

This essay deals with the underlying truths we accept in making confession of ours sins to God in the first place, and then perhaps, where it is necessary and appropriate, openly speaking of them to others afterwards.

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1 - The life Christ lived for us, in our place and in our stead; He lived before God in our name.

Christ has come for us. All the life He lived upon the earth is for our sakes. His birth, baptism in the Jordan, temptation, preaching, teaching, healing, Transfiguration, journey to Jerusalem, agony in the garden, betrayal, arrest, trials, death, burial, resurrection, ascension, His sending of the Spirit and His coming return; all of these activities were for us. They were the work of the Son, carrying out the salvation His Father had provided for us.

There are some places where Christ works in our place as a Substitute. These are actions He does for us so that we might not have to do them. They are situations where we could not save ourselves, atone for our sins, or open an access to God. We have a share in the results of these actions but have no part in the actual working of them. He does these for us alone and where He substitutes for us not only can we have no part in the work, we must not ever seek to either. They are works of grace that our Saviour must do for us and in our place. We cannot add to His works nor merit them in any way. They are a free, gracious gift of God to us in, through and by the Saviour.

Our trust concerning these works is that they are finished, complete and are sufficient. In the present, we live by faith in the results of these works done for us.

There are other situations in which Christ works in our stead as a Representative. These actions are done for us, but not so as to exclude us but to open up a way for us to be included in our representative person. They are actions that allow us, as we are enlivened by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, to participate in the life of Christ as lived before the Father. We are to see ourselves “in” Christ, as God has chosen to deal with us.

These are works where we answer God with our faith; as we co-operate with God and respond to His gracious provisions and gifts of the Spirit so these works pass into our life. These works are freely given, and come as Christ lives within us by His Spirit. The decision to trust is our response to the gift, the power through which they are done in our lives is His.

2- God confessed Jesus to be His Son and His pleasure in Him.

When our Saviour came to full maturity of His calling, He was found listening to His Father’s instructions through the voice of His cousin John the Baptist. As a man of Israel, come for them, Jesus recognised and obeyed the Word of God that came through the last and greatest of all the prophets before the kingdom of God came.

John's message was that people should get ready for the coming kingdom by submitting to a baptism of repentance leading to the remission of sins. He prepared Israel for the coming of Jesus' ministry, and raised within them an expectation that the forgiveness of their sins was imminent.

Jesus went down into the water of baptism in the Jordan. In doing that He stood with confessing sinners who were emboldened to publicly state their sinful condition because they had believed John about their coming forgiveness. Jesus identified Himself with them. He was among them as one who would confess the sins of the world by bearing them and bearing them away.

As He did this God confessed Him. As the heaven was opened, God made a clear, public confession of a hitherto hidden matter. He said that Jesus was His Son and that He was pleased with what His Son was doing. The descent of the Spirit upon Jesus in a visible form was an indication of the Father's pleasure and the inward drive to begin the task.

3 - Christ confessed the sins of the whole world

Jesus had no sins of His own commission to confess; He was not a sinner by practice. But He knew more than any man about sins from the side of God. He knew the affect of our sins upon the heart of a holy God. He knew their defiling power in relationship. He also knew the power sin exercised over mankind.

Jesus did not confess our sins by word, although He taught about them. He publicly confessed the sins of the world by dying for the sins of mankind. By the nature of His death, as a substitute for sin, in our place, He confessed them – made them public – and saw them judged fully. He did this in our place and confessed them for what they were in God's sight. Never has such a deep and disturbing public confession of sin been made. Sin was judged for all that it meant from God's side; and from man's side it was revealed as a shaming thing, and a bringer of death. The judgment of sin in the death of Christ defeated Satan through use of his own power of death.

Such a confession of sin that Jesus made for us through His death brought reconciliation with the world from God's side. This is what is preached in the gospel message. Consider this quotation concerning Christ's confession and ours.

