

"In a period of time that questions the place of confession in religious practice, Annemarie S. Kidder offers a thorough and easy-to-read study of confession in the Christian tradition, rooting it in its biblical ground. She gives us helpful knowledge of its theological foundations, good insights into the forms of its development, and practical ways of entering into the exercise or sacrament of confession. Her book is a rich treasure to be valued by all readers, especially coming from the various Christian traditions."

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"This historically well-informed and pastorally sensitive book, written from an ecumenical perspective, will be helpful to both clergy and laity in all the churches. Accessible in its style, it gently challenges us to give confession, no matter what form it might take, the place it deserves in our spiritual lives as Christians."

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Professor of Religion, Georgetown University  
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"Nothing is more useful for reinvigorating the practices of Christian tradition than a thorough and penetrating knowledge of their history, pursued with ecumenical openness. By recognizing the relationship between personal confession of sins, charisms of spiritual discernment, offices of pastoral care, and public rituals bonding the church in its members, Kidder has achieved a historical tour de force demonstrating how confession—in various forms—is anything but moribund for present and future Christianity. With its combined theological, pastoral, and historical resources, this book has no peer in the English-language literature treating penance, reconciliation, and spiritual direction."

—Bruce T. Morrill, SJ  
Boston College

"Community. Confession. Penitence. Reconciliation. Spiritual formation. Annemarie S. Kidder presents a meticulous historical study of these five strands, which have been interwoven and separated variously through Christian history. She supports the study with substantial theological reflection. *Making Confession, Hearing Confession* will be a valuable addition to the libraries of theological schools, graduate schools—and the bookshelves of reflective Christians."

—Mary Ann Donovan, SC, PhD  
Professor of Historical Theology and Spirituality  
Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley

"Kidder brings to life the monastic process of spiritual fathering and mothering that evolved into the sacrament of penance, illuminating the history of penitential practices with amazing detail. She amply demonstrates how Christian thinkers of all ages, whether Catholic or Protestant, have been concerned with moral conversion and spiritual development. In the process, she assembles a wealth of information on confession as a means of spiritual growth from the Middle Ages to the present, pointing the way to a renewal of the sacrament in the 21st century."

—Joseph Martos  
Author of *The Sacraments:*  
*An Interdisciplinary and Interactive Study*

“This engaging book on the practice of confession in the life of the church brings together historical and spiritual theology in a wonderful way. Annemarie Kidder shows how confession, rooted in the Scriptures and the great tradition of Christian faith through the ages, is still relevant for the life of faith today. Well researched and well written, we have here a welcomed resource for both academic theology and spiritual direction.”

—Timothy George  
Founding Dean of Beeson Divinity School  
of Samford University  
Senior Editor of *Christianity Today*

“I was absolutely stunned on first reading *Making Confession, Hearing Confession*. Annemarie Kidder integrates the many expressions of the subject that honor the basic human need for disclosure, to respond to the hunger for forgiveness, ranging from confession to spiritual direction during these 2,000 years. She expertly discerns the common thread that keeps all these various ways recognizably coherent in their historical and theological underpinnings and their rootedness in the Gospel. I welcome this as a critical and timely gift for today’s church—its congregations and pastors.”

—Eugene H. Peterson  
Professor Emeritus of Spiritual Theology,  
Regent College, Vancouver, B.C.  
Author of *The Message*

“An extraordinary achievement. A book for conservative bishops and liberal academics, for pastors Catholic and Protestant, spiritual directors religious and lay, for anyone interested in using a time-honored means for growing in the spiritual life.

“At a time when psychologists and 12-step programs alike recognize that confession is essential to the treatment of troubled souls, Kidder demonstrates brilliantly why confession matters.

“An extraordinary work of historical, ecumenical, and sacramental theology, encyclopedic in its treatment of penance, confession, and spiritual direction. From its biblical roots to the most contemporary reflection on the pastoral healing of souls, Kidder allows the tradition to speak for itself.

“When public, once-in-a-lifetime penance died in the early middle ages, the laity sought spiritual healing by bearing their souls to monks and religious women like Brigit. Can the work of a knowledgeable, wise, Presbyterian woman pastor-theologian help revive what appears like a moribund if not dead Catholic sacramental practice? As Kidder brilliantly demonstrates, stranger things have happened in the history of confession. With meticulous scholarship made accessible for any interested reader, this may well be the most important book of academic and pastoral theology in a decade.”

