members report that they are more honest with themselves, feel better about themselves, and can forgive themselves. Like Karen, group members may be freed from crippling anxiety, guilt, and shame. As they bare their souls to God and each other, the weight of past sin is lightened; the abyss of suffering becomes less consuming. They are restored to greater wholeness, that is, to greater emotional, spiritual, and relational well-being.

Overall, these well-developed small groups long to practice mutual accountability, and, in a few instances, they actually break through to confession of sin with one another. One men's group reported that they confess failures in their marriages and sins against God, specifically their self-centeredness, misdirected anger,

⁴Deborah Tall, "Dwelling: Making Peace with Space and Place," in *Rooted in the Land: Essays on Community and Place*, ed. William Vitek and Wes Jackson (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996) 107.

and use of pornography. They phone each other during moments of crisis, praying for and exhorting each other to honor their covenants of marriage and to interpret their family relationships as central to their Christian discipleship.

In summary, small groups are communities of care in and through which people experience restoration to wholeness. For some, small groups heal their inner fragmentation and loneliness by providing a place to belong. For others, small groups heal their shame and relieve their guilt. Consequently, they become ambassadors of healing, caring for those who are suffering in the larger church and world. Properly speaking, however, small groups are not the agent of healing. Neither is the church. Rather, God is the Healer. For this reason, we need to delineate the relationship among community, confession, and God's work of healing in order to set forth a vision for framing small groups theologically.

CONFESSION AND HEALING IN THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Throughout the New Testament, confession has two basic meanings, both of which are central to Christian community. First, to *confess* means to declare to ourselves and to the world what we believe about God, who we are in the church, and how we intend to live in light of that. Since its inception, the church has grappled with and expounded upon its most basic confession of faith: Jesus is Lord. From the Apostle's Creed to the Augsburg Confession to the Barmen Declaration, Catholics and Protestants alike have adopted confessional statements to guide their practice of faith in particular times and places.

When we adopt these confessions as our own, we participate in the communion of saints. We belong to a group of believers much larger than our own congregations. We belong to believers from all times and places. In belonging to them, we are accountable to them. For we interpret Scripture and shape our Christian practices in light of their confessions, not solely on the basis of our own social location and perspectives.

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The second meaning of confession—honest acknowledgment of the ways in which we fall short of God's good intention for our lives—flows from the first. To *confess* is to admit openly those things that we deeply regret having said or done (or not said or done). This acknowledgment is an act of faith. We recognize our sin only on the basis of the Word and the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit convicts us of our sin at the same time that she points us to Jesus Christ, the Word of God. In light of Christ's self-giving, our generosity appears as disguised hoarding. In light of Christ's compassion, the judgment buried in our own acts of kindness comes to the surface. In other words, our confession of sin occurs in the context of grace.

Grace precedes and provides the foundation for the confession of our sin. To know Christ's self-giving is to know that the gift is ours. To know Christ's compassion is to know that it encompasses us. To know Christ is to know God-with-us and God-for-us. This knowledge frees us to bare our souls—to tell our inner truth—to God and to one another. Fourth-century theologian Saint Augustine provides a clear example of this kind of confessing. Trusting in God's grace, Augustine recounts his doubts about the Christian faith, his troubled relationship with his mother, his son born out of wedlock, the mistress he never married, and what today we might call his sexual addiction.⁵

To say that grace precedes our confession of sin is also to say that our confession of sin, like our confession of faith, is thoroughly communal. It is at the heart of our fellowship with our fellow brothers- and sisters-in-Christ. It is at the heart of our fellowship with God. It is central to our healing. Consider this passage from the book of James, which closely links suffering, prayer, confession, sin, and healing in the community of faith:

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. (James 5:13–16)

Extrapolating from this text, Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes confession as the breakthrough to the cross, the breakthrough to community, the breakthrough to new life, and the breakthrough to certainty.⁶ Implied in this also is the breakthrough to healing. Each of these breakthroughs occurs by means of the work of Jesus Christ in and through his body, the church.

In confession, we live the way of the cross. We fellowship with Christ in his passion. We die to sin and are raised to new life. We recapitulate the event of our baptism. In and with our confession of sin, we joyfully exclaim, "I have been baptized!" Thus, confession emerges from conviction rather than condemnation. Conviction liberates. It leads to new life. It is distinct from condemnation, which is related to shame. Here we must distinguish guilt from shame. Simply put, *guilt* is remorse for something that we have done or failed to do, something we have spoken or failed to speak, or thoughts we have harbored against others. In contrast, *shame* is focused not on our actions but rather on our being. Shame is an unbearable sense of being deficient, flawed, undesirable, and worthless. It can consume our identity, so that any event can trigger a downward spiral into self-loathing. The source of shame may be childhood trauma, adolescent humiliation, or larger dehu-

⁵Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin, Penguin Classics (New York: Penguin Books, 1961).

⁶Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1954) 112–118.

manizing sociocultural patterns. In any case, it is so painful that it causes us to hide from others, God, and even ourselves.⁷ Consider Karen's story. She experienced both guilt and shame. On the one hand, she felt anguish and regret over the decision to abort her pregnancy—that is, guilt. On the other hand, she experienced herself as unacceptable and unlovable—that is, shame. She wore the heavy mask of happy churchgoer until her encounter with God in her small group, where she received both forgiveness of her sin and healing of her shame.