"God made Him sin, treated Him as if He were sin; He did not view Him as sinful. That is quite another matter. God made Him to be sin - it does not say He made Him sinful. God lovingly treated Him as human sin, and with His consent judged human sin in Him and on him. Personal guilt Christ could never confess. There is that guilt which can only be confessed by the guilty. "I did it." That kind of confession Christ could never make. That is the part of the confession that we make, and we cannot make it effectually until we are in union with Christ and His great lone work of perfectly and practically confessing the holiness of God. There is a racial confession that can only be made by the holy; and there is a personal confession that can only be made by the guilty. That latter, I say, is a confession that Christ could never make. In that respect, Christ did not die, and did not suffer, did not confess, in our stead. We alone, the guilty, can make that confession; but we cannot make it with Christian effect without the Cross and the confession there. We say then not only "I did this," but "I am guilty before the holiness confessed in the Cross." The grand sin not to sin against the law but against the Cross. The sin of sins is not transgression, but unfaith." Forsyth [1910] *Work of Christ* p.150-151

4 – It is because Jesus has confessed our sin that we can.

What Jesus has done as He lived, died and resurrected for us was all done in our name. He has lived the one true human life as it should be lived towards God and before men and women. In this respect, His representative and substitutionary work now accrues for us before our God and His Father. Because He has responded to the Father for us in our name, then we can now go to the Father in His Name. For He has become the man who has made us fully and truly human before the Father. As His Spirit lives within us we are bold to pray and to trust in the communication of the Father and the Spirit of Christ to make the connection for us, and to help us to pray [Romans 8.28].

So when we come to confess our sins to the Father, it is because Christ has first confessed them that the Father is not counting them against us. The wrath of God in regard to sins is exhausted in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. This deals with our fear of owning up.

First, we have no fear of retribution by God upon us for our sins. We do not fear what He can do to us. Christ is the full propitiation for our sins and also for the whole world. His death has fully exhausted the wrath of God on humanity.

Second, we have no fear of owning up because the Spirit of God is Himself responsible for bringing to us a conviction of, our sins. We would not know what is offensive to God unless He had first shown us. So we are not surprising God when we confess our sins – there is no sin of ours He does not already know as registered by His holiness.

So, we are simply children, dealing with the God and Father of our Lord. We are coming in the Lord's Name, who has lived and died in our name, in our place and in our stead.

3 5 – Sins no longer separate us from God.

In the Old Testament it was clear that the sin of the people of God brought a separation from His life and from His fellowship. They longed for His habitation and His presence.

Now, living before God in Jesus name, we are found to have the Spirit given to us who never leaves us nor forsakes us. Our Lord has not left us as orphans; we are never Fatherless. So separation from God is not to be our experience.

But we are in deep joint-life with Him. And His Spirit will register our sin as a deep grief and our 'self-drive' as a quenching of His own fire. So His presence does not leave, but His registration of grief is powerfully known, if gently stated.

6 – Our sins bind us to God now.

At every occasion when we celebrate the Lord's Supper the fellowship and sustaining life that we receive is centred around the way in which the Saviour has dealt with our sins. Whenever we eat the bread and drink the cup we proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. As, by faith, we feed on His flesh as manna from heaven and the drinking of His blood is a recognition of the giving up of His life for us and of the shedding of His blood to cleanse us from sin.

Central to the supper are our sins. But now, as we recognise them, we are aware that they bind us to the Saviour. Even in the heavenly worship the Lamb is the centre, standing as one "slain" and He is worshiped as the one who ransomed people from every tribe, people and tongue for God.

7 – The Lord's instruction about prayer.

There was a time the Lord taught His disciples to pray directly to their common Father [Matthew 6.9]. The foundations for such an access to God is established by the Lord Jesus through his life, death, resurrection and ascension.

He warned them to keep such prayer exclusive; they were not to speak to God while having an eye on any other person listening than Him [Matthew 6.5-6]. As to their method; it wasn't to be a lot of words, babbling as the heathen do. They would not be heard for their many words. Nor were they to tell things to God as if to inform Him; they must understand that their Father knew their needs before they asked Him [Matthew 6.7-8].

