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Confessions Within a Guilt-Denying Society

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*"This is how we shall know that we are children of the truth and can reassure ourselves in the sight of God, even if our own conscience makes us feel guilty. For God is greater than our conscience, and he knows everything."
(1 John 3:19-20, Phillips)*

Confessions Within A Guilt-denying Society

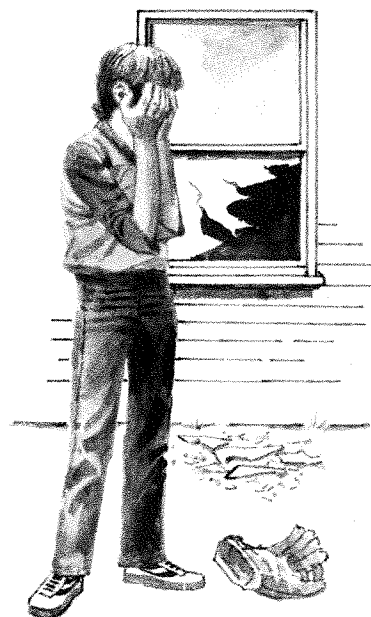
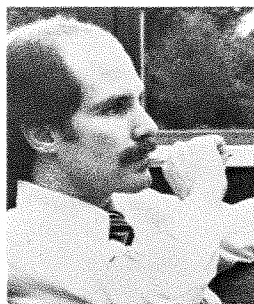
BY PAUL ANDERSON

WE LIVE in a guilt-denying society. "No-fault" auto insurance limits the cost of an accident to the paying of bills rather than the assessing of blame. A disillusioned spouse bends the ear of a sympathetic listener as to the problems that the *other* partner causes within the marriage. The habitually late student explains to his teacher, "But it wasn't my fault!" We live in a society that seems to demand success over failure and rightness over wrongness. Therefore, the tendency is to deny anything that would make us look wrong or in any way inadequate.

The result then is a generation of people who are all too willing to display their merits and far too uneasy with themselves to be truly authentic. We wear masks for acceptability, and only take them off in sharing groups or other contexts in which doing so is "expected."

But the Gospel of Jesus Christ cuts across all this. Or, at least it should. The Christian practice of confession frees us from the binding power of guilt. It helps us come to truth, real truth within ourselves. And through the healing power of forgiveness, it restores us to right relationship with God and others.

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"Without guilt we wouldn't recognize the need for change—let alone be motivated to do something about it."

The Redemptive Function of Guilt

Not all guilt is bad. In fact, guilt functions within our emotional selves much like pain functions within our physical selves. It warns us that something is wrong and that it needs our attention. If we didn't feel pain when a blister appeared on our heel, we would do ourselves further damage without even knowing it. And if we didn't feel guilt about destructive behaviors or damaged relationships, society itself would crumble. Guilt can help us recognize an area in need of change and motivate us to do something about it.

On the other hand, guilt can be destructive. This is usually a result of guilt being out of balance. In many cases, people feel guilty over things that they shouldn't. This is *inappropriate* guilt. The only things worth feeling guilty over are those things that can (and ought to) be changed. Past experiences about which we feel uneasy do not deserve guilt feelings unless there is something that can be done to remedy or to compensate for those experiences. The whole purpose of spiritual conviction is repentance. If there is no opportunity for repentance, or change, then one need not bear the burden of feeling guilty.

In some cases, people feel more guilt than they should, given the situation. This is *disproportionate* guilt.

Guilt feelings should be in proportion to the impact of the event upon important relationships. Contrasting two experiences as a child, Dr. Arthur Becker says:

"Trampling the geraniums was not as grave as the rebellious assault of direct disobedience. I felt this in my heart, and I felt much more guilty about refusing to go to bed (contrary to my father's order). Guilt feelings occur in proportion to how damaging our behavior is to an important relationship."

1. Arthur H. Becker, *Guilt: Curse or Blessing?* (Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1977), pp. 17-18.



"Without confession we would avoid the very truth that would set us free, both inwardly and outwardly."



"Without forgiveness we would not experience wholeness between ourselves and God and between ourselves and others."

The more direct and destructive the assault upon the relationship, the more profound our guilt feelings.¹

This is why disobeying God's ways involves more than mere nonconformity to a series of do's and don'ts. It involves rebellion against the very safeguards God has given us for our own good. Thus, failure to keep one aspect of the law involves a breach of the entire covenant with God (see James 2:10-11). What is needed, then, is a restoration of the damaged relationship. This is what forgiveness is all about.

Guilt exists as a life-preserving signal. It can show us what needs our attention, and it can also produce the motivation to work on restoring important relationships; but if we totally deny its existence, those benefits will be lost. Here's where confession comes into play. Through confession, we agree that something is wrong—in need of change. In doing so we are confronted with truth—life-producing truth, which brings healing to our innermost selves.

Confession and Truth

Carl Rogers observed that there is a link between our emotional health and coming to truth within ourselves. Anxiety and feelings of uneasiness arise within us because what we think or perceive about ourselves is different from what we experience. The greater the difference, the greater will be our anxiety. And, the greater the similarity (or congruence) between the two, the greater will be our sense of well-being. We cannot remain healthy emotionally and physically without maintaining "congruence" between our perceived and our experienced selves.

For instance, if I consider myself to be a good golfer, and yet my average is two or three strokes above par per hole, a conflict will develop between my perception and my experience. To deny it would cost a lot of energy, and even-

tually my health (especially if golf is important to me). What will most likely happen is that I will either say to myself, "Well, I guess I'm not *that* good a golfer" or, I will go to the practice range and try to improve my game.

