

**SYSTEMATIC
THEOLOGY
502
DISTANCE**

CONFESSION

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CONFESSION OR RECONCILIATION

The sacrament of Reconciliation was called penance through the middle ages because of the common medieval practice of auricular confession with the attached penance. Today it is often called Confession.

The English term penance is from the Latin (*poenitentia*), however, this is a translation of the Greek word *μετάνοια* meaning repentance

- Form and Matter

- According to St. Thomas, the matter of confession is the penance imposed by the priest upon the penitent (and his action of carrying this out), and the form of the sacrament are the words of absolution, 'I absolve you (*Ego te absolvo*) . . . in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit'
- Anglicans generally do not hold strictly to this distinction, but Anglo-Catholics would

- Judicial (Indicative) & Declaratory (Precatory) forms of Absolution

- Roman Catholics hold exclusively that priestly absolution is a judicial act (Trent 14.9)
- Roman Catholics hold that it is necessary in the case of mortal sin
- Anglicans, like Eastern Orthodox, generally believe that absolution is a declarative act because God alone forgives sins
 - 'Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who of his great mercy hath promised forgiveness of sins to all them that with hearty repentance and true faith turn unto him; Have mercy upon you; pardon and deliver you from all your sins; confirm and strengthen you in all goodness; and bring you to everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord.' (1662 BCP, 309, 1928 BCP)
 - 'Almighty God have mercy on you, forgive you all your sins through our Lord Jesus Christ, strengthen you in all goodness, and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep you in eternal life.' (1979 BCP, 398)
- Anglicans, however, have also kept the judicial or indicative form of confession as well in priestly absolution
 - 'Our Lord Jesus Christ, who has left power to his Church to absolve all sinners who truly repent and believe in him, of his great mercy forgive you all your offenses; and by his authority committed to me, I absolve you from all your sins: In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.' (1979 BCP 448, Form I of Reconciliation)

- Contrition is Necessary

- Contrition refers to appropriate sorrow and remorse for sins committed and desire for amendment of life on the part of the penitent
- Going to Confession itself is normally a sufficient evidence of appropriate contrition



SCRIPTURAL FOUNDATION

The scriptural foundation for Confession comes from three ideas found in Scripture: The commandment for us to confess sins, the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church to forgive sins, and the authority to bind and lose.

- Biblical Admonitions to Confess Sins

- 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.' (1 John 1:9)
- 'If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the perfect offering for our sins, and not for ours only, but for the sins of the whole world.' (1 John 2:1-2)
- 'Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed.' (James 5:16)

- The Gift of the Spirit to Forgive Sins given to the Church

- 'And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."' (John 2:22-23)
- 'Therefore it is said, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.'" (Eph 4:8)
- Priestly absolution is a gift that Jesus Christ has given to the Church

- The Power to Bind and Lose

- 'If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.' (Matt 18:15-18)
- Priestly absolution declares sins forgiven, it cannot declare something not sinful that God has declared to be sin



HISTORY OF CONFESSION

Penance was originally tied to conversion and was communal of the catechumenate. As the original meaning of the Latin word 'penance' suggests, the sacrament of penance was closely tied with the conversion and repentance (metanoia) of the individual.