In this way, Jesus set a standard of prayer; it was to be exclusive, brief, not informative and it presumed that God was a caring and attentive Father to his children. Jesus went on to give a pattern for

- [1] addressing Father,
- [2] what they could ask because of His assumed care and
- [3] a right motive for asking; that His glory would be seen.

[i] The address.

We address the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ as One to Whom we pray as being "in heaven". We state to Him that his Name is to us holy and therefore is to be "hallowed", which is to say, treated that way. We express our desire, as persons living upon the earth and not in heaven, that we look for and desire His kingdom - His rule - to come on the earth in the way that it is already in heaven. This very request indicates that we are praying after the ascension of Jesus.

[ii] What to ask

Our requests are of the sort that dependant children make of their Father as they trust Him for provision, for forgiveness and for protection. For the children understand that, notwithstanding that He is in heaven, He cares for our bodily needs knowing them before we ask Him. He knows that we are prone to sin and live under His constant forgiveness. He has also placed us to live upon the earth, after the victory of His Son is established. So that we can trust Him and stand up as His children in a hostile world, resisting our inward flesh, knowing that we have an enemy in the devil, who has been cast down to the earth.

We ask for our "daily bread" - immediate provisions of a most practical, bodily nature. Confident of the assured acceptance that He extends towards us, we ask Him to "forgive us" as we extend forgiveness to persons around us. We are equipped to extend forgiveness to others for we experience being forgiven by God. Recognising that we are set within a hostile environment by our Father, and called to stand believing in the victory of His Son, we ask Him to deliver us from the evil one.

[iii] The shared motive

The praying ones understand that the honour of the kingdom, the power and the glory belong to God, their Father. They are jealous that His Person should receive the due that is His. And by their prayers to Him they state that, for themselves, they are confessing this, on the earth.

4 8 – When we ask God to forgive us we are not initiating the exchange.

We need to recognise that we are not initiating anything by asking. We are, in fact, responding to His provision for us. It is the provision of Jesus as the Saviour. At the centre of the “good news” is the provision, through God’s Son, of forgiveness of sins. Reconciliation with God has been established. From God’s side, the outgoing message of love and accomplishment is that He is not counting the sins of anyone against them. In the person of His Son, He has reconciled the world to Himself. Such an attitude, from God’s side is what constitutes the gospel message. Since God is reconciled to the world, the apostle Paul says we must answer this gift, take it up and “be reconciled to God” [2 Corinthians 5.18-24]. This is the response we must make.

9 – Each must confess their sins for themselves; but in response to God.

Consistent with this understanding of answering the gracious offer of forgiveness from God’s side we must make the response for ourselves, that is clear. But it is not made by ourselves; for the very graciousness of the offer elicits a response from us; we are drawn to respond. This is just another of those examples where the two-sided nature of the exchange we have with God acknowledges that His initiative with us is a revelation. Something of His character is conveyed to us that reveals we are safe from His side. The outgoing love of God has this power to reveal that God’s heart is good and kind towards us. In this way confession of sins is drawn from us. We are so set free from defending ourselves that we are able to speak against ourselves before God in agreement with His perception of our deeds.

10 – Our confession of sin is not the basis for our being forgiven

If we are not initiating, but simply responding, then it is clear that we are not forgiven because we somehow draw forgiveness from God because we have asked for it. Sometimes Christians think it is this way. By confessing, it is said, they satisfy the conditions for being forgiven by God. In this way they make the grounds – the basis - for being forgiven the confession that they make. They forget that the grounds for such an offer of forgiveness are God’s forgiving and holy character. It is because of this and His love towards us in our predicament that He has made a way, through Christ, to deal with the affront of our sinful deeds to Him.

11 – Two texts to consider

I received a request from a person who asked me about the conditions of forgiveness. The questions centred on 1 John 1.9 and Acts 8.22. Here is the request.

