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CHOSEN IN CHRIST  
CALLED TO INFLUENCE

## Coming Clean

The Power  
of Confession



## Coming Clean

The Power of Confession



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Introduction

## A Surprising Delight

By Kelli B. Trujillo



Amid swirling rumors of Tiger Woods' infidelities, newsman Brit Hume waded in with a rather bold claim about Christianity: "The extent to which [Tiger] can recover seems to me depends on his faith. . . . I don't think [Buddhism] offers the kind of forgiveness and redemption that is offered by the Christian faith. My message to Tiger would be, 'Tiger, turn to the Christian faith and you can make a total recovery and be a *great* example to the world.'"

Many were up in arms about Hume's direct on-air promotion of Christianity—but what struck me most was the *aspect* of Christian faith that Hume drew attention to. It wasn't God's love or how we're made in God's image or even about God's wonderful plan for your life. It was the desperate need we sinners have for forgiveness and redemption.



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### A Surprising Delight

It's a message that's become rare in the American church. Of the multitude of post cards I receive in the mail marketing various nearby churches (and trust me, I get *tons*), I've never received one that says, "Come to our church where we invite you to look long and hard at the deep, dark, and shameful parts of your life and declare 'I'm wrong and sinful!'"

Squaring off with our deepest secrets and crippling feelings of guilt is exactly the opposite of the pat-on-the-back, you're-so-great message that American culture has taught us to expect. Yet, as Hume dared to publicly claim, there's something freeing and very appealing in the Christian message that calls sin *sin* and provides an avenue of forgiveness and absolution. "One of the greatest longings of our generation," writes Gordon T. Smith in this download, "is for someone to explain how we can be forgiven of the guilt we feel." There is, indeed, a surprising delight in confession.

For millions of Catholics world-wide, confession is a sacramental practice in which a penitent Christian recounts for her priest the sins she's recently committed. He may provide some counsel; he will likely recommend some act of penance (saying certain prayers, for example); he will declare that person forgiven in Jesus' name.

Protestants rejected this form of confession back in the Reformation—and for many of us, the closest we've come to a confessional booth is seeing one in the movies. Protestants insist there need be no middleman—a believer can confess directly to God. Yet unfortunately many of us end up neglecting the practice of confession altogether. We prefer to lightly gloss over or ignore our sins, knowing they're "covered" by God's grace.





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Yet Scripture urges us to confess (see James 5:16 and 1 John 1:9). We're called not just to confess our sins at the moment of conversion, but to do so throughout our life as believers.

If it's not in a booth behind a curtain with a priest, then what can confession look like for us? It may be kneeling in prayer at one's bed-side or scrawling in one's journal; it may be sitting at a coffee shop with a friend (and lots of Kleenex) or answering accountability questions with a small group; it may be reciting a liturgical confession with your congregation; it may even mean making a public statement in front of a large group of believers. However we do it, confession is an important part of growth for every Christian—without it, we can grow prideful and self-reliant, becoming spiritually stuck and floundering in our faith.

The articles in this download explore the importance of confession and the impact it can have on our own lives as well as the lives of others. As you read these articles and mull over the "Reflect" questions, invite God to speak to you. Consider how confession can become a more regular practice for you; ask God to use it in your life, enabling you to truly live in the freedom and redemption Christ offers.

Grace,

*Kelli B. Trujillo*

Managing Editor, KYRIA downloads,  
Christianity Today International





## How to use “Coming Clean” for a group study

“Coming Clean” can be used for individual or group study. If you intend to lead a group study, some simple suggestions follow.

1. **Make enough copies for everyone in the group to have her own guide.**
2. **Depending on the time you have dedicated to the study, you might consider distributing the guides before your group meets so everyone has a chance to read the material. Some articles are quite long and could take a while to get through.**
3. **Alternately, you might consider reading the articles together as a group—out loud—and plan on meeting multiple times.**
4. **Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting women to open up.**
5. **When working through the “Reflect” questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for women to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.**
6. **End the session in prayer.**



## 'Fessing Up

Why confession and repentance are essential to discipleship

*By Gordon T. Smith*

Confession and repentance are increasingly disappearing from the church, despite the clear witness of both Scripture and our spiritual heritage. What has contributed to this trend? Although there are many factors, I've identified three. One of these, no doubt, is the influence of the so-called seeker-sensitive movement, with the notable influence of those who insist that references to sin and confession are not positive and affirming.

Others contend that confession is a violation of the gospel; they argue that Christians no longer need to confess our sins because they have been forgiven—past, present, and future. One radio personality declares that every time we confess our sins after we become Christians, we "nail Christ to the cross again."



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Finally, some therapists suggest that confession is not consistent with our experience being victims. They observe that every time we sin, we are acting out the ways in which we have been wronged or wounded. According to them, confessing our sins only legitimizes those who have wronged us.

Yet neglecting confession has serious consequences and distorts both the gospel and our real capacity for transformation. One of the great longings of our generation is for someone to explain how we can be forgiven of the guilt we feel. We simply do not know the gospel unless we come to terms with our sin; even though we are "in Christ" and no longer under condemnation, real spiritual growth demands that we learn what it means to be healed. Both the Puritan and Wesleyan heritage, for example, demonstrate that confession is integral to genuine spiritual growth. And, while we are certainly victims, through confession we learn to take personal responsibility for our lives and insist that we will not wrong others as we have been wronged.

