Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed are those whose sin the
LORD does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit.
When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was
heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.
Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to
the LORD." And you forgave the guilt of my sin.
Psalm 32:1-5, TNIV

When I was in my early twenties, after having been a Christian for a little over five years, and having returned to
Seattle on the heels of an intense time of spiritual growth, I found myself in a funk. I felt stalled out and only
rarely felt the presence of the Lord in prayer or worship. When I shared these feelings with a friend, she gave me
a pamphlet from the ministry of Keith Green, a fiery reformer of the early Christian rock movement. The booklet
suggested that confession of sin was the remedy for spiritual malaise and recommended a one-day private
retreat of confession and repentance. On a warm, sunny Saturday in May, I took a yellow legal pad and a pen
out onto the vast sloping lawn of the YMCA youth hostel where my band mates and I were renting a basement
apartment. Following Keith Green’s suggestion, I went all the way back in life and wrote down every sin I could
recall ever having committed. Hour after hour passed; page after page was filled. Eventually I came to a point
where my recollection was exhausted and I could remember no more. I prayed a prayer of thanksgiving, and,
during the prayer, the words “Psalm 32” came into my mind. I didn’t know what Psalm 32 said, so I ran into the
house and picked up my Bible. I couldn’t believe it! The text was so directly applicable to my situation. Look at
the text above and see for yourself.

I felt completely cleaned and was overcome with the joy of the Lord. This
sense of freedom carried me forward in my faith for quite some time after this.

Early in my Christian experience, I memorized 1 John 1:9, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to
forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (NASB). I was taught, however, that this referred to
what happened at salvation when all my past sins were borne by Jesus on the cross, so I had never thought to
apply this to my continued Christian development.
Last summer, my friend Neal and I took a day-hike up Mt. Si. We decided to take lunch at the summit of the hike, and everything we needed—jackets, water, lunch, sunscreen—fit into one backpack. I started out carrying the pack, but halfway up the trail, I became tired and thirsty and my back and my feet began to hurt. Neal offered to take the pack, so we stopped and switched. I dug for one of the water bottles and took a long refreshing drink. The rest of the ascent was a breeze once I was refreshed—and someone else carried the burden!

This is the analogy in Psalm 32: living with un-confessed sin is like climbing a mountain in August carrying a forty-pound pack, and confessing sin is like handing the pack to a friend and taking a long drink of fresh water!

Protestant Christians often avoid practices related to confession due to the association between confession and Catholicism. They can’t imagine themselves confessing to a priest through a screen, so they dismiss confession as belonging to someone else’s faith. Confession, however, is a central aspect of a biblical expression of Christianity, so it is essential to find a way to practice it that honors scriptural teachings.

What to Confess: Ideas about Sin

In the fourth century St. Augustine asserted that “all human projects are infected with the perversion caused by an exalted human pride and a distorted will.”¹ Thomas Aquinas suggested that sin is rooted in “the inordinate longing for some temporal good grounded in the inordinate love of self.” In the twentieth century, Karl Barth expanded beyond pride to include sloth and falsehood, and Dutch theologian Piet Schoonenberg highlighted the fact that “the sinful person acts against his or her being or against their neighbor’s being.”² In his own words, Professor William Dyrness focuses on sin as an impediment to deep personal engagement with God: “Sin and its consequences account for most of the reasons that people cannot come to God in faithful worship.”³ An especially wise definition of sin that comes to us through the spirituality of Ignatius of Loyola states that “Sin is whatever alienates us from God.”⁴

How do we break past the attitudes and behaviors that create barriers between us and God? There are two kinds of confession in scripture: private confession before God, and confession to a Christian brother or sister.

Confession to a Christian Friend

The New Testament Epistle of James gives us a straightforward directive: “Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed” (James 5:16, NIV). This is different than silent confession before God in prayer; and it is different than formal dialogue with a priest in a confessional. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his classic book Life Together gives an extended warning regarding the dangers of exclusive reliance on private

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² Ibid., 37.
³ Ibid., 39. Dyrness goes on to emphasize other less directly applicable, but nonetheless crucial, aspects of sin, Examples include Niebuhr’s sin as “the ambiguity and paradox of human existence”; the modern feminists’ emphasis on “whatever opposes God’s will for our flourishing”; that fact that sin is not only personal, but can also have structural and societal dimensions; sin as pollution, sin as brokenness; and church historian Justo Gonzales’s idea of sin as self-deprecation: “Many people living on the margins or in places of powerlessness in society not only are forced to suffer humiliation or discrimination by those in power, but are made complicit in the process... tempted to deny not only their rights, but also the gifts they have to offer.”
confession, exhorting the young ministers training in his underground seminary to practice James 5:16 together in real life.

