

To Experience Grace John D.

Corporate confession is indispensable, provided that it is bathed in grace, and that worshipers are led to understand why it's important.

First, it is radically honest to confess that we have fallen short of God's glory. Since sin is both individual and corporate, confession should be, too (Ps. 51 and Neh. 9). If we avoid corporate confession, we convey the idea that sin—and thus salvation—is only an individual matter.

Second, corporate confession is a formative act that spills over into everyday life. Fruitful corporate worship involves learning to say words to God that do not come naturally to us. "We are sorry" is as hard for us to say as it is for misbehaving toddlers. But when we practice these words, they shape our souls, priming us to use them in the middle of ordinary life.

Early church theologians compared public worship to a spiritual gymnasium. Omitting corporate confession is a little like going to a gym and skipping the core toning exercises.

Third, penitence orients us to grace. Think of penitence not as a burden but as a place to set aside our burdens. Construed as such, it becomes a welcome practice.

Fourth, acts of candid corporate humility resist self-righteousness and triumphalism—two of the largest problems inside the church, and two of the biggest reasons many people can't stand the church.

But simply dropping confession into next week's worship service won't do.

We need leaders to teach us that confession is something to grow into, something the Holy Spirit uses to form us. They need to assure us that it is valuable even when we do not understand the depths of our folly, even when we doubt we are sincere. If we waited until we fully understood and meant every word, would we ever pray the Lord's Prayer or sing even an average praise song?

Further, we need leaders to immerse corporate confession in grace. Too often, corporate confession feels like a temporary suspension of good news.

But it is a gift to be in a church honest enough to confess sin corporately. It is a gift to confess sin to a God of covenant love. It is a gift to pray for the Holy Spirit's help and to pray in the strong name of Jesus, who perfects our prayers. It is a gift to have confession encircled by scriptural words of assurance that announce the sovereign grace of God at work through the sacrifice of Jesus. When we have gospel-shaped worship, grace abounds before, during, and after corporate confession.

Ultimately, confession "sings" when public worship and lifelong repentance and service seamlessly connect. Pastors can and should nurture this connection, but they can't coerce it. This means that every act of confession—like every praise song—can be at least partly hypocritical.

So let's confess hypocrisy alongside everything else, expecting the Holy Spirit to bless candor with healing grace and to help us, as God's dearly loved children, to "grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (Eph. 4:15, NRSV).

The church is blessed today with artists, musicians, pastors, and others who have a renewed vision for shaping honest, grace-immersed corporate prayer and confession. Many are doing so by returning to the Psalms, the Bible's own school of prayer. Psalm 32 celebrates forgiveness, proclaiming, "Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven" (NRSV). Psalm 38, 51, 69, and 130 explore similar themes. May God's Spirit bless these worship leaders with congregations willing to embrace their vision.

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