Confession is a means of appropriating the grace of God that enables us to live in the freedom of God's forgiveness as we grow in faith, hope, and love. We need to know that we are forgiven—and here the church becomes the sacramental embodiment of God's mercy as we forgive one another.

We urgently need to rediscover the power of confession as a vital element of our worship and spiritual friendship. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer observes in *Life Together*, our sins are too great for us to bear alone. When we confess our sin to another, we break its power by bringing it out into the light. Such a conversation might take place with a peer,





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with a mentor, or in a small group. Through confession—both corporately within the rhythms of our prayer and worship and in private, through our confession to a trusted friend or small group—we confront sin with the power of the gospel and the grace of the Spirit, and we turn, in humility, from darkness to light.

How can we practice the discipline of confession? It involves a few basic elements:

- (1) Acknowledge sin—that in thought, word or deed, we have acted in a way contrary to God.
- (2) Take personal responsibility for what has happened, claiming no excuse or extenuating circumstances.
- (3) Plead for the mercy of Christ. (We can use an ancient prayer, historically known as the *kyrie eleison*, which simply says "Lord have mercy.")
- (4) Claim the mercy and forgiveness of God.
- (5) Turn from sin and renounce it.

Through confession we come again to live under the mercy of God. We live as forgiven people who in the grace of the Spirit continue to grow—never assuming we have arrived, but always attentive to the prompting of the Spirit and the call to grow yet deeper in our faith.

*Gordon T. Smith is the president of reSource Leadership International, an author, and a professor at Regent College, Vancouver. You can read more about him at [www.gordontsmith.com](http://www.gordontsmith.com). This is adapted from the original article which was first published in the summer 2008 issue of LEADERSHIP JOURNAL.*





## Reflect

- *Gordon writes of Bonhoeffer's observation that "our sins are too great for us to bear alone." When in your life have you experienced this truth—when the burden of sin or guilt has felt too heavy? What did you do?*
- *"We simply do not know the gospel unless we come to terms with our sin," Gordon writes. He goes on to say, "[Confession] enables us to live in the freedom of God's forgiveness as we grow in faith, hope, and love." When has confession (to God or in conversation with a Christian friend or pastor) been liberating to you? If you can think of a specific example, reflect on how your feelings and spiritual life was changed through confession.*
- *Read **1 John 1:5–2:2**. What hope do you find in this passage? How would you explain the main ideas of this passage to a young Christian?*
- *Gordon outlines five basic parts of what confession to God can look like. In your view, which aspect(s) of confession as he describes it seems especially important? Why?*



## Why Can't I Shake My Sins?



A surprising answer to a stubborn problem

*By Kevin A. Miller*

**A** man came to see me. It was the beginning of Lent, the original "40 Days of Purposeful Repentance."

"Pastor," he said, "I want to confess my sins." And in tears, he spoke honestly and openly about the sin in his life—nothing illegal, most known only to him, yet serious, and he wanted to turn away from it. We talked and prayed together, and he left.

Forty days later, he came back.

"How are you doing?" I asked.



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"I haven't made much progress," he admitted, his eyes unable to meet mine.

In his agony was a question I've often asked: "Why does sin so stubbornly remain in our lives?" He and I both want to change more than we have and more than we do.

I've heard many answers, ranging from "You just haven't gotten serious enough about turning away from your sin" to "You need an experience of greater or entire sanctification" to "You need an accountability partner" to "You need to let go and let God." All helpful to a point, but they didn't seem to fit this man hunched over in front of me.

So I read several classic books of spiritual devotion. Their answer was not what I expected; in fact, it was the opposite.

In the first book, Francois Fenelon, a Christian spiritual adviser in the 1600s, wrote a letter that included a phrase that stopped me: "Sometimes [God] leaves people with certain unconquerable imperfections . . ." Really? God does this? What good end could God possibly have in mind for leaving unconquered areas in our lives? Fenelon continued, ". . . in order to deprive them of all inward self-satisfaction . . . Self-reliance, even in the matter of curing one's faults, fosters a hidden conceit."

In other words, we are most concerned about our "unconquerable imperfections." God is more concerned about our pride. And in order to stab our pride, he may leave those imperfections in our life, for a time, to make us humble, to cause us to throw ourselves, in frustration with ourselves, upon God.





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Even faults that stubbornly remain can be used by God for our good, says Fenelon: "Let us profit by the faults we have committed, through the humble consciousness of our weakness, without discouragement."

I swelled with hope. Could it be that our frustratingly persistent sins, which abound, lead us to a greater awareness of God's grace, which so much more abounds?

In a second spiritual classic, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Francis de Sales concurs: "For the furtherance of humility, it is needful that we sometimes find ourselves worsted in this spiritual battle." Needful. Necessary for us. But "we shall never be conquered until we lose either life or courage. . . . we are certain to vanquish so long as we are willing to fight."

Our persistent failings bring us "abjection" (humility), and that's spiritually beneficial as long as we persevere.