Though Christians have fellowship with one another as believers, they do not have fellowship as sinners. So they must conceal their sin from themselves and from the fellowship. Sin demands to have a person alone. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive the power of sin. Sin wants to remain unknown. In the darkness of the unexpressed, it poisons the whole being. When confession of sin is made in the presence of a Christian friend, however, the last stronghold of self-justification is abandoned. The expressed, acknowledged sin has lost its power.

To stand before a friend as a sinner is an almost-unbearable embarrassment. In the confession of concrete sins, the old self dies a painful, shameful death. Because this humiliation is so hard, we continually scheme to evade it. Why should we not find it easier to go to our friend than to the holy God? If we do, we must ask ourselves whether we have not often been deceiving ourselves with our confession of sin to God, whether we have not rather been confessing our sins to ourselves and also granting ourselves absolution. And is not the reason perhaps for our countless relapses and the feebleness of our Christian obedience to be found precisely in the fact that we are living on self-forgiveness and not on real forgiveness? Our friend breaks the circle of self-deception. Those who confess their sins in the presence of a Christian friend know that they are no longer alone. They experience the presence of God in the reality of the other person.

Years ago, I inherited the leadership of the Men’s ministry in a large Evangelical church, which was, at the time, organizing itself into small accountability groups. I joined a group of five men and we committed ourselves to gather at six o’clock every Wednesday morning in one of four, drafty “chalets” that were a remnant of a Bible camp somewhere in the church’s distant past. Our agenda was simple; we asked and answered seven questions:

1. How is your prayer life?
2. What is the quality of time spent with God’s word?
3. How are you investing yourself in your marriage?
4. What time have you spent with your kids?
5. Have you been in an inappropriate or awkward situation with a woman?
6. Have you allowed your eyes to go anywhere they shouldn’t?
7. Have you just been lying about any of the previous questions?

Besides formal accountability groups, prayer-partner relationships and one-to-one mentorships can be effective contexts for mutual confession. Questions of trust and vulnerability, however, must be addressed here. It can feel—and even be—somewhat dangerous to let others know about our struggles and our sins. In group contexts, it is essential to discuss rules of engagement and boundaries of confidentiality. In one-to-one relationships, the choice of mentor or prayer partner is crucial. Again, Bonhoeffer has clear insight. He asks and

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5 Bonhoeffer, 133-4.
6 Ibid., 134.
7 Ibid., 136.
8 Ibid., 131-139. I have altered and edited the English translation of Bonhoeffer’s German here for two purposes: to use gender-neutral language, communicating Bonhoeffer’s ideas to both men and women; and to encapsulate and condense the thought of a whole chapter in a length appropriate for this discussion. To indicate every place where I have deleted a word, phrase, or sentence would result in a cluttered presentation. For this reason, I have chosen not to do so.
9 These are modified versions of the questions popularized by the Promise Keepers movement. This process of group confession finds it roots in early Methodism and in the teaching of John and Charles Wesley.
answer the question, “To whom confess?” with these words: “Anybody who lives beneath the cross and who has discerned in the cross of Jesus the utter wickedness of all people and of his or her own heart will find there is no sin that can ever be alien. Only the brother or sister under the cross can hear a confession. It is not experience of life but experience of the cross that makes one a worthy hearer of confessions.”

Private Confession before God

Looking at the previous section, it might be tempting to dismiss or disparage the value of private confession. The two kinds of confession, however, work together so that you may remain fresh and pure before God. I mentioned Ignatius of Loyola above. Born the year before Columbus sailed, this romantic, daydreaming, swashbuckling Spanish youth came to Christ on the heels of a failed border skirmish with the French. As he convalesced from injuries he incurred there, his fantasy took a new turn: “When he daydreamed about his lady and doing heroic deeds for her... he would feel nothing in particular. When he dreamed about being in the service of Christ the King, he found himself filled with a peace and joy that lasted long after the fantasizing.”

Desiring that others would share this elation, Ignatius developed his famous Spiritual Exercises, one of which is called The Examen. This exercise is filled with insight into the process of private confession, so I will use it as a model in the following discussion.

How to Confess

First, it is important to stress that The Examen is not an examination of a person’s conscience—looking for and confessing behaviors already understood to be sins—but is, instead a reflective exercise centered on consciousness, a bringing of the whole person before God. This is done in the spirit of Psalm 139, “Search me, God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any hurtful way in me; and lead me in the everlasting way” (verses 23-4). Note that it is God who is doing the searching here. Confession in this mode involves a radical change of perspective—a bringing of self before God with an open, listening spirit, one desirous of genuine inner change.