—Ronald Modras  
Professor of Theological Studies  
Saint Louis University

# Making Confession, Hearing Confession

A History of the Cure of Souls

*Annemarie S. Kidder*



A Michael Glazier Book

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To  
*Timothy George*  
and  
*Robert Hater*



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## Acknowledgments

The modest question someone asked me in an adult education class at a Presbyterian church in Ann Arbor was: “How can I experience God’s forgiveness?” The question would eventually send me off on the meandering paths of the history and practice of private and public confession. Had I known of what lay ahead in order to be able to produce a reasonably adequate answer, I would have gladly admitted ignorance and left it at that. But the more I read, the more the question became my own. Many people have assisted me during the nearly four years of research and writing, especially the parishioners at the church I serve and the seminary students I teach.

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# Introduction

A book on confession may seem like an archaic undertaking. It conjures up images of monastic self-chastisement and penance, darkened confessionals with a concealed priestly presence, and a trembling and squirming sinner waiting to be absolved. Why revisit what the Protestant Reformation had dismissed and eliminated as a sacrament and what Catholics, in the wake of Vatican II, practice only on occasion, if at all? The fact is that incidences of confession, albeit concealed and innocuous, are a regular occurrence in most our lives. For example, on a flight to Philadelphia some years ago I was looking forward to studying my conference book and selecting the seminars I would be attending, hearing speakers of national renown in the world of theology and biblical studies. But even before takeoff I saw my hopes crumble. "Where are you headed?" my seat neighbor asked gregariously as soon as I settled into my seat. "To a convention on religion," I said. "Oh, then you must be a theologian or a pastor," came his immediate reply. "Yes, I'm a pastor," I said, hoping that would intimidate him enough to be quiet. Instead, it encouraged him to launch into a monologue about the church, the hypocrisy of members, his longstanding involvement there, and then his misgivings about the pastor that had led him to resign from his post on the church board and quit church altogether. Was I thinking that a bad thing, he asked, and I, still hoping to be able to read, lamely conceded that at times it was good to take a break. But this only spurred him on to elaborate on his church upbringing, his marriage, his children who were in college, and his sense of wanting to quit his job, too. I wasn't paying much attention until he got to the part about a woman he had met and the fact that he was thinking of leaving his wife of thirty-some years. "I feel guilty about that, you know," he said, "but life can get away from you if you don't watch out."

After my return I attended an AA meeting with a friend who had begged me to come along to ease her first-time jitters. No one could have

prepared me for what was to ensue. One by one, members introduced themselves as alcoholics, some sober for months, some for years, until it was my turn to say that I was “just accompanying my friend,” as if I had no problems whatsoever. By the end of the meeting I had become privy to stories of panic attacks, misplaced anger, and hapless exchanges with workmates and family. Everyone felt better, it seemed, but me.

Then another friend called to report on her latest dispute with her boss. “I hate him and there is nothing I want more than to see him fired,” she said. I waited for her to elaborate on the most recent incident, but all she said was that she was tired of going to work, dreaded his presence, even hated herself. She was finally looking for another job.

Locked into captivity by an airplane seat, a kindly disposition of keeping a friend company, or a telephone connection, we become *ex officio* confessors to those with troubled consciences and traces, or bold footprints, of guilt. Confession seems to make us feel better, to lift burdens, to restore our self-confidence. I notice it when church members come to see me for pastoral counseling in my office. Often I can tell that what they name as the reason for the appointment is something entirely different from the real cause: they need to admit to a failure of the past, a slip of their temper, a careless word or precipitous deed, even drug abuse, abortion, attempted suicide, or a resentment harbored for years. “I feel better now that I told you,” they say as they get up from the chair. “Thanks for listening and understanding.” Yet, while I am grateful for their relief and appreciation of me as unofficial confessor, I cannot help but feel that something is missing: a biblical word of forgiveness and direction, a litany of repentance and absolution, an assurance on my part to pray for them that they may resist future temptation, and a verbal or visual pledge on their part not to slip again. Moreover, I find myself stretched in making a plausible connection between their act of confession and the biblical concept of repentance, of turning from the old ways and reconciling with God in Christ and the church so as to be born anew and made anew.