“I understand that Christ died once for all and in that forgiveness has been taken care of. But I found two verses that confuse that issue for me; they are Acts 8:22 and 1 John 1:9. They both seem to use conditional language; ‘perhaps’ and ‘if’ are the 2 words that confuse me. Can you help?”

The first text: 1 John 1.6-2.1.

[1] - The setting of the letter 1 John.

1 John is written to a group of believers who had some perfectionist folks among them who made statements about themselves which conveyed that they were superior Christians [1 John 1.6-9]. These “superior” ones subsequently left [1 John 2.19].

John calls them “antichrists” because their doctrine shows they despise the coming of Jesus in the flesh [1 John 4.1-2] and their leaving, he says, shows that they were not of the Christian community at all [1 John 2.19].

However, their leaving caused the Christians left behind to be in great doubt as to whether they were real Christians at all. John writes to assure them that they certainly were.

[2] – The writer assures them they are Christians.

One of the ways he does this is to compare and contrast the teaching and practice of this leaving group with the normal experience of the group of Christians that is left. In this way he goes to the source of the doubt that had made them doubt themselves.

[3] – What the “superior” group said about themselves.

[i] they said that they had fellowship with God; but it was observed that they walked in a way which made clear they were in the darkness [1 John 1.6a]

[ii] they also said that they had no sin in their life at present [1 John 1.8a] - so they were claiming to be perfect in this regard.

[iii] they also said about their past life that they had never sinned [1 John 1.10a].

5 [4] - John's verdict about their assertions and their lifestyle.

[i] A life lived like those who walk in the dark and the assertion that they have fellowship with God is a contradiction. John declares that this is a lie and is not a practical doing of the truth [1 John 1.6b]

[ii] if they think they have no sin then they are deceived and the truth is not in them [1 John 1.8b]. The implication of this statement is that the common life of Christians admits that they do sin.

[iii] if they think they have never sinned then they have made God a liar [because He says that we have] and so His Word is not within them [1 John 1.10b].

John's concern is that the Word of God became flesh, in such a real way that He could be touched, handled and seen. This incarnate life, made manifest in this accessible way, opened up for mankind the possibility of fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. It was this fellowship which the apostolic men had with God; and which they coveted for the Christians to whom they were writing.

The "superior" false Christians had put that fellowship in danger in that they had been the occasion of the rest beginning to doubt their own Christian experience as real fellowship with God.

John is quite direct, stating the direct contrast involved in such false assertions and ways of living. In passing judgement about them He has already condemned their words as untrue.

[5] - The difference between an "if...if" and an "if...then".

In each case he makes the contrast by using the word "if". His usage is along the lines of "if someone does this, that's a lie, but if someone does this, then this is the true way". Both of the "if's" used in this sentence are not used as a conditional "if".

That is, they do not mean "if" in the way do when we say "if you do this, then I will do that". In that case the "if clause" is setting up a condition which if that condition is met "then" something will follow from that. The "if...then" arrangement first states a condition which, if met, brings about the result described by the "then" clause.

The "if's" which John is using make a contrast, they do not introduce a condition to be met. They lay two things side by side and contrast them; if this is the case, then that is not true, but if this is the case, then that is correct. It is the use of the "but if" which makes it quite clear it is a contrast.

[6] - The meaning of the "if" in 1 John 1.9.

[i] if {A} someone says they have fellowship with God but walk in darkness that is a lie. But if {B} we walk in the light we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin. [1 John 1.6-7].

Here the contrast is being made with the false claim to have fellowship, which is contradicted by their life, and then the contrast is that the normal Christian life will mean fellowship and cleansing. Both contrasts are made by the formula "if" {A}, then that is a lie, "but if" {B} then that is the true life style; which the recipients of the letter have as their normal Christian experience.

[ii] if {A} someone says that they have no sin, then they are deceived. But if {B} we confess our sin He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Here the contrast of the lie, introduced by "if" and the normal practice of Christian confession is contrasted by another "if".

This does not say "if we confess our sins, and because in confessing we meet the condition which merits forgiveness, then we get forgiven for that reason."