- Heretics were generally excommunicated and shunned in the practice of the early Church, whereas penitents were disciplined
 - Penance was originally allowed only once in the early Church (The Sheppard of Hermas, Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp, and 2nd Clement all give witness to this practice)
 - For example Tertullian says: 'Although the gate of forgiveness has been shut and fastened up with the bar of baptism, God has permitted it still to stand somewhat open. In the vestibule, He has stationed the second repentance for opening to those who knock. But now it is once for all—because not it is for the second time. It will not be repeated, if the last time was in vain. For is not even this once enough? You have what you did not deserve, for you lost what you had received. If the Lord's indulgence grants you the means of restoring what you had lost be thankful for the benefits rewarded' (c. 203 W), 3:663.
- Penance was Public
 - Penance began with exclusion from Eucharistic fellowship and after the time of penance was over the penitent was reinstated and given the Eucharist
 - Tertullian writes: 'This act [of penance] is more usually expressed and commonly spoken of under a Greek name. exomologesis. Through it, we confess our sins to the Lord. . . . Penance is a form of discipline for man's prostration and humiliation, requiring a demeanor calculated to bring mercy. With regard also to the very dress and food, it commands the penitent to lie in sackcloth and ashes, to cover his body in mourning . . . to know no food and drink but such is plain—not for the stomach's sake, but for the soul's.'
 - During the Medieval Period Penance became Individual
 - 'The demise of the catechumenate meant that the developing season of Lent took on a penitential rather than baptismal spirit.'
 - Though the influence of Celtic monks in the West, penance became part of spiritual direction
 - The Celtic monks also developed Penitentials or lists with prescribed penances
 - Under this system all that was needed was contrition (sincere repentance for sin). Attrition or sorrow and remorse for sin, latter became contrasted with attrition.
 - It is very doubtful that absolution as we know it actually existed at this time.
 - Lateran IV (1215) required each Christian of the age of reason (7 years old) to make an annual confession to his priest for the sake of receiving absolution.
 - Most saw this compulsory confession as binding only on those with mortal sin, and this view also approved by Trent, became the norm in the 1983 code of canon law



CONFESSION IN

• The Anglican reformers, along with the magisterial Reformers (Luther and Calvin) saw the value of confession. For Luther confession (penance) formed one of the three sacraments. And Luther also emphasized that the Scriptures said to 'repent' not 'due penance' as St. Jerome had incorrectly translated the Vulgate.

• Anglicanism kept Confession

- The Reformers and Anglicans rejected the Roman Catholic theology of merit tied to penance, but not the value of confession itself
- 1549 BCP included an admonition to confession
- 1552 BCP kept this admonition to confession in a revised form
- 1662 BCP admonished Confession in the rubrics to the sick and the Exhortation to a Holy Communion
- Hooker, rejected the Lateran Council's teaching of confession once a year
- Jeremy Taylor points out that the Eucharist itself is a form of absolution
- By the 19th century confession fell into disuse, and the Tractarians revived it
- Pusey's sermons on 'The Entire Absolution of the Penitent' is the major Tractarian statement on the subject

• Confession Today in Anglicanism

- Confession takes on the role of a spiritual discipline
- Assigned penances are usually reading a Psalm
- Confession is never mandatory, even in the case of mortal sins, because Jesus forgives all sins
- Confession as a spiritual discipline is a great aid to spiritual growth and self honesty about sin in one's life
- Confession is a means of God's grace to those in need



THE SEAL & PRIESTLY

Hearing confession is a great privilege of the ordained priest. However, there are some helpful things to remember about hearing a confession and giving absolution.

- The Seal of the Confessional is Absolute
 - A priest is not at liberty to divulge any information heard in confession, to do so would destroy the trust of the confessional and possibly the person and the priest's own ministry
 - Priestly absolution deals only with sin and forgiveness for sin and spiritual counsel
 - Confession is listening, offering counsel, and absolution, not interrogation (sometimes less is better)
 - A priest is at liberty to ask the penitent to speak with them about an issue in their confession outside of the confessional, but that person must bring up that issue again, the priest cannot
- Absolution is Not Mandatory in Exceptional Circumstances
 - Absolution should not be withheld from the truly penitent, to do so would be a violation of priestly vows
 - Absolution can be withheld in extreme circumstances of very serious sin, when a person shows no contrition (i.e., I have murdered but won't tell the authorities, and/or I will murder again)
- Mortal and Venial Sins
 - Confession of mortal sins is mandatory for Roman Catholics, but not Anglicans
 - The distinction between mortal and venial sins is helpful in determining the severity of the nature of sin in a person's life

