

Confession: A Needed Practice in the Church

Preface

This guide seeks to provide a practical and theological framework for a sacramental practice of confession within an Evangelical context. It draws upon the Anglican tradition's liturgical model and the early Methodist emphasis on confession, sanctification, and holiness. Its goal is to offer pastors and congregations a renewed means of grace that fosters spiritual healing, repentance, and restoration, while remaining faithful to the Wesleyan vision of grace as both pardon and power.

Part I: Foundational Framework

Evangelical Christianity has rightly emphasized that forgiveness is grounded in the once-for-all atoning work of Jesus Christ (Hebrews 10:10–14), received by grace through faith alone (Ephesians 2:8–9). Yet Scripture and the historic Christian tradition alike reveal that the means by which this grace transforms believers are not purely internal or private. Confession—verbal, relational, and restorative—stands as one of the chief practices through which the gospel is embodied in the life of the Church.

For many Protestants, the very idea of confession evokes imagery of Roman Catholic practice: a believer entering a confessional booth, disclosing sins to a priest, and receiving absolution. This often triggers skepticism: “*We only have one mediator—Christ—and only God can forgive sin!*” Such a reaction is understandable, especially in light of historical abuses. Yet beneath this instinct lies an incomplete picture of what confession truly is and how it functions in Scripture and the Church's life.

One of the key differences between Protestant and Roman Catholic understandings of confession lies in the theology of the sacraments. Roman Catholicism recognizes seven sacraments, including penance, whereas most Protestant traditions affirm only two—Baptism and the Eucharist—as dominical sacraments, instituted directly by Christ. However, this need not exclude other practices from being understood as sacramental—that is, as outward signs that convey inward grace—even if they are not sacraments in the strictest sense.

A sacrament may be defined as *an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, instituted by Christ himself, whereby God works effectively to convey and confirm that grace to the believer*. Rooted in Augustine's classic definition (*De Catechizandis Rudibus* 26.50) and received through the Anglican formularies (Article XXV of the Thirty-Nine Articles), this understanding was embraced and expanded by John Wesley. Wesley described the sacraments as “means of grace”—channels through which the Holy Spirit works to awaken, justify, and sanctify believers (cf. Sermon 16, *The Means of Grace*).

Scripturally, these means are grounded in Christ's own commands: "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19) and "Repent and be baptized... for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38). The sacraments are therefore both divine acts and human responses—signs of covenantal grace that unite the Church to Christ and to one another.

At its most basic, a sacrament is an avenue of divine grace for the believer who approaches in faith. In the Anglican tradition, two sacraments—Baptism and the Eucharist—are recognized as instituted by Christ, while five additional "sacraments of the Church" (confirmation, ordination, marriage, penance, and unction) are regarded as sacramental practices that, while not dominical, still convey grace as means of grace. Through this framework, confession (or penance) can rightly be seen as a vital part of Christian life—biblically grounded and pastorally fruitful—without elevating it beyond the authority of Scripture.

Why, then, emphasize confession in particular? Because of all the "sacraments of the Church," it is the only one largely absent from Evangelical practice. Marriage is universally observed; ordination and the laying on of hands continue in various forms; prayer for the sick remains common; and church membership often functions analogously to confirmation. Yet confession—or *Penance and Reconciliation*—is virtually without an equivalent in most Evangelical contexts. While believers are encouraged to confess sins privately to God or occasionally to one another in accountability settings, these practices often lack the theological depth, consistency, and pastoral intentionality that historic confession embodies. Recovering a form of confession rooted in Scripture and Wesleyan spirituality could therefore restore an essential dimension of the Church's ministry of healing and holiness.

In Scripture, confession and repentance are rarely private matters. Sin has both a vertical dimension (against God) and a horizontal one (against others and the covenant community). For this reason, biblical confession almost always involves both acknowledgment before God and accountability or restitution before others.

In the Old Testament, confession was typically public and tied to tangible acts of repentance. Leviticus 5:5–6 commands that "when anyone becomes aware that they are guilty... they must confess in what way they have sinned," followed by a guilt offering to make atonement. Numbers 5:6–7 likewise directs that when one wrongs another, "they must confess the sin they have committed" and "make full restitution for the wrong, adding a fifth of the value to it." Confession here is both verbal and restorative—it seeks to repair relationships and restore justice.

Public confession also marked Israel's communal life. In Ezra 10:1, Ezra prays, "We have been unfaithful," prompting the people to gather and confess together. Similarly, Nehemiah 9:2–3 depicts the people standing and confessing "their sins and the sins of their ancestors." Repentance in these contexts is not merely individual but corporate—acknowledging that sin damages the whole covenant community.

This pattern continues into the New Testament. John the Baptist's ministry of repentance included open confession: "They were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins" (Matthew 3:6). James instructs believers, "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed" (James 5:16), emphasizing both mutual accountability and the healing power of truth-telling.

Restitution also remains integral to repentance. When Zacchaeus encounters Jesus, his faith expresses itself through reparation: "If I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold" (Luke 19:8). Jesus affirms this as genuine repentance, declaring, "Today salvation has come to this house." Repentance, then, is never merely inward—it manifests in transformed behavior and restored relationships.

Even the Lord's Prayer ties divine forgiveness to human reconciliation: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us" (Matthew 6:12). Our reconciliation with God is inseparable from our reconciliation with one another.

Thus, biblically, confession is not a private transaction between the sinner and God alone. It is a relational act—rooted in community, expressed through words and deeds, and often requiring public acknowledgment and restitution. The grace of forgiveness is never cheap or isolated; it calls us into restored fellowship with both God and neighbor, embodying the gospel's ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18–19).