This book results from my own need for private confession and self-examination in a safe and sacred context that bears upon my Christian convictions as a child of God through baptism. I ask myself: where do I go to share my troubles and receive forgiveness? Who will hold me accountable and what pledges and offerings can I bring to demonstrate true repentance in hopes of a new beginning? The book results from my discontent with a church that used to consider itself a hospital and sanatorium for sinners and now functions as an elitist enclave for those who seemingly have it all together. And it results from puzzlement over why

churches are not providing more intentionally for occasions of confession, forgiveness, and conversion when outside groups have successfully adopted these practices, thus facilitating members' wholeness and recovery. Finally, I have observed a discrepancy between how people act within and outside the church, and I have wondered about that. On the one hand, people long for assurance by sharing their most intimate fears and failures, sometimes asking forgiveness, more often affirmation—even from disengaged strangers who make every effort to look bored. On the other hand, most people—with the exception of a few bold or trusting souls—are hesitant to divulge their failures and sins to a member of the clergy, either because they fear repercussions (“Will I get nominated for a church function next year?” “Will I still be respected around the church?”) or because church leaders are tentative or bumbling guides in listening to, absolving, and holding accountable those who have come to us with their burdens of guilt and shame. Of course, Christian denominations differ in their histories regarding the practice of confession, which plays a role in members' awareness of the practice and its use. Some, such as the Roman Catholic Church, consider it a sacrament, the sacrament of reconciliation, to be observed prior to partaking of the Eucharist or at least annually during Holy Week. Others, such as the Episcopal Church, commend confession to their members as a perennial rite of reconciliation with God, neighbor, and the church. And still others, such as churches in the Reformed tradition, have communal acts of confession during Sunday liturgy or on special days, providing confessional litanies printed in the bulletin. Members of denominations without a sacramental practice or a rite of confession, along with those who could participate in confession but fail to do so, are left to take their burdens elsewhere: to a friend, stranger, self-help group, journal, or directly to God. They are on their own when it comes to preparing the setting and beginning the process of introspection and self-examination.

The practice of confession in the context of a liturgy or in a private ecclesiastical setting has declined drastically over the past fifty years, and in particular since the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. Has the need for forgiveness diminished? Or have we forgotten that our search for wholeness begins with a contrite heart over past wrongs and the willingness to allow God to restore and guide us? I don't think so. The need for hearing the words spoken as if they were Christ's is everyone's need, and the need for restoration and correction, for a turning and a remembering of the ways of God is the basis of the church's existence and ministry. Knit together as individual members of Christ's body, we are both sinner and saint, broken and redeemed, aware that

we “have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23) and can be renewed by the Spirit of forgiveness. This means that if we recognize and act upon our need for ongoing forgiveness and God’s grace we will be renewed, and so will the church as a whole.

The saying goes that confession is good for the soul, and in the particular understanding of the church it is a way of the soul’s coming clean before God in Christ. While psychotherapists readily admit to the healing dimension of confession and most twelve-step programs incorporate it explicitly in the fifth step, churches are less likely to make provision for this practice. I suspect that the reason for today’s disuse of confession as a spiritual discipline may be twofold: people are not sure whether they want to or can trust the clergy—or another church member—charged with listening; and pastors and laypeople in most denominations are not sure how best to draw on this ancient rite and relate their fundamental human need for forgiveness to the biblical concept of repentance, *metanoia*, and the new birth in Christ. Fortunately there is ample assistance for recovering the central place and the varied contexts of confession in the biblical story and the church’s history of practice—and even its malpractice. The question is: How can we today reap the benefits of what was once a commonplace and vital spiritual discipline with significant transformative effects? How do we select a confessor with whom to enter into this process of self-examination? And in what ways can we adopt this practice today in a postmodern era that holds in suspicion ecclesial, biblical, and clerical authority? A word concerning terminology is in order. I use the term confession not in the strict sacramental sense it has assumed in later centuries, but as a way of describing an interpersonal exchange or private meeting between two people that involves remorse, repentance, and conversion to God. While diverse means and contexts set the stage for facilitating confession and forgiveness, it is the actual transformation in the person that matters: the burden of guilt and shame is lifted and one finds forgiveness, cleansing, and a restored self.