While striving for holiness, we must not underestimate the value of humility. As Peter of Damaskos wrote in the *Philokalia*: If "you sin out of habit even when you do not want to, show humility like the Publican (Luke 18:13); this is enough to ensure your salvation."

So when struggling with persistent sin, take heart. God is at work, and even your persistent failings may work to your good and his glory. Let yourself be humbled by your falls.





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Fenelon concludes:

Bear with yourself in your involuntary frailties as God bears, wait patiently for His appointed time of complete deliverance, and meanwhile go on quietly and according to your strength in the path before you, without losing time in looking back; sorrowing over [your sins] with humility, but putting them aside to press onwards; not looking upon God as a spy watching to surprise you, or an enemy laying snares for you, but as a Father who loves you. . . . Such you will find to be the path toward true liberty.

*Kevin A. Miller is executive vice president of Christianity Today International and assistant pastor at Church of the Resurrection in Glen Ellyn, Illinois. This article was first published online at [LeadershipJournal.net](http://LeadershipJournal.net) in June 2008.*





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## Reflect

- *Confession and repentance are not a quick fix! When have you felt like the man who met with Kevin—who, despite heartfelt contrition, was able to make very little progress in his effort to overcome certain sins? Which stubborn sins are most difficult for you to shake?*
- *Persistent sin can make us feel that we've been beaten in our spiritual battle. But, according to Kevin, God may allow this to happen in order "to make us humble, to cause us to throw ourselves, in frustration with ourselves, upon God." Read **2 Corinthians 12:7–10**. Paul's words in verse 10 have become a popular Christian tagline—but what do they really mean? Explore this idea on a deeper level: How would you put Paul's message here into your own words?*
- *Read **Luke 18:9–14**. Though short and simple, this parable communicates great truth. What are some adjectives that describe the tax collector? Reflect on his approach to God in prayer and how it personally challenges you.*
- *Fenelon points out that confession is not about wallowing in guilt over the past, urging Christians not to waste "time in looking back" but instead to have humble sorrow over sins, then "[put] them aside to press onwards." Practically speaking, how can a person do this? What are some concrete steps a person can take to put past sin aside and press forward in faith?*



## Good for the Soul



What can Protestants learn from the Catholic perspective on confession?

*By Frederica Mathewes-Green*

Does being a Christian mean always having to say you're sorry? When outsiders look at the Roman Catholic rite of confession (now more often termed "reconciliation"), they suspect it is driven by feelings of masochistic self-hatred, and sustained by claims of sacerdotal magic. Why should we have to spend this life groveling over sins if Jesus already paid for them on the Cross? Why should we speak sins out loud to another person, when they could remain between us and the bedpost? And, especially, why should we believe that a priest stands between us and God, forgiving or retaining our debts as he chooses?



## Coming Clean Good for the Soul

To understand the Catholic perspective on sacramental confession, we can turn to two books from Roman Catholic authors: *How to Go to Confession When You Don't Know How* by Ann M. S. LeBlanc and *Lord Have Mercy: The Healing Power of Confession* by Scott Hahn (an evangelical convert to Catholicism).

Sin is not a list of broken rules but "a heart condition," LeBlanc says; when Jesus calls us to abandon ourselves wholly to his service, counting up the times you yelled at your kids "starts to seem like it might miss the point." In conversation with a trusted priest you can explore patterns of selfishness and gain insight into ways to resist them. This is nothing like therapy, she insists: "Nowhere in therapy do you step into the arms of God."

According to LeBlanc, confession is a sacrament because ultimately God is at work, not you. LeBlanc, who lives in Maine, likens confession to the process of ice breaking up in spring. "One day," after false starts and reverses,

we suddenly find the river rushing heedlessly for the ocean, with huge gouges of slush and big chunks of ice, dirty and packed with gravel underneath, full of sticks, old fishing gear, and the ragged pelts and bones of small animals. We didn't cause it, we didn't even know when it started, we just watched and waited, knowing that it absolutely was going to happen. We turn, and find the water coursing through the river, and through our hearts, wild, unimpeded, and full of air.

Well, when you put it that way, it sounds pretty good. Her description of this sacrament resonated with my own





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experience as an Orthodox Christian; I go regularly to talk with my friend Fr. George, a heroic and joyous man who decades ago endured torture in Romanian communist prisons. Like LeBlanc, I am grateful to have such a wise and good friend, and welcome his advice, and especially his prayers. The risky act of speaking sins aloud, and being greeted with open forgiveness, has an impact you can't get in dialogue with a bedpost. That's the healing power of confession.

In his book, Scott Hahn focuses less on the experience of healing and more on establishing the Church's authority in sacramental confession. According to Hahn, when Jesus breathed on the apostles, "those first clergymen," they were explicitly given his power to bind and loose sins, Hahn says. "He was establishing them as priests, to administer a sacrament, but also as judges, to pronounce judgment upon the actions of believers." The rabbis of Israel had similar authority to exclude individuals from the life and worship of the community, but Jesus now expands it. "No longer would the authorities pass a sentence that was merely earthly. Since the Church shared the power of God incarnate, her power would extend as far as the power of God."