Rather, it tells us that confession of sins is a public, shameless admission of them to God drawn from us because we are so sure that He is a forgiving God, and has demonstrated that by His great trouble to make atonement for our sins so that He does not now count them against us. [2 Corinthians 5.19b]

It is because He is "not counting" that we confess them; not the reverse. If the reverse were true that would mean that we confess our sins so that He will not count them.

[iii] He is writing this that they may not sin in the present, [1 John 2.1]. But even if they did, they do have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. That is, he is assuring them that they have One Who "is" the propitiation for their sins. It is in this person Christ, that they have atonement; and so have their present hope and assurance of forgiveness of sins today.

[7] - Confessing

It is also worth considering that the word "confession" is often misunderstood today, precisely because it is so often used in a Christian setting in reference to sins. Strictly speaking, a confession has a much wider meaning and application than in the context of forgiveness only. A confession is what you do when you make public something that hitherto was private or hidden.

Viewed in this light, we are not confessing our sins to seek forgiveness on the grounds that we have confessed. Rather, we are appropriating the declared mind of God that He is not counting them because of Christ and His work. We appropriate forgiveness by declaring our sins openly before Him and often, before our brethren. Confession then, is a public airing of secret matters, and so it is a manifestation of strong confidence in the fact that God is certainly not counting our sins against us. We can face them and acknowledge them.

The second text: Acts 8.22.

[8] - The order of conviction by the Spirit, then repentance and baptism.

In Acts 2 we notice on the day of Pentecost Peter preaches the meaning of the event as an outpouring of the

Holy Spirit that fulfils the prophecy of Joel 2.28. He states that this outpouring upon the gathered Church results from Jesus receiving the Father's promised Holy Spirit and has poured Him out. It follows from Jesus being exalted and lifted up by His ascension to the Father, Who has declared Him to be Lord [God] and Christ [the anointed Messiah].

The importance of this for the Jewish listeners is that they had crucified Him. Upon hearing that God had vindicated Jesus they found themselves in the wrong and so they asked; "What shall we do?" Notice that they were not instructed about the response they should make to the gospel message. They were instructed after they had made a response - for the response was already plain to the apostles in their evident conviction of heart and their clear understanding that they were wrong and that God and Jesus were right.

Seeing the conviction of the Spirit at work within them, the apostles indicate to them that they need to repent [in this case to change their mind concerning their previous condemnation of Jesus] and to be baptised in the Name of Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins, and they shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit [Himself]. This is the order of the way they see things happening, and in this case, it was so.

[9] – A different order for a different situation

Acts 8 records that, following the death of Stephen, many believers left Jerusalem and went out. In Philip's case his preaching the gospel was accompanied by powerful signs. This was important for the Samaritan people and they rejoiced over the healings and miracles [Acts 8.7-8].

But signs were important for another reason; for the Samaritans had a person among them, Simon Magus, who was a magician. And he had impressed them enormously and they revered him as the "Great Power of God" [Acts 8.9-10]. In other words, they thought the miracles of Simon were works of God; this was a judgment about the origin of those works. So, whilst they received Philip and the miracles of God with joy, they also had also received Simon and his miracles. It was a double-minded position for the minds of the Samaritans. It was this confusion that caused the Holy Spirit to direct the evangelistic results in a different way to what the apostles had seen before.

Many, including Simon Magus himself, believed Philip's preaching and were baptised. But when it came for the Holy Spirit to fall [as they, and we, as readers of the Acts, might expect from previous experience] He did not.

The apostles from Jerusalem know that the life of the Spirit does not originate with them, but is the Gift of God Himself. But in these circumstances, under the Spirit's direction, they proceed to lay hands on people, one at a time. It is this strategy that flushes out Simon. His heart is exposed. Thinking that the apostles have it within them to grant the Holy Spirit, he asks that they will give this ability to him for a fee that he will pay.

[10] – Simon is not to receive Holy Spirit, Who is the Gift as well as the Giver.