Besides openness to God’s examination on a consciousness level, The Examen presumes an attitude of heart referred to as indifference. Ignatian indifference is not a careless spirit, and is certainly not a disregard for the well-being of others. It is similar to the attitude expressed by Paul in Philippians 4:11-13, “I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength” (TNIV). Ignatius articulates this attitude of heart in his “First Principle and Foundation,” adding a nuance of his own, “We should not prefer health to sickness, riches to poverty, honor to dishonor, a long life to a short life.” The ability to welcome all of these, pleasant and unpleasant, recognizing them as the hand of God, illuminates the path toward agape with joy and lightness. Classically, the practice of The Examen proceeds in five “moments”: appreciating, adjusting, admitting, apologizing, and assenting.

Appreciating recognizes that real confession must be grounded in thankfulness. Our focus is too easily drawn to perceived areas of lack or deprivation in life. Not long after our kids arrived from Africa, I was driving

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10 Ibid., 118.
12 My translation.
13 McIntyre, 195.
14 Ibid., 193. The traditional headings are “acknowledging, asking, admitting, repenting, and resolving.” A few of these terms are misleading, however, so I have coined the above schema to correct this.
away from our lakefront country home and complaining to my son about something that “rich people” could do that I couldn’t. His reply: “You’re rich, Dad!” He was so right! Why, then, do I spend so much time feeling sorry for myself? Appreciation disarms this distorted self-perception as we intentionally thank God for a long list of concrete blessings. The first “word” in human maturity is “thank you.”

Adjusting relates directly to distorted self-perception and addresses it head on. This movement toward self-detachment seeks the divine perspective and prays, “Grant me grace to see myself as I am.” Jesuit writer John P. McIntyre describes this moment beautifully: “By recognizing all of our strengths for what they are—gifts of God—we must empty ourselves to ourselves and enter into that kenotic movement of self-emptying in order to achieve the incarnational vantage point.” The essence of this moment is to get new glasses. Our present pair is like a funhouse mirror, distorting our view of self beyond recognition. The distortion we experience may cause us to view ourselves more highly than we ought to, but it is also possible to view ourselves too lowly, or to focus entirely on the wrong aspects of ourselves. God is the great optometrist. He has the lenses we need to see ourselves clearly and accurately, exactly as he sees us.

Admitting uses a written record and, with ear still attuned to God’s spirit, identifies precise issues, recalling that sin is “whatever alienates us from God.” This definition of sin takes our eyes off of momentary acts and minor peccadillos, some of which are related more closely to the expectations of polite society than to genuine godliness, and causes us to examine core heart attitudes toward God, self, and others. Ignatius describes it this way: “I will consider who God is against whom I have sinned, going through his attributes and comparing them with their contraries in me: his wisdom with my ignorance, his power with my weakness.” The character of God is the litmus test. Unlike my Keith Green experience, The Examen is not designed to encompass a sinful track record over a lifetime, but instead focuses on a defined period: a day, a month, a week, or a season of time.

Apologizing moves from simple accounting of misguided actions and behaviors to an attitude of remorse. Contrition is the essence of this moment, recognizing that God has blessed us and that we have abused His blessing. Apologizing acknowledges that our sins are not simply misjudgments or victimless crimes—that we are not the only ones who bear sin’s disastrous effects. Ours sins hurt others and offend God. Sinful attitudes burn bridges, opening chasms between the sinner and God, and creating barriers between the sinner and the people God has called him or her to love. The second word in human maturity is “I’m sorry.”

Assenting, the final phase, is rooted in the desire that confession will not prove to be only a sentimental, tear-filled exercise, but that it will result in actual behavioral change. “Resolving,” the term classically used to describe this phase, implies that behavior-change can be accomplished by the exercise of the will—and sometimes it can. Entrenched patterns of behavior can, however, prove very tenacious. New Year’s Resolutions are often ineffectual over the long term and are quickly forgotten as old ways reassert themselves. Assent is different than resolve. Assent is rooted in the conviction that the transforming action is God’s and is not catalyzed by human willpower. Assent takes a passive rather than an active stance.