A situation with such anxiety-provoking potential requires clear rules. "Sin is any action—any thought, word, deed, or omission—that offends God, violates His law, or dishonors the order of creation," Hahn writes. Further, sins may be categorized as venial or mortal. Venial sins are seen to damage us spiritually, but mortal sins kill us, according to traditional Catholic view. Mortal sins meet "three conditions: grave matter, full knowledge, and deliberate





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consent." In the Catholic view, it is not necessary to confess venial sins, but mortal sins must be confessed or the person will be eternally lost.

How do you know if you confessed correctly? Hahn describes three conditions. First, you must be sorry for your sins, a state called "contrition." If sorrow is mixed with lesser emotions, such as fear or shame, it is called "attrition." "It will suffice for a valid confession, though we should always strive for a more perfect penance." Second, Hahn says, you must confess your sins aloud to a priest—"clearly state the types of mortal sin we've committed and the number of times we've committed them. If we hold back, we have not made a valid confession." Deliberately withholding a mortal sin is a mortal sin in Catholic tradition.

It is the third requirement Hahn outlines that will trouble Protestants most: you must "complete the work of penance or restitution." Hahn finds a biblical foreshadowing of this in Old Testament sacrifices: the sinner was required to personally offer God something costly and difficult in satisfaction for his sins. While our offenses against God are so great that we could never actually pay for them—Hahn says it's like the difference between punching your neighbor and punching the president—we are obligated to offer whatever sacrifice we can.

In his book, Hahn knits together four aspects of the Atonement—economic, military, liturgical, and legal—under one heading, that of covenant. Only from the perspective of *covenant*, he says, can we understand the full mystery of reconciliation.





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This choice of covenant analogy distills for me the point where Hahn's presentation fails. It is so relentlessly *external*. A covenant is what enables everyone to get along peaceably, without meddling or disturbance. It is concerned only with outward acts, and calls for only external self-control. In this view sins are separate and discrete actions, caused by fleshly hungers, and the cure is to set the mind in firmer control of the body.

The gospel reality is more intimate and challenging than mere orderly covenant. If "the kingdom of God is within you," if we are in Christ and he in us, we are more than good neighbors. If sins come "out of the treasure of the heart," then merely correcting external actions isn't enough. We can't trust the mind to rule the body; fallen human reason can drive sin as readily as the body does. Thoughts are frequently the door to actions; there's a reason "rational" and "rationalize" have the same root.

As a Catholic child I had a Sunday school book that showed the soul before and after confession. Before confession it looked like a milk bottle blotchy with mold; after confession it was sparkling clean. If confession is just a matter of getting the debt zeroed out, getting square with the covenant community, that makes sense. But what if it is a "heart condition" as LeBlanc says? Then it will be a lifelong process of healing, in which continual gratitude for forgiveness spurs us to be ever more honest about the ways in which we need it. We recognize our sins long after God does, and long after the Cross made possible their forgiveness. Yet we don't get free of their tyranny until we name and reject them, often fumbling and falling but continuing to try.





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This is a subtle distinction, between taking on self-disciplines to grow in strength to resist future sins, and performing acts of self-denial in order to contribute payment toward past ones. It is the difference between LeBlanc's and Hahn's books, and I believe that Hahn more accurately reflects classic Catholic theology. Again, he does not omit consideration of sin as sickness, but it is overshadowed by the view of sin as infraction.

Hahn describes how, as a young teen in Pittsburgh, he stole records from a store. He was caught and made up a story about being coerced by older boys to steal and then drop the records by a stump in the woods. He got away with it, but his success at deceiving his dad made him miserable.

In commenting on this, Hahn makes the valuable point that when we tell ourselves self-excusing stories, we cut ourselves dangerously loose from reality. "We begin to lose the narrative thread of our lives. Things no longer make sense to us. Relationships grow cold. We lose our sense of purpose and sense of ourselves." We all do this, to a greater or lesser degree, and it takes great effort to resist it and practice honesty, but we must realize that we are in God's all-seeing presence all the time anyway. We must grow to tolerate that light, because it is the only light there is; all else is confusion and darkness.

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## Reflect

- *Do you have personal experience with confessing to a priest? If so, how would you summarize your experience and what it meant to you? If not, what's been your general impression of such sacramental confession? Why?*
- *Though overall you may disagree with the Catholic practice of confession, what reasons for it (highlighted in this article) stand out to you as valid or significant? Why?*
- *Hahn's book explored the danger of telling self-excusing stories to ourselves and to God. How has this been a struggle or temptation for you? What negative effects have you experienced that resulted from not facing up to your sin?*
- *Zero in again on **1 John 1:8–10**. What does this passage say about the human tendency to excuse ourselves for our wrongs or ignore them?*
- *In rejecting sacramental confession, for many Protestants the pendulum has swung quite far the other way in which sins are rarely (if ever) confessed to others. Why do you think this is so?*
- *How is confessing sins to a friend or pastor like or unlike the Catholic approach to confession?*



## The Price of Silence



Author Francine Rivers knew she had to come clean about her past, but would it destroy her marriage?