Peter declares, concerning Simon,

[1] that he has no part or portion in the apostolic ministry. Further, Peter says

[2] that his heart is not right before God [Acts 8.20-21].

Now our text, Acts 8.22, comes into view.

"Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin." Acts 8.22-23 NIV

First, Peter advises Simon to repent of this wickedness. The wickedness is that he thought he could buy the gift of God's life with money [Acts 8.20]. So he certainly has not grasped the grace of God; and he is operating with knowledge gained from the occult practice he had engaged in before this. He is using his knowledge of how evil spirit's work and applying it to the giving of the Holy Spirit.

Second, Peter instructs that he is to pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intention of his heart may be forgiven him. Why "if possible"? I think it is because Peter understands him to have seen the power and the grace of God preached, so that when he intends to buy his way in - it is a rejection of the grace of God, of the free forgiveness and the giving out of God's life as a gift.

Far from wishing to receive the life of God, Simon wants to procure an authority so that he may be the dispenser of God's life. This is not the act of a forgiven sinner humbly receiving from God the life that He is bringing through the preaching of the gospel.

[11] – The issue is praying for a place of repentance

In this case Simon fits into a different category; he is a person who needs to see if God will give him a place of repentance about this specific rejection of God's free grace. [You see a similar issue at stake in Hebrews 6.4 and also in Esau who obviously changed his mind and really wanted a place of repentance and it was not given him.]

This is in quite sharp contrast to what we have been saying the gospel is about. That is, that God is "not counting" our sins against us, we are to believe it and in that we do, we simply confess our sins in public as a result of knowing that we are forgiven.

Simon Magus does have some knowledge of the gospel, indeed he has responded and been baptised [Acts 8.16]. But the Holy Spirit had read his heart and set up a situation where his request for power showed him to be at loggerheads with free grace. In Peter's understanding then, he needs to see if it is possible for God to forgive him. Simon, unlike the normal Christian position, needs to ask for forgiveness, to see if it will be granted! Peter does not give up hope for Simon, for he encourages him to pray, but he leaves him to God. For Peter is not dealing with a man hearing a gospel of grace for the first time; but with a man who desires to be a dispenser of God's Spirit. Simon surely needs to ask where he stands for himself.

Taking a broader view of the church as a whole, this episode in the Acts - this temporary withholding of the

falling of the Holy Spirit - made sure that the infant church in Samaria was not compromised from the start by a power figure who had a control [Acts 8.9-10] over the people already through the cudos they had given him. Such a relationship would have gone into the life of the new church so as to compromise it with mixture and defilement at it's very formation.

Rather, this was the encounter that set the new Christians free from Simon. Their receiving of the gospel was the occasion of their deliverance from Simon, who is excluded from the life of God and the new community formed. It was a work of the Spirit not to have a compromised beginning for the Samaritan's early Christian life.

This completed my answer to the enquirer.

12 – God is merciful and forgiving by nature [Psalm 25.10; Daniel 9.9]

It is also true that the death of Christ does not change the heart of God; He does not forgive us because Christ died for us. It is the reverse, Christ died for us because God, who is forgiving by nature, has found a way to cover our sins so that He may look at us unhindered by them. He sent His Son to die because of His great love for us. That His Son was willing to obey the Father in this matter on our behalf, indicates that the Father and the Son were at one in their love for us.

13 – Confessing our sins one to another and praying for one to another

While we do not want to encourage a slack view of our sins ever [See Part II.5]; it is important to take into account that the New Testament contains evidence that fellow Christians knew of each others past sins [1 Corinthians 6.9-11]. Further, there are encouragements to confess them one to another [James 5.16]. The full passage in James reads as follows.

Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. James 5.14-16 NIV

[a] The setting is one of illness. The sick person is to call for the elders. It is his decision that they are called; in coming, the elders did not take that initiative to come themselves. Far from invading his space, they have been invited to come and pray.

[b] When they come they are

[i] to anoint the person's body with oil in the name of the Lord.