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15 This is a theological term relating to Christ’s self-emptying (Greek kenos), especially as articulated by Paul in Philippians 2:6-11.
16 McIntyre, 194.
17 Ibid., 196.
18 Ibid., 196.
Travelling to Colorado Springs to teach a class, I stopped by the airport newsstand and bought a copy of *Scientific American Mind*. The article that caught my attention was “The Willpower Paradox,” in which author Wray Herbert reported research\(^\text{19}\) from which he concluded that “setting your mind on a goal may be counterproductive.” His advice: “Think of the future as an open question.”\(^\text{20}\) The research centered on addiction recovery and compared “willfulness,” expressed by the statement “I will,” with “willingness,” voiced instead with a question: “Will I?” The study concluded that “people who kept their minds open were more goal-directed and more motivated that those who declared their objective to themselves.”\(^\text{21}\) It turns out that willfulness correlates to shame and guilt, and results in continuation of harmful patterns, while willingness correlates to openness and engagement in new ways of being in the world. Assent recognizes God as the primary actor in repentance and grants permission for God to act, envisioning and welcoming a future characterized by new and better patterns than those that have defined the past. The third and final word in human maturity: “in deed.”\(^\text{22}\)

An Exercise in Personal Confession: Psalm 15

**Prelude 1: Prepare a Place**

Find a time and place to pray that is free from distractions and comfortable for prayer. Turn off electronics. Remove all items except journal, a pen, and a Bible open to Psalm 15.

**Prelude 2: Center Down**

Set your heart and mind on the present Holy Spirit of God. Breathe out the cares of the day. Wait in silence until your spirit begins to connect with God’s Spirit. Dwell prayerfully on the words of Psalm 139:23-24: “Search me, God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any hurtful way in me; and lead me in the everlasting way.”

**The First Moment: Appreciating God’s Gifts**

Using your journal and your pen, write a list of thirty-five concrete life blessings. These may be loved people, fortuitous situations, personal victories, treasured possessions—whatever you have received from God that is valuable and good. Spend the time required to make this list generous and expansive. Pray with your pen, composing a seven-sentence prayer of thanks and praise to God for his goodness.

**The Second Moment: Adjusting Your Perspective**

Using silent worded prayer, ask the Lord to grant you the grace of a divine self-perspective. Write a list of your premier accomplishments in life (college degrees, successes at work, athletic accomplishments). Then make a list of a few of your perceived deficits and flaws (struggles in school, social awkwardness, that conversation you had with…). Stretch your hands out in front of you, palms up. Imagine your accomplishments in one hand and your deficits in the other. Turn your hands over and let them all fall to the ground. Write a seven-sentence prayer

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\(^{21}\) Ibid., 67.

\(^{22}\) McIntyre, 197.
confessing the false weight you have put on these things and asking God to bring to your mind what really matters to him. With an ear to the spirit, take a minute to write down what comes to mind. Receive affirmation from the Spirit; and be open to challenging news as well.

The Third Moment: Admitting Your Sins

Read through Psalm 15 twice (it’s short), allowing the passage to serve as a tool for self-examination, comparing your own behaviors and heart attitudes over the last several weeks or months to those described in the Psalm. With ear tuned to the Spirit, and keeping in mind that “sin is whatever alienates us from God,” write a list of twenty-five behaviors, attitudes, habits, patterns, and personality trends that contradict what you see in the Psalm and what you know of God’s character more broadly.

The Fourth Moment: Expressing Apology

Read through your list one more time, this time asking God’s Spirit to highlight one item on the list that is of special concern. This should be very clear to you and should take only a moment. Praying with your pen, write a ten-sentence expression of sorrow and remorse, telling God that you know you have sinned against him personally and that, though he has blessed you, you have abused his blessing. Consider also those others who have been hurt by your sin and the human and divine relational barriers your sin has created.

The Fifth Moment: Assenting to New Ways

Continue praying with your pen. In three sentences, express the realization that you are powerless to conquer these patterns by yourself—that you need him to empower any change. Pause for a moment and envision how your life would be different if you could overcome the attitudes behind these behaviors. What would new and better patterns look like? Summarize these musings before God in three additional sentences. Close the time in a three-sentence prayer granting God consent to do the needed transforming work. Finally, move to the prayer that is beyond words, enjoying the Lord’s presence in an attitude of thankfulness, resting in God’s love.

Postlude 1: Reflect with Others

Discuss the fruit of this exercise with an accountability group, a prayer-partner, or a trusted Christian friend. Present yourself with humility and listen with discernment to their response.

Postlude 2: Put Feet to It

Return to your journal a day or a week later and compose a short prayer reflecting on the exercise with the benefit of a little distance. Affirm again your openness to the Spirit’s work of cleansing and transformation, realizing that God is the one who empowers real change in a Christian’s life.

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