Confession to another believer is a powerful act of humility and healing (James 5:16). Yet confession to an ordained pastor carries a distinct biblical and ecclesial significance, recognizing the Church as the appointed instrument through which Christ ministers reconciliation. Throughout Scripture, God's forgiveness is declared through authorized representatives—prophets, priests, and ultimately the apostles—to whom Christ entrusted the authority of forgiveness: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven" (John 20:23; cf. 2 Corinthians 5:18–20).

The pastor, as a steward of Word and Sacrament, stands not as a private confidant but as a public servant of Christ and his Church—entrusted to declare absolution, offer pastoral counsel, and guide the work of restitution in the name of the gospel. Confession before a pastor thus anchors repentance in the visible life of the Church, guards against self-deception, and assures the penitent that forgiveness is not merely a feeling but a divine reality—announced through Christ's ordained minister.

Part II: The Rite and Rubrics

Below are some potential options for what a confession liturgy could look like. The first rite is based on classical Christian formulas for confession. The second is solely taken from Scripture, allowing those who only desire to use what is found in Scripture to still keep the practice.

A Short Liturgy of Confession

(For use between a penitent and a clergy member or spiritual director)

The Minister says:

The peace of the Lord be always with you.

The Penitent responds:

And with your spirit.

Minister:

Beloved in Christ, we are called to confess our sins, not to earn God's favor, but to receive anew the mercy that is already ours in Jesus Christ. In humility and faith, let us come before God, who is rich in mercy to all who call upon him.

Let us pray.

Both may pray:

Most merciful God,
I confess that I have sinned against you,
in thought, word, and deed,
by what I have done,
and by what I have left undone.
I have not loved you with my whole heart;
I have not loved my neighbor as myself.
I am truly sorry and I humbly repent.
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,
have mercy on me and forgive me;
that I may delight in your will,
and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your Name. Amen.

The Minister may invite personal confession, saying:

You may now confess before God the particular sins you wish to acknowledge.

(The Penitent may speak freely. A moment of silence may follow.)

The Minister then says:

Our Lord Jesus Christ said to his disciples, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them" (John 20:22–23).

Therefore, as a minister of his Gospel and a witness to his grace, I declare to you the promise of God:

Absolution (Declarative Form):

Almighty God have mercy upon you,
pardon and deliver you from all your sins,
confirm and strengthen you in all goodness,
and bring you to everlasting life;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Minister may add:

Go in peace; your sins are forgiven.
Live now in the freedom of the Spirit,
and, as you are able, make right what has been wrong, that reconciliation may be complete.

Penitent responds:

Thanks be to God. Amen.

A Scripture-Based Liturgy of Confession

(For use between a believer and a pastor)

Pastor:

The Word of God says, *“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”* (1 John 1:8–9).

Let’s come before the Lord with that promise in mind.

Both may pause for silence.

Believer:

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
try me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any grievous way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting (Psalm 139:23–24).

(The believer may speak openly and honestly about their sins. A moment of quiet may follow.)

Pastor:

Thank you for bringing this into the light. The Scripture says,

“Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy” (Proverbs 28:13).

Would you now join me in prayer?

Both pray:

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy

blot out my transgressions.

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me (Psalm 51:1, 10).

Pastor:

Hear the good news.

*“As far as the east is from the west,
so far does he remove our transgressions from us”*
(Psalm 103:12).

*“In him we have redemption through his blood,
the forgiveness of our trespasses,
according to the riches of his grace”* (Ephesians 1:7).

As a servant of Christ and witness to his grace,
I declare to you the promise of the gospel:
*“Everyone who believes in him receives
forgiveness of sins through his name”* (Acts 10:43).

You are forgiven. Walk now in the light,
and, as Scripture says, *“bear fruit in keeping
with repentance”* (Matthew 3:8).

Believer:

Thanks be to God for his mercy and grace.
I will arise and go to my Father (Luke 15:18).

Pastor (optional closing):

The peace of God, which surpasses all
understanding,
will guard your heart and your mind in Christ
Jesus (Philippians 4:7).

Part III: Privacy and Legal Requirements

The “seal of confession” is the principle that what a penitent shares with a pastor in confession is kept confidential. While traditionally emphasized in Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican practice, evangelical pastors can uphold a similar principle rooted in Scripture and pastoral care. Confession involves voluntarily disclosing sin to a spiritually trustworthy leader for guidance, prayer, and accountability (James 5:16; Galatians 6:1).

Purpose:

- Provides a safe space for spiritual honesty and healing.
- Encourages repentance, accountability, and restoration.
- Protects trust between pastor and congregant, reinforcing spiritual guidance.

Biblical Foundation:

- *James 5:16*: “Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another.”
- *Galatians 6:1*: Restoring someone caught in sin requires gentleness and discretion.
- *Proverbs 11:13*: Faithful lips preserve trust.

Limits of Confidentiality:

Evangelical pastors are called to protect both spiritual trust and legal/ethical responsibilities.

Confidentiality is **not absolute** when legal or moral obligations arise:

1. **Child or Vulnerable Adult Abuse** – Mandatory reporting laws typically override confidentiality.
2. **Imminent Harm** – Threats of suicide or violence may require disclosure to protect life.
3. **Legal Proceedings** – Court orders may compel disclosure, though some states recognize clergy-penitent privilege.

Best Practices:

- **Communicate boundaries upfront:** Clarify what will remain confidential and what may require reporting.
- **Document carefully:** Keep notes private and minimal.
- **Encourage accountability:** Pair confession with prayer, Scripture, and practical guidance.
- **Seek guidance:** Stay informed about local laws and ethical standards.

Summary Statement:

In an evangelical setting, the seal of confession is a pastoral and moral commitment, not a sacrament. Pastors are called to maintain confidentiality to foster trust and spiritual healing while respecting legal responsibilities. Properly handled, it is a ministry of grace, accountability, and restoration.