[ii] to pray in faith, trusting in the Lord, expecting the sick one to be made well and that he may get up and return to his work and daily round.

[iii] if there is sin involved they are to assure the sick person that he will be forgiven. Notice that this forgiveness is assumed; for healing is but the outward sign of forgiveness, the forgiveness is the reality. [See the healing of the paralytic in Mark 2.1-12]. It is out of the confidence that the sin will be forgiven that the following encouragement is given.

[c] Then, in the text a "therefore" follows; something is about to be encouraged in the context of this pastoral setting of brothers praying for their brother who is assured that sins will be forgiven.

It is that we are encouraged to confess our sins to each other and pray for each other that we may be healed. Notice that this does not necessarily imply that the sick one is confessing his sins to God before the brothers. This is not necessarily the hearing of someone's confession. Indeed, that transaction may have preceded the calling of the elders to anoint and pray.

But concerning the sins –albeit confessed to God previously; what is encouraged is that the person is open with the elders about what the sins themselves were. Particularly those sin relating to the current illness and prayer for healing. For to be open about his sins at that point is a sure indication that forgiveness has been appropriated. When we share our sins, in an open way, we are no longer guilt ridden and ashamed, so we don't need to hide away.

14 – Sharing our sins and weaknesses among older, gracious Christians.

Leaving aside the scenario of "calling for the elders when sick"; it is also true that sometimes we live in a pious fellowship of Christians where we are quite sure that no one can fail. Whenever the church does not have a strong experience of the grace of God it moves into a strong "works based" understanding of dealing with God. It is possible, in the context of encouraging everyone to live a more godly life, that a powerful pressure to perform well is coupled with a deep distaste for people who fall over and sin.

Many people are horrified when a real sinner is found among the "righteous". They forget, or may not know, that while we are justified through Christ's work alone; we are also sinners – both at once. [See Part II.2 of this paper for a clear statement of this situation]. They also forget that to be forgiven themselves is the basis and empowerment to extend

forgiveness and grace to other sinners. Where this is not practised, it may be that personal knowledge of the forgiveness of God is not experienced; or, if it is understood, it is not accepted.

We see un-accepted grace outlined in the parable Jesus told of the man who was forgiven the debt by his lord, but then went on to extract the full debt from his neighbour [Matthew 18.21-35]. In that setting it seems that the lord takes back the forgiveness first offered.

But the debtor's action shows something of his heart. In the first place, the man's response to the lord was a protesting desire to "pay" the debt himself when it was wiped. In the second place, his extraction of his neighbour's debt to the full is the evidence that he did not receive the forgiveness his lord offered; for he could not extend that forgiveness to others.

Where the group pressure is strong to perform, it is possible to remain alone with our sin, living a life of hypocrisy and alienation. What tends to happen there is that everyone conceals his sin from his neighbour and even from himself. To be alone with our sin can lead to isolation and confusion. It can make us prey to our own self-judgment - never a wise thing - and we lose the comfort of the grace of God who is not counting any of our sins against us. For His love of the sinner, while hating their sin, has been adequately addressed by the work of the Saviour. Such a balanced view is shown in the lives of those who respond to the full gospel of grace.

People often have to move outside of the unforgiving assembly in which they live. For it is only outside, away from the condemnation and isolation, that they can find mature brothers and sisters to whom they can open their hearts about their failings so that the deep remedy of the gospel may be applied.

15 – The need for humility coupled with a real acceptance of our own failings.

Anyone who is to be of use to the brother who has fallen into sin needs to watch themself, knowing that they are also tempted. They are to deal with such a brother gently, restoring him to his former trust in God and assurance that he is accepted by God, and by the brethren [Galatians 6.1-5].

We are not to judge relatively, comparing people with others [Galatians 6.4] but to pay attention to the conviction of sin that the Holy Spirit has brought to the individual about their own actions. Noting how God judges only each according to his own culpability [Genesis 3.14,15,17]. We are not to convince a person of their sin; but to follow the Spirit's work in their life as the Spirit has let it be known.