

Perpetual Penitence?

Some time ago, we were in a large meeting with Christians from several different backgrounds in the same city. We were visitors and knew no-one there, but wanted to be part of this united meeting.

The leader stood up and, after some introductory remarks, launched into his understanding of an essential preliminary: making sure (as far as possible) that there was no unconfessed and unforgiven sin in the congregation. He started by reminding us that we were all sinners and that therefore we needed to repent of our various sins. He then asked the whole congregation to say a 'prayer of confession' together and followed that by 'pronouncing forgiveness' on the basis of the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ shed for us.

I admire the desire to try to eliminate unconfessed and unforgiven sins, but it certainly doesn't work like that!

This sort of corporate, ritual confession and forgiveness definitely has its place in the Bible, but it is in the Old Testament, where the covenant of God was administered through the Law and the priesthood, with a system of different sacrifices appropriate to different circumstances and an annual Day of Atonement to make sure that nothing had slipped through the net.

The New Covenant in Jesus is different. Yes, there is the continuing understanding that we owe it to God to live rightly with him and our neighbours, but there are major differences. There is only one sacrifice which has already been made, and it is administered by the Holy Spirit working in each believer. When we first put our trust in the Lord Jesus and the sacrifice he made for us, we find ourselves brought into a relationship with the Creator Father God, where all the wrong things we have done are removed and are no longer a blockage between us and him. We learn that the death of Jesus pays off our 'debt' and so puts us in a right and open relationship with our Father.

All too soon, we discover that clouds have appeared in that relationship because we have failed again. It feels as though the whole thing is a failure but, if we are wisely instructed, we are told that Jesus' sacrifice covers not only the 'debts' we accrued **before** we turned to him, but also any that we fall into later. All we have to do is agree with Father that we have failed again and take fresh hold of the power of Jesus' death to cover the new debts as well as the old ones. As John writes so graphically, "the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." (**1 John 1:7**)

This is intensely personal and spiritual; it is usually where our relationship with our Father starts and it is also a very large part of how it continues as the days grow into months, years and decades. However much progress we may have

made, from time to time we find ourselves needing to come back and experience afresh the release of his forgiveness. We also need to learn to give and receive forgiveness in our human relationships and one may often trigger the other.

So, when we meet together, it **is** important that any unforgiven sin is dealt with, but it simply cannot be done on a corporate scale. We do not need to be told that we are 'miserable sinners'. If we are learning to live in relationship with our Father through the Lord Jesus, the Holy Spirit makes it his business to let us know when we step out of line, and we need to learn to be sensitive to his voice and to respond quickly in repentance and faith. As long as I remain unresponsive to him I may well find that I am miserable, but I don't need to stay there!

If we adopt the attitude that "Well, I have probably done something wrong, so I may as well be penitent about it", we deny the role of the Holy Spirit. He wants to deal with us personally, on a 'case by case' basis, so that we can be gradually changed. If he is not showing you that you have gone wrong, please don't try to confess to anything!

The Greek word translated 'confess' really means 'agree', 'say the same thing'. We can only truly confess to sin when we have become aware of it. This may be by the direct prompting of the Holy Spirit, or through the words of another believer who has had the insight, grace and courage to point it out to us. Either way, it is our Father who is speaking to us, and our response can only be either to reject the prompting or 'say the same thing' and agree with what is being said to us. As we do that, we truly 'confess' and forgiveness is instantaneous – no penance, no pleading, no delay!

Going the other way, rejecting the prompting, is futile if we want to go on in our relationship with our Father, as there will always be a blockage while we refuse to agree with him. However, most (probably all) of us have tried it and experienced the resulting spiritual desert.

There is very much to be said for 'keeping short accounts'. Quite apart from the joy of unclouded relationship, we also go on learning the precious lesson of hearing and recognising the voice of the Holy Spirit when he speaks to us. This is no ritualised religion, administered by man; it is part of the path of progress as we are gradually being transformed.

Dave Taylor August 2008

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