It is my hope that this brief historical survey of confessional practices in the church’s history will commend confession as a spiritual practice to all Christians, regardless of denominational affiliation. Part I will explore the origins of public and private confession in the church, the rising popularity of private confession among the laity and its emerging sacramental status, and developments resulting from the arrival of the friars, beguines, members of third orders, and the movements of the Friends of God and *devotio moderna* involving mutual confession and spiritual direction among the laity. Part II will address the changes begun

with the Protestant Reformation and the Council of Trent, and the subsequent use or disuse of confessional practices among various denominations. And Part III will sketch the biblical antecedents and historical developments up to today in the areas of preaching, worship, and confessional litanies, small and accountability groups, and private confession and spiritual direction; it will explore the reasons for the decline of private confession in churches; and it will seek to formulate a theology of confession that draws on contemporary Christian theologians and spiritual writers from both the Catholic and Protestant traditions. The Conclusion offers practical suggestions for preparing for and making private confession today, choosing a confessor, and hearing confession from another. Appendices include additional tools for an examination of conscience and confessional litanies for use by the laity.



## **Biblical Beginnings to the Middle Ages**

Tracing the history of the church's practice of confession can be a daunting undertaking. Given the complexities of the topic, it seemed prudent to initially follow historical chronology (as in parts 1 and 2), rather than topical arrangement (as in parts 3 and 4). But even with a chronological approach, the intricacies needed to be streamlined and detail condensed so as to allow for recognizable strands and patterns to emerge. In tracing the various stages of confession from its biblical beginnings through the church's history up to the present day, I have tried to highlight decisive developments, caesuras, and significant turning points.

Part 1 will chronicle the gradual unfolding of confessional practices from its biblical beginnings to its flowering during the High Middle Ages. Practices that are apparent in the Old Testament are considered in their continuity and contrast with those in the New. New Testament beginnings are seen as setting the stage for public confession, which will come to be replaced in time by private confession and spiritual direction. And the unfolding of private confession is seen in the context of its beginnings among early monastic communities and later within the larger church where it is commonly accompanied by counsel, exhortation, and spiritual direction on the confessor's part. At private confession's flowering stage and at its height, not only priests as male clergy are engaged in hearing confession, but also women, most often third-order members of religious communities who lived among the people, beguines, and female members of spiritual circles and pious societies, who served as

## 2 *Biblical Beginnings in the Middle Ages*

both “unofficial” confessors and spiritual directors. Not surprisingly, the popularity of private confession among Christians by that time saw the steady rise and burgeoning of abuses by those administering the sacrament, while the variety of “clandestine” confessors emerging from among the laity resulted in ecclesiastical measures aimed at curbing potentially “illicit” activity within the ministry of the cure of souls.

## Setting the Stage

### The Need for Confession and Its Biblical Beginnings

The history of repentance is as old as humankind. We each carry the remembrance of wrongdoing in burdensome satchels, hoping that eventually someone will ease them off our back. We each know the feeling of self-reproach, self-criticism, and self-blame. And we each continue to enjoy the vast landscape of free will by doing what is wrong, harmful, and unjust, and by refusing to aim for what is good, life-giving, and fair. Repentance and confession release our high-piled debts and scrub clean a sullied conscience. The Hebrew word used in the Old Testament to express repentance means “to turn,” reflecting the notion of journeying and pilgrimage and an attitude and relationship between YHWH and ancient Israel that required constant vigilance and intentionality. The Greek word used in the New Testament is *metanoia*, basically denoting a “change of mind,” with only subtle nuances of regret or remorse. When we repent we “turn” and “change our mind” about who we thought we were and the acceptability of what we have done. We recognize the difference between our ways and the ways God intended for us and find that we have drifted off course and out of line with the divine current. Confession, on the other hand, comes from a Latin word meaning “to agree” and “to give consent.” It describes an oral activity, a moment in time when we “agree” to the difference observed between what should have been and was not, due to our actions, when we verbally lay bare and make public our off-course dealings and doings. Underlying this oral statement is an instinctual knowledge that confession might relieve us of the burdensome satchels that pull us under and that there is the vague hope of obtaining relief, forgiveness, and appropriate instructions

on how to make amends. While confession is the moment of disclosure, repentance and remorse have generally preceded it. An attitude of introspection and self-examination has produced the inclination to confess. This may mean that self-examination is at least as important as the act of confession itself.