*By Diane Eble*

**W**hen Francine married Rick Rivers, she did it without telling him her terrible secret.

They had known each other since fifth grade, but lost touch while attending different colleges. Later, Rick went into the Marine Corps. During those years, Francine got involved with a man and became pregnant. Frightened, and feeling she couldn't tell her parents, she did what was *supposed* to solve the problem, though it wasn't legal at the time: She had an abortion. Then she tried to get on with her life as if it had never happened.



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Francine began to correspond with Rick while he was in Vietnam, and they married in 1969, a year after he came home. "Before we got married," he says, "we talked about honesty. We were going to base our marriage on truth." He told Francine about his not-so-sterling past, but she couldn't bring herself to tell Rick about the abortion.

"I was convinced Rick wouldn't marry me [if he knew]," Francine explains. "I'd grown up in a Christian home. Killing your own child ranked in my mind as *the* worst sin. I was ashamed into my bones. Since I thought God couldn't accept me anymore, I certainly didn't think a man could, either. So I convinced myself that I should have the right to reach out for happiness."

And they *were* happy, in many ways, those first few years. But even while she enjoyed the growing love and trust in her marriage, Francine couldn't forget the abortion. Sudden fits of grief would descend on her. The possibility of starting a family brought feelings of extreme guilt and unworthiness.

No longer willing to live a lie, she decided she could trust Rick with her secret. So after two years of marriage, Francine confessed. "I told him in the dark—literally," she recalls. "We were at my parents' house, lying in bed. I said, 'There's something I never told you.'"

Rick was stunned. "I'd known Francine practically all my life," he says, "and she was the most moral girl I knew. But what hurt most was that she didn't trust me from the beginning. I had always been honest [with her]. I think she told me at her folks' house because she figured if I walked out, at least she'd have a place to stay."





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#### A terrible knowledge

After Francine's confession, their relationship changed. "You can't drop that kind of bombshell and expect to go on the same," Rick says.

"People are not like God," Francine adds. "The Lord hears our confession, forgives and *forgets*. Rick couldn't forget."

When they had disagreements common to any marriage, Rick would sometimes use his knowledge against her: *Who are you to tell me how to run my life? Look what you've done*. Francine would bitterly wish she had never handed him this weapon.

"There were other things going on that contributed to the stress of that time," she says. "But when he'd throw the past back at me, he proved what I'd felt all along—that he couldn't be trusted with the truth. I wondered if he really loved me, now that he knew."

Francine's insecurity about Rick's love colored everything. When they decided to wait to have children until after Rick finished college, she secretly wondered if Rick thought she'd be an unfit mother. This wasn't true, but feelings often have nothing to do with reality. And her insecurity deepened Rick's frustration. What would it take to prove to her that he loved her? Whatever he did, it was never enough.

Then came the miscarriages. In 1974, Francine found out she was pregnant. But what should have been an occasion for celebration only deepened her sense of guilt. She faced again what she had done years earlier to end her first pregnancy.





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Later, when the miscarriage began, she stayed alone in the living room, trying not to think, not to feel. "At the time, I felt it was justice," she says now, "[as if] God was taking back from me what I took from him."

Francine suffered three miscarriages in all, one before each of her three children were born. With every miscarriage, her self-condemnation intensified. Even her joy in her surviving children didn't assuage the shame she felt from deciding to go through with that long-ago abortion.

Rick refused to concede the existence of a God who delighted in punishing his wife for aborting her first child. He told her: "I don't believe for a second there's a God up there plotting how to make Francine and Rick miserable, just because of some mistake you made."

Rick's skepticism did nothing to diminish Francine's image of a wrathful God who left no sin unpunished. But things began to change after they moved to northern California in 1985. Francine started attending the Sebastopol Christian Church, and one day Rick grudgingly went along. Soon they were both committed Christians, growing in a more complete understanding of God's character.

As Francine studied the Bible, she began to see that God is also merciful and loving. Yet she had trouble *feeling* forgiven. "One day I was reading Proverbs 6:16–19, and it hit me that I'd done every one of those 'things the Lord hates' [such as 'a lying tongue' and 'hands that shed innocent blood'] by having the abortion," she recalls. Guilt washed over her again, and she was blinded by tears.





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Another time, one of her children came home from his Christian school and announced, "Every woman who ever had an abortion should be executed for murder." Francine winced. "How could I tell my child that when he throws stones at these women, he's throwing stones at me?"

When the word *abortion* came up in the media, it was like a fingernail scraping a chalkboard. If she truly was forgiven, why did these things continue to bother her so? She had to find a way past the guilt and pain.

#### **A deeper healing**

Francine began attending the PACE (Post Abortion Counseling and Education) Bible study offered at her local Pregnancy Counseling Center. The studies covered such topics as the character of God, anger, forgiveness, depression, letting go, and acceptance. "We studied what the Bible says about every aspect of our lives—not just abortion," Francine says. "We had to look at what we did—to the child, to our bodies. We looked at the full spectrum of God's character—his justice, but also the forgiveness offered through Christ. We forgave the people involved—including ourselves.

"I had to give my shame to the Lord and quit telling myself that God hadn't forgotten. Certain things you have to nail to the Cross."