The denial of any aspect of truth about ourselves, no matter how unpleasant, always leads us to inward self-estrangement. Only as we open our eyes to who we really are and take full responsibility for that which we have done can there be any peace or harmony within. Here's where confession plays a miraculous role. As we stop running from our faults and confess them openly and honestly to God, we find that we are liberated from the shackles of inward alienation. It's not surprising that Jesus prefaced the healing of the paralytic with the words, "Your sins are forgiven!" Then and now, He meets our first needs first.

When we confess our sins, this is not an exercise in self-flagellation. It is merely the exposing of our souls to the penetrating and healing light of God's love and truth. When something that needs correction is revealed, we merely agree with truth and pray, "This is what I am, Lord, except for Your helping spirit." Then the same spirit who reveals to us the truth about ourselves also gives us everything we need to walk in that truth. This is where human transformation happens most powerfully. Through the confession of sins we come to truth and harmony within ourselves, and through confession of our need before God we are liberated to live as we'd always wanted, but humanly speaking, never could.

Another liberating factor about the ministry of the Spirit is that we do not have to spend all of our time and energies looking inward, searching out our sins and incongruities. Jesus promised that the Helper, the Spirit of truth, would do this.

"And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment . . . He will guide you into all the truth . . ." (John 16:8, 13a NASB)

Instead of feeling overwhelmed by guilt or struggling to know what needs to be confessed, we need merely wait on the Lord openly and trust Christ's spirit to convict us of what needs to change and what has been done right. This liberates us from both the tendency to wallow in self-blame and the temptation to give in to selfish pride. Confession, then, is the means by which we agree with God about our true condition. When we come to truth within ourselves, our lives become renewed and renewing for others.

The Process of Forgiveness

Confession serves a pivotal role in the process of forgiveness. Through confessing our sins, we own up to our responsibility for our actions. In doing so, not only are we restored to well-being inwardly, but we are also restored into right relationship with God and others.

The biblical understanding of forgiveness involves the *releasing* of a person who has become indebted to another. When forgiveness is complete, it involves removing the offense or indebtedness from sight so that the relationship is restored. A theme that emerges quite clearly is that the "releasing" of another also sets free the one who forgives. Now let's look at that process. It involves seven elements.

1. *Indebtedness.* If something is to be forgiven, there must be a need. This usually involves some kind of offense or sin. Whether it be an act of transgression, a trespass, an insult, or missing the mark, all sin has both pragmatic and relational consequences. The pragmatic consequences are the natural fruit of our behavior. Despite full forgiveness from God, we still reap what we sow in at least some sense. But the worst consequence of sin is the damaging of personal relationships. If a brother strikes a brother, the physical wound will heal. But the deeper wound is the gulf that develops between the two persons. For relational gaps to be bridged, the process of forgiveness must continue.

2. *Conviction.* Unless we recognize our fault or need to make things right, the process could be ended before it begins. Our awareness of fault may come from a variety of sources, but ultimately it is the work of the Holy Spirit that confronts us with this truth about ourselves.

3. *Remorse.* If we agree with the Spirit's conviction of truth, this produces a feeling of sorrow, or remorse. Without sincere sorrow for a wrong committed there can be no restoration to right relationship. True *metanoia*, or repentance, involves the reversal of one's attitude as well as one's actions. It is within this stage of the process that we are



motivated by feelings of guilt to seek forgiveness and to make things right.

4. *Confession.* Confession occupies the pivotal position within the process of forgiveness. In recognizing that we have been at fault and that some changes need to be made, we are set free inwardly. We can be truly authentic and look at ourselves as we really are, not fearing or dreading what we might discover. Confession also prepares us to be able to receive forgiveness from another.

5. *Releasing.* Forgiveness takes place only as the one who is owed releases the debt of the one who owes. In doing so, once-estranged relationships are healed. This healing transforms our relationships with God, with others, and with ourselves. Each of these relationships affects the other two. Jesus said, "And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have aught [anything] against anyone; so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses." (Mark 11:25) Often, we are hindered from experiencing God's forgiveness either because we have not forgiven ourselves, or we have not forgiven others. It is interesting to note that the passage of releasing and binding on earth and in heaven (Matthew 18:18) is bordered on both sides by Jesus' teaching about forgiveness. Unless we "release" others, they remain in bondage and so do we.

6. *Restitution.* Sometimes in this process, we become aware that there is something we can *do* to make matters right. This may involve the expression of an apology, or it may involve the replacement of a damaged or stolen item. Restitution is the healthy result of realistic guilt.

7. *Restoration.* The goal of all forgiveness is the restoration of right relationship between once-estranged persons. When two parties have been restored into loving fellowship, the relationship rests on a deeper level than it had ever known before. Trust is more firmly established because the two have weathered tough times. And feelings of appreciation and love are rekindled because the two parties have reconfirmed their caring for and commitment to one another. We also learn from such experiences, and in most cases, we are further prepared to be better persons, having emerged successfully through the process of forgiveness.

Guilt, confession, forgiveness—they're all interrelated. Without guilt we wouldn't recognize the need for change—let alone be motivated to do something about it. Without confession we would avoid the very truth that would set us free, both inwardly and outwardly. And without forgiveness we would not experience wholeness between ourselves and God and between ourselves and others.

The whole purpose of Jesus' ministry involved the reconciling of such relationships. As His friends, He has called us to join Him in the ministry of reconciliation, ". . . namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation." (2 Corinthians 5:18-19 NASB)