In his devotional guide on preparing for the rite of confession in the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the nineteenth-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard says that true repentance from the perspective of the Eternal One “is a silent daily anxiety.”<sup>1</sup> When we abandon the practice, terror may seize us at unexpected moments and keep us frozen and stuck in our relationship with God. Kierkegaard illustrates what he means through the story of a man who had served a sentence in prison:

After he had suffered for his wrong acts he went back into ordinary society, improved. Then he went to a strange land, where he was not known, and where he became known for his worthy conduct. All was forgotten. Then one day there appeared a fugitive that recognized the distinguished person as his equal back in those miserable days. This was a terrifying memory to meet. A deathlike fear shook him each time this man passed. Although silent, his memory shouted in a high voice until through the voice of this vile fugitive it took on words. Then suddenly despair seized this man, who seemed to have been saved. And it seized him just because repentance was forgotten, because the improvement toward society was not the resigning of himself to God, so that in the humility of repentance he might remember what he had been.<sup>2</sup>

Because the man had flung away his sense of wrongdoing, his repentance was only temporary and of no lasting redemptive value. Contrary to popular belief, says Kierkegaard, we need to continually meditate on our wrongdoing, for “the longer and the more deeply one treasures [repentance], the better it becomes,”<sup>3</sup> and the more transformative it is on the soul. Repentance resulting from self-examination is a lifelong endeavor, occasionally surfacing in the public or private act of confession as an act of “courageous memory”<sup>4</sup> in recalling one’s past.

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing: Spiritual Preparation for the Office of Confession* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1938), 45.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*, 47.

4. The Presbyterian pastor Thomas Long calls the confession of sins “the courage of memory” and speech, employed both inside and outside the sanctuary; see Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves Into Being Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 61.

In the Old Testament the acts of confession and penance occur collectively for the most part, and in dramatic fashion. The cycle follows a predictable pattern: the people of Israel sin and violate God's commandments, they experience various sorts of pestilence and calamity, they remember their wrongdoing and repent in sorrow over their wrongdoing, and they make amends by offerings and expressions of thanksgiving in cultic rituals. The first of such cultic acts of confession occurs as a result of Israel's deliverance out of Egyptian bondage. In time, several liturgical traditions emerge as marked annual periods of fasting, almsgiving, and reconciliation. Such liturgies of repentance are preserved in Isaiah 63:7–64:12, Daniel 9:4–19, and Hosea 6 and 14. Rituals of repentance typically include the tearing of one's clothes, fasting, putting on sackcloth, and sitting in ashes. In addition, the prophets, as preachers of exhortation, appear on the scene on various occasions to alert people to their wrongdoing and their perverted ways. Often their message contrasts genuine penitence with one marked by merely outward ritual. Such genuine repentance leads to obedience, rejection of idolatry, and a refusal to lean on human understanding and help. The Psalms are enlisted in worship to be sung, enacted, and used for meditation and thanksgiving, and they serve as an ongoing mnemonic tool for day-to-day reflection and exhortation. Later, during the postexilic period, it is individual confession that takes on a more prominent role. Litanies of confession, which are personal and individualistic, include Psalms 22, 33, 34, 40, 55, and 116. The penitent prays in Psalm 40: ". . . evils have encompassed me without number; my iniquities have overtaken me, until I cannot see; they are more than the hairs of my head, and my heart fails me" (v. 12). Hymns of penitence are Hannah's prayer (I Sam 2:1–10), the prayer for health and restoration of King Hezekiah (Isa 38:10–20), and the prayer of Jonah in the belly of the fish (Jonah 2:2–9). On occasion one finds stories of a personal call to repentance, such as the prophet Nathan confronting David for his adultery and the calculated murder of his mistress's husband (I Samuel 12). The story of Job serves as an example of private confession gone awry: despite Job's fierce self-examination, in which he scrutinizes his past for moral failures and offenses against the divine, he does not confess because, to his mind, there is nothing that warrants it. His so-called comforters, or self-appointed confessors, come away empty-handed. No coaxing, cajoling, insinuation, and insult can elicit from Job a confession of wrongdoing, in spite of the many ills and losses he has suffered, which suggest to his confessors the gravity of Job's concealed and unconfessed sin.