Over a period of months, after working with other women dealing with the same feelings, Francine found healing. One indicator that she is now free of the past is her ability to talk with others about the abortion.





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And for Francine, who is a bestselling novelist, "talking about it with others" means writing about it. Her fiction has always been one way to work through ideas and problems. "I felt that God wanted me to talk openly about what I had done, the effects on my life, and how healing came about."

Rick supported her attending the Bible study, but he says the book "touched on issues of privacy—my privacy. I'm not the kind of guy who walks down the street and says, 'Hi, my name is Rick Rivers and my wife had an abortion.' I would rather they know she's been a wonderful wife and mother, that she's a gifted writer, that she's a Christian who's working hard to help other people become Christians and maintain their faith. I was worried about her being hurt."

As she worked on the manuscript, Francine needed to talk about her intense feelings. But Rick just wanted to get on with their lives. Once he asked her fiercely, "Aren't we ever going to put this behind us? When will it end?"

But the end is finally in sight. Rick says, "I was wrong about the book. Writing *The Atonement Child* (Tyndale) not only completed Francine's healing process—reading it forced me to deal with personal problems and past mistakes of my own."

### A fresh start

A man of action more than words, Rick spoke volumes when he proposed to Francine all over again, and they renewed their vows at Bodega Bay, beside the sparkling Pacific. Francine says, "It was a message to me—and to our children: 'I would have married you anyway, and I love you enough to prove it to the world by marrying you again.'"





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### The Price of Silence

Rick adds, "We've never been happier!"

Rick and Francine encourage couples who are touched by abortion to face the issue in the light of Scripture. Francine urges women to seek healing even if their spouses don't want to deal with the problem.

"If one person can receive healing from the Lord and move on, it lights the way for the other person," she says. "No matter how painful the process, when you come out the other side, you feel so free. It's worth it."

*Diane Eble is a freelance writer and the author of numerous books and articles. She and her husband, Gene, live with their two children in the Chicago area. This article was originally published in the winter 1997 issue of MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP.*

## Reflect

- *Francine felt unable to confess her hidden sin to her husband because, as she says, "I was ashamed into my bones." When has shame isolated you from a spouse, family member, or close friend? Reflect on the power shame had over you at that time.*
- *Read **James 5:16**. What does it mean to confess your sin to someone else? What doesn't it mean?*
- *Envision what **James 5:16** could look like if it were more fully lived out in your church. Describe how it would play out and what effect it would have on your Christian community.*





## Catalysts for Confession

What pastors from the past  
can teach the church today

*By Lyle Dorsett*

**“Y**ou’re a sinner!” At face value, this is not one of the most appealing Christian messages. No one has ever *liked* being called a sinner, but the great revivals in history began when people were convicted of their sin. Martin Luther, John Wesley, and Dwight L. Moody in their respective centuries found ways to communicate the doctrines of sin and repentance to reluctant people. They transformed churches, universities, and nations with their message. Their approaches can help us as we seek to grow in faith and in our ministry to others.



### **Luther's sin detector**

Martin Luther knew the power of simplicity. He used simple tracts, art, drawings, and even cartoons. Luther also put together a teaching device that he called a small catechism. Once widely used, the catechism has been gradually abandoned. But our post-Christian culture is beginning to resemble Luther's; ours is a biblical illiterate culture that's confused about who God is and what constitutes sin. Whereas the Victorians were supremely aware of their sins, today's culture rejects sin and denies guilt.

Luther's catechism included the Ten Commandments, the Apostle's Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and instruction on sacraments. The Commandments in particular were the mirror into which many people looked and realized, *Oh, look how I have offended God. I've sinned.*

In the church plant I've taken part in, we teach a catechism similar to Luther's. For the children who later walk away from their parents' faith, or for adults who need to renew their own, the catechism they learn here prods their spirits like the prodigal son's memories of home. We deliberately sow this catechism as the seed of future repentance.

I was at Bodleian Library in Oxford, England, researching to write a biography of C.S. Lewis's wife. A woman asked me, "What are you studying that for?"

"I'm a mid-life convert to Christianity," I said. "Lewis and his wife were also mid-life converts, and his writings had an impact on bringing me to my faith."

I asked her if she was a believer.





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"Oh, no."

"Have you had any exposure to the faith?"

"I was raised a Methodist, but I have nothing to do with it anymore."

"Since you grew up in the Methodist church," I said, "you must be familiar with the Ten Commandments." I was using Luther's principle of the catechism as a mirror. "Ma'am,"—and I don't know why I picked this commandment—"have you ever committed adultery?" She was shaken. "Don't answer that question. But if you have, because you're created in the image of God, I can't help but believe you're dealing with some deep guilt."

Then I said, "The beautiful thing about my Savior is that he can clean you and bring you back to God."

It's much easier to talk about sin with someone who was taught a catechism earlier. She looked at me stunned. Her eyes began to tear, and she said, "I need to think about that."

### Wesley's confessional

When John Wesley looked across Great Britain's Anglican Church in the 1700s, he saw a dead formalism. Pastors had about as much zeal as a dead possum. Why?