Distinguishing guilt from shame pushes us beyond Bonhoeffer and our traditional understanding of confession in the church. If confession is fundamentally honest admission of our status before God, then shouldn't it include acknowledgment of our sin and our suffering, our guilt and our shame? Return to our scriptural text above. In the same breath, James urges us to confess our sins and share our sorrows with one another, to pray for one another in our sickness, suffering, and sin. Honest and thorough admission of our sin occurs together with our prayers of petition and intercession, in which we call upon God for healing for ourselves and others.⁸ For God both forgives our sin and cures our diseases (physical and emotional).

The cross of Christ removes our guilt and heals our shame. It is the remedy for our depravity and our deprivation. Jesus saves us from sin, and, in and with this salvation, he restores us to wholeness. Therefore, we live the way of the cross not only by dying to our sin but also by interpreting whatever suffering comes to us in this life as a fellowship with Christ in his cross. This is not to glorify suffering or to suggest that one ought to seek out suffering. Rather it is an acknowledgement that Christ is with us in our suffering in order to liberate us from it.⁹

Contemporary theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff demonstrates how confession of our suffering, like confession of our sin, enables us to break through to the cross. In his book *Lament for a Son*, Wolterstorff grapples with the tragic death of his twenty-three-year-old son. He turns to the cross for meaning, meditating on his suffering in light of God's suffering in Christ. He writes, "To believe in Christ's rising and death's dying is also to live with the power and the challenge to rise up now from all our dark graves of suffering love.... In my living, my son's dying will not be the last word. But as I rise up, I bear the wounds of his death. My rising does not remove them. They mark me. If you want to know who I am, put your hand

⁷Here I am following Gershen Kaufman's definition of *shame* in his book, *Shame: The Power of Caring* (Rochester, VT: Schenkman Books, 1992).

⁸Though we can distinguish conceptually prayers of confession, petition, intercession, and lament, in practice they occur in and with each other. Moreover, if *confession* is fundamentally an acknowledgment of our human predicament and our need for God, then each of these prayers contains a certain type of confession. In prayers of petition and intercession, we acknowledge our physical, emotional, relational needs and ask for God's healing and reconciliation for ourselves and others; in prayers of lament, we acknowledge our despair and ask for God's hope and justice. A full argument is beyond the scope of this article, but this points to justification for understanding confession as central to all forms of prayer and, hence, the argument that prayers of confession might include both sin and suffering.

⁹See Theresa F. Latini, "Grief-Work in Light of the Cross," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 37/2 (2009) 87–95.

in.”¹⁰ In breaking through to the cross in this way, Wolterstorff simultaneously breaks through to community. We see and hear this theologian in the midst of his own agony, fear, anger, and confusion. In seeing this depth of his grief, we know him. We commune with him, for authentic confession leads to authentic fellowship.

Conversely, genuine communion is stunted by our failure to acknowledge our sin and suffering to one another. Our prayers in weekly worship services rarely facilitate honesty and vulnerability with one another or God. They are too generic, too broad, too disconnected to do so. The New Testament urges not a mere mental assent to our separation from God but rather specific expressions of our remorse and heartfelt pleas for healing. When we dare to be as honest as Augustine, Wolterstorff, and Karen, then, and only then, will we break through to true communion with one another. Because then we will know and be known in ways that really matter. We will know one another not abstractly but concretely as those who are simultaneously saints and sinners and sufferers.

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To put it another way, confession is inextricable from community. It creates community. When we pour out our hearts to one another, we are united in love. Failure to be real, to be fully human, to acknowledge, as the psalmist says, that we are but dust (Ps 103:14) limits not only our fellowship with each other but also our fellowship with God. We experience the presence of Jesus in each other. Jesus Christ is embodied in the present, in the here and now, in you and me. Jesus comes to us through one another. Jesus Christ doesn't exist in the world as a disembodied spirit but rather as a corporate body of people. There is no way of knowing God's love and forgiveness in isolation from each other. Thus, confessing our specific sin and suffering enables us to commune with God and each other.

Confessing in community also brings healing. When we lock up our distress and disappointment in some secret compartment of our hearts and minds, then our sense of separation from God and each other only increases. But when we take the risk to speak about that which is the source of our shame, whether it is something we have done or something that has been done to us, we move out of isolation and loneliness. We move into connection. When we are accepted fully by someone who sees us in the depths of our being, we experience grace. In the presence of grace, our self-judgments melt away. “[P]erfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18). Moreover, when we confess our guilt and our grief to others, when they see and hear us fully, we give them an opportunity to participate in Jesus' ministry of forgiveness and healing. We give them an opportunity to be who they are—an am-

¹⁰Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 92, 93.

bassador of reconciliation. As we are healed and forgiven, again and again, we also become witnesses to the kingdom of God. Like Karen, we may be propelled into ministries of healing in the world.

In conclusion, confession that includes acknowledgment of our specific sin and suffering is central to our communion with Christ and each other. Through such confession, we participate in the cross of Christ, who, by the power of the Holy Spirit, raises us up to new life free from guilt and shame. Because our union and communion with Christ are inextricable from our union and communion with the body of Christ, confession is not a private affair. We may be wise and follow Bonhoeffer's advice to unburden our souls only to those who themselves live under the sign of the cross, but confess we must.¹¹ When we are known concretely in our sin and suffering, we experience a fellowship through which God heals our contemporary loneliness and fragmentation. As we are healed, we also are sent into the world, participating in God's mission of transforming our shallow, broken forms of community into life-giving communion with God and each other. As demonstrated in Karen's life story and the research cited above, such confessing, healing, and mission can and do occur in the context of small-group community. ⊕

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¹¹Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 118–119.