In the New Testament the cycle of confession of sin, divine deliverance, and gratitude and praise persists. However, the centrality of Jesus and developments in the early church add significant changes to the meaning and practice of confession. John the Baptist emphasizes confession of sins as a sign of repentance. Moreover, people are to show their remorse by submitting to baptism in the Jordan River. This dramatic enactment of their repentance is a form of penance and self-humiliation. The new ritual is an outward sign of an inward disposition, a public message of a privately wrought change of heart. Like the prophets of the Old Testament, John stresses that baptism is to result in changed behavior. "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees," he says; "every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Matt 3:10). The baptized are not merely to join the crowd but to show inner conviction and a shift of attitude, a reorientation toward God in light of the Messiah's coming and the inbreaking of a new, divine order. Thereby baptism functions as a preparation for the coming kingdom and a symbol of the forgiveness of sins.

Jesus proclaims the urgency of repentance in his initial preaching. Following his temptation in the wilderness and John's arrest, Jesus' first sermon is a call to repent: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:14). Again, repentance is to involve the whole person, not simply outward gestures and rituals: "The tree is known by its fruits . . . For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matt 12:33-34); "First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean" (Matt 23:26; cf. Mark 7:15). Jesus elaborates on the call to repent by giving concrete examples of what such repentance and turning entails. Anything that stands as an obstacle between the person and God is to be renounced: possessions, family ties, and human loyalties (Luke 14:33). Entrance into the kingdom involves becoming another person, someone who makes an effort at loving one's enemies, shows forgiveness and self-sacrifice, and takes on the attitude of helplessness, lowliness, and dependence on God. "Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 18:3). Unless one is willing to associate and identify with the despised and lowly of society, the sinners and tax collectors and prostitutes, one cannot be part of the new heavenly rule. Jesus associates with those whom society marginalizes and even enlists them in his work: fishermen and tax collectors are his companions on an itinerant ministry and women his coworkers in spreading his teachings and the message of his resurrection. He finds acceptance and welcome largely among those who know that their lives are not what they should be: "Those who are

well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (Mark 2:17). Among his most responsive audiences are those who acknowledge their yokes and burdens, their shortcomings and failures, their disorientation and disarray; they are willing to draw near and lay bare what they lack. A socioeconomically oppressive condition had put them at an advantage in regard to repentance: they could more easily admit to and confess what was wrong in their lives and in their souls. The other side of repentance is to trust that one will be forgiven. The humiliation accompanying admission of wrongs involves courage and faith. Repentance and faith in being forgiven are coupled. Thus the Great Commission that concludes Luke's gospel reads: "Repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations" (24:47). Failure to repent, confess, and trust in God's forgiveness is not an option: either repent or "perish" (Luke 15:7, 10), either repent in this life or suffer "torment" in "hell" thereafter, either yield and listen to the warning signs or end up "in agony" (Luke 16:23-30).

In the preaching of the early apostolic church the call to repentance and confession of sins is central. Echoing John the Baptist, Peter urges the people gathered in Jerusalem during the festival of Pentecost: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven . . . . For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him" (Acts 2:38-39). The apostle Paul says on the Areopagus that God "commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:30-31). For Paul this type of repentance requires faith, leading to union with Christ, the death of the old nature, the putting on of the new humanity, resurrection to newness of life, and a new creation. Repentance is turning away from evil and returning to God.

Another New Testament development is that confession of sin is equated, or often coincides, with confessing Christ. The disciple pronounces loyalty to Jesus as a way of being transformed and being allowed to enter into the new birth and the new life with Christ. This pronouncement is a public event "in the presence of many witnesses" (I Tim 6:12), presumably in connection with baptism. At the beginning of his ministry John the Baptist made confession, saying of Jesus: "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!" (John 1:29). At Caesarea Philippi, Simon Peter confessed Jesus as Messiah, saying: "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God," and in turn is promised

“the keys of the kingdom of heaven” that would unlock the “gates of Hades” and give power to bind and loose, to forgive and retain sins (Matt 16:16-19). Martha of Bethany did so after the death of Lazarus, saying to Jesus in response to his question whether she believed that he himself was “the resurrection and the life”: “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world (John 11:25-26). And the apostle Paul did so during his two-year imprisonment by Felix, the governor in Caesarea (Acts 24:14-27).