Wesley's genius was realizing that when people came to Christ, they needed to change and grow, not merely stand on the terms of a contract. In other words, they may have been converted,

**L**earn more about Wesley's small groups and the accountability questions they asked each other by clicking **here**.





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but their lives were not transformed. They were baptized, confirmed, and churched on Sunday. Yet they lived like hellions the rest of the time. Wesley concluded that the people of the church needed to be regularly confronted and challenged to confess their sins and repent.

Wesley realized that the Great Commission is not to make converts; it's to make disciples. As he preached, people gave their lives to Christ in droves. And then Wesley did something we often do today—he put them into small groups.

The purpose of Wesley's small groups was not simply encouragement and Bible study, but to provide a safe place for confession and accountability, an intimate environment for transformation into Christlikeness.

In 1995, God brought revival to Wheaton College. It broke out in a student-led Sunday night service. Confession and repentance continued Sunday night and every night through Thursday. Eight or nine hundred students got right with God that week.

During one of those evenings, a student stood and confessed that she'd lost her virginity the summer before. She was carrying terrible guilt, and she just wanted to confess her sin. The man sitting next to me elbowed me and said, "Prof, get this thing shut down. This is terrible. She didn't sin publicly. She shouldn't be confessing publicly. If that was my daughter, I'd feel terrible."

I said, "You're right. She didn't sin publicly. But she's having to confess here because . . . ." I paused, "because I've preached in your church, and it's not a safe place to confess





sin or to be held in loving accountability."

That night's events and conversations were the seeds that inspired my wife and me and some friends to plant a church. And every Sunday after the service we provide trained prayer and communion ministers, so people have a safe place to confess sin.

We don't forgive their sins, but we tell them, "Jesus Christ forgives your sins and cleanses you from all unrighteousness." And then we try to follow up with them next week. "How are you doing on this? Staying clean on this thing?"

### **Moody's listening team**

Despite the flood of conversions under his preaching, Dwight L. Moody kept his focus on the individual. At the end of the service he would say, "If anyone here has questions or they would like prayer, I'll be in another room and we can pray for you."

Moody would go to that other room where he had trained workers waiting. He told those workers, "When someone comes up, I want you to look at her. I want you to listen to her. I want you to pray, listen to the Holy Spirit, and ask him to help you listen to her. As you're working with her, another person might come up, too, and be looking at her watch. But don't worry about her. Take the first person seriously and keep working with her."

As soon as the people were heard and prayed with, Moody





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made sure they were connected with local pastors and lay leaders who would continue that kind of listening.

At a conference on the eastern seaboard, I was challenged to ignore the multitudes and focus on one person. I had just read an intriguing, little, second-hand book written for Catholic priests who were going to hear confessions. The book focused on listening to people while seeking the Spirit to hear what they're *not* saying—like Moody instructed his trainees. The book contended that some people don't know what they want to say or ask, but as we seek the Spirit, he can work in the unseen things of their hearts.

The night of the conference, the preacher concluded his message by asking people who desired to pray to come forward. As soon as he said it, people streamed forward. So many came forward, he said, "I want the ministry team to come up and help me pray."

I went up to the altar rail, and a man in a sports coat and tie knelt down. "How can I pray for you?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said.

I had just read that little book a few hours before. I prayed, *Lord, show me what I might do with this man. Show me how to pray for him.* I put my arm around him, and I began to pray. I just started praying in a way that I felt led.

He began to weep uncontrollably. "How did you know how to pray for me?"

"I didn't," I said. "The Lord knows your need. He told me how





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to pray for you." This man wept and wept. I didn't minister to anyone else that night. For five more days at the conference I got together with him regularly. And for six years, every year at that conference, we met and we talked. And he has grown in the Lord.

As Moody had taught, "Listen well. Take this soul seriously. And listen to the Holy Spirit as you do."

Frederica Mathewes-Green once wrote, "The more we see the depth of our sin, the more we realize the height of God's love." This vision of sin and love transformed the life of my friend from the conference. Luther, Wesley, and Moody can prod us toward confession in our own lives and help us offer the same vision to others in our church family.

*Lyle Dorsett is a professor at Beeson Divinity School. This is adapted from the original article, titled "Three Ways to Bring About Repentance" and first published in the fall 2002 issue of LEADERSHIP JOURNAL.*

## Reflect





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### Catalysts for Confession

- *When is the last time you heard a sermon, read a book, or in some other way were strongly confronted with your need to confess and repent from your sin?*
- *Read **Matthew 4:17; Acts 2:38–39, and 3:19.** Jesus and the leaders of the early church made no bones about confronting sin and the need for repentance. Why do you think this message is so rare in the church today?*
- *Wesley saw small groups as essential to discipleship; they were to be "a safe place for confession and accountability, an intimate environment for transformation into Christlikeness." Do you have any relationships like this? If so, describe that friendship or small group. If not, what can you do to help a friendship or small group move in that direction?*
- *What about hearing the confessions of others? What are some essential do's and don'ts when it comes to listening to another person share his or her sins and struggles?*
- *Finally, in light of all you've read in this download and thought about with God, are there any sins that God is prompting you to confess now? Will you do that?*



## Additional Resources

Books, articles, and Bible studies to help you further.



### Books

**The Best of Fenelon** by Francois Fenelon (Bridge-Logos Publishing, 2002; 352 pages). Fenelon was an important Christian thinker and writer in the 1600's who emphasized the importance of faith (rather than ritual) and abandonment in Christ. This volume contains three of this prolific author's most famous works: *Spiritual Letters*, *Maxims of the Saints*, and *Christian Counsel*, all carefully revised and updated into modern English by Harold Chadwick.

**How to Go to Confession When You Don't Know How** by Ann M. S. LeBlanc (St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2003; 60 pages). Written from a Catholic perspective, this book is a personal exploration of the inner feelings and spiritual growth associated with sacramental confession.



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### Additional Resources

**Introduction to the Devout Life** by Francis de Sales (Random House, 2002; 272 pages). As Bishop of Geneva in the first quarter of the 17th century, Francis De Sales saw to the spiritual needs of everyone from the poorest peasants to the court ladies. The desire to be closer to God that he found in people from all levels of society led him to compile these instructions on how to live in Christ. Francis' compassionate *Introduction* leads the reader through practical ways of attaining a devout life without renouncing the world and offers prayers and meditations to strengthen devotion in the face of temptation and hardship.

**Lord Have Mercy** by Scott Hahn (Random House, 2003; 208 pages). This book explains the Catholic Church's teachings on confession and forgiveness.

**Missing the Mark: Sin and Its Consequences in Biblical Theology** by Mark Biddle (Abingdon Press, 2005; 192 pages). Biddle addresses the essential nature of sin. He examines the dominant Christian understanding of sin, carefully rereads key biblical texts, and reveals the depth of meaning in the biblical tradition. He also examines the following aspects of the subject of sin: key passages and terms in the Old and New Testaments that deal with sin, its consequences, its effect on the community; reflection on the nature of sin, including original sin, in classical Christian theology; the relationship of the biblical theology of sin to Western juridical practice as well as philosophy, psychology, and the social sciences; the implications of the biblical theology of sin for the life of the church and Christian ministry.





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### Additional Resources

**The Philokalia, Volumes 1-4** compiled by St. Nikodimos and St. Makarios (McaMillan, 1984; 1626 pages). A collection of texts written in Greek between the fourth and 15th centuries by spiritual masters of the Orthodox tradition. Compiled in the 18th century and first published in Venice in 1782, *The Philokalia* has had a profound influence on the spiritual life of the Eastern Churches.

**Rediscovering the Power of Confession & Forgiveness** by Dr. Leah Coulter (Ampelon Publishing, 2006; 169 pages). Facing the pain of sin and guilt, we often wonder: "What does God want me to do?" This is the question Dr. Coulter seeks to answer in her careful study of Scripture. She provides a "pathway to repentance and forgiveness" as she explores forgiveness in the context of ancient Jewish culture.

**Respectable Sins: Confronting the Sins We Tolerate** by Jerry Bridges (NavPress, 2007; 192 pages). As Christians, we believe that all sins are considered equal in God's eyes. Yet while evangelicals continue to decry the Big Ones—such as abortion, adultery, and violence—we often overlook more deceptive sins. It seems we've created a sliding scale where gossip, jealousy, and selfishness comfortably exist within the church. In short, some sins have simply become acceptable.

**Signature Sins: Taming Our Wayward Hearts** by Michael Mangis (IVP Books, 2008; 244 pages). Finally—a safe place to talk about sin. Guided by psychologist Michael Mangis, we get specific by learning to know the individual and specific patterns of sin in our life that affect our thoughts, actions and relationships. This book reflects on the ways we manage our behavior to hide our sin and ignore the true poverty of our





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hearts. But until we deal with the root of our sin, we will be ruled and fooled by it, and miss the freedom Christ died to bring. Exploring common forms of sin and then discovering how our own temperament, culture, family and gender affect the way those sins manifest themselves in our lives will lead us to a place of real honesty with ourselves, God, and others. But the book doesn't stop there; it also shows ways to combat our sin so that we can change our hearts, not just our behavior.

## Articles

**“Authentic Fellowship”** by Karen Shepard, available from [ChristianBibleStudies.com](http://ChristianBibleStudies.com).

**“The Campus Confession Booth”** by Donald Miller, available from [ChristianityToday.com](http://ChristianityToday.com).

**“Confessions of a Perfect Christian Woman . . . (Or Why Getting Real About Our Messy Lives is Good for Us)”** by Julie Barnhill, available on [Kyria.com](http://Kyria.com).

**“Perfect Words for the Contrite Heart,”** an excerpt from Thomas Cranmer's Book of Common Prayer, available from [ChristianHistory.net](http://ChristianHistory.net).





## Coming Clean Additional Resources

### Bible Studies

**“Forgiveness in the Hands of God”**—a single-session Bible Study available from [ChristianBibleStudies.com](http://ChristianBibleStudies.com).

**“How to Repent”**—a single-session Bible study available from [ChristianBibleStudies.com](http://ChristianBibleStudies.com).

**“I Want to Change . . . So Help Me God!”**—a four-session Bible Study available from [ChristianBibleStudies.com](http://ChristianBibleStudies.com).



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