The apostolic church emphasized that confessing Jesus as Lord was a way to salvation, providing entry into the kingdom of heaven and access to life everlasting. The apostle Paul writes, “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved” (Rom 10:9-10). The need for catechetical instruction encouraged the development of confessional formulas in preparation for baptism. This becomes evident in a later manuscript addition of verse 37 to the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, who upon his confession of Jesus as Lord is baptized, saying, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God” (Acts 9:37). While the quotation may not be part of the original text, it shows that the practice of linking a confessional statement regarding Jesus with baptism is a rather early development. At the same time it raises the question whether confession of Jesus as Lord was beginning to be equated with and substituted for confessing one’s sins, repentance, and conversion. Another question is whether confessing Christ allowed room for postbaptismal confession with an opportunity and incentive for ongoing self-examination, or whether the new creation begun at baptism was seen as potentially equipping believers to henceforth lead a life pleasing to God.

Both the gospels and the epistles are primarily concerned with a first-time confession of sins. This is understandable since the apostolic church was mainly interested in evangelism and conversion, proclaiming the good news of Jesus, making disciples, and baptizing them in the name of the triune God. The call to conversion seemingly bypasses repentance as a preparatory step, as do the Gospel of John and the Johannine letters, which make no mention of the word repentance. Instead, the focus is on a new life, a fresh beginning, a clean slate that occurs when one meets and hears Jesus. “He told me everything I have ever done,” the woman of Samaria announces to her people, so that “many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony” (John 4:39). Then “many more believed” because they heard Jesus speak, and they said to

the woman: "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world" (John 4:41-42). Another example of rebirth and new beginning is the woman caught in adultery. After her accusers have left, too ashamed to throw the death-dealing stone at her, Jesus asks: "'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'no one, sir.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again'" (John 8:10-11). While repentance is implied, the focus in John's writings is on the believer's movement from death to life, from darkness to light, from falsehood to truth, from hatred to love, from living for the world and oneself to living for God.

Only a few passages in the New Testament point to the problem of postbaptismal transgressions. The letter of James advises that the transgressor seek out the elders of the church for forgiveness and renewal. "The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed" (Jas 5:15-16). Here sickness of body and sickness of the soul are linked, both requiring outside help through intercessory prayer and confession. In fact, the one hearing confession and extending forgiveness will be privileged by God and will be forgiven in turn: "You should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins" (Jas 5:20)—presumably one's own. Another approach to postbaptismal sin is to write off those Christians who have continued sinning and not made progress toward perfection in their conduct. In the letter to the Hebrews the author instructs: "Let us go on toward perfection, leaving behind the basic teaching about Christ, and not laying again the foundation: repentance from dead works and faith toward God, instruction about baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. . . . For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away" (Heb 6:1-5). Such people are like "worthless" soil producing only "thorns and thistles" and drinking up the rainwater, "on the verge of being cursed" and about "to be burned over" (Heb 6:7-8). The first letter of John echoes this view: "Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil; for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. . . . Those who have been born of God do not sin, because God's word abides in them; they cannot sin, because they have been born of God" (John 3:8-9). Committing sins after

baptism is considered inexcusable, and repentance that would restore one's relationship with God is not possible.

While in exile, John of Patmos issues report cards to the seven churches he may have helped found, commending two (Smyrna and Philadelphia) and calling five of them to repentance. The nature of the sins of the five churches differs enough to deserve a closer look. To the church in Ephesus, John writes: "I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. . . . But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first" (Rev 2:2-5a). To the church in Pergamum he writes: "I know where you are living, where Satan's throne is . . ." and that "you are holding fast to my name. But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam," eating food sacrificed to idols and practicing fornication, and "some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent then" (Rev 2:13-16a). To the church in Thyatira he writes: "I know your works—your love, faith, service, and patient endurance. . . . But I have this against you: you tolerate that woman Jezebel," who teaches the members to practice fornication and eat food sacrificed to idols. "Those who commit adultery with her I am throwing into great distress, unless they repent of her doings" (Rev 2:19-22). To the church in Sardis he writes: "I know your work; you have a name of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God. Remember then what you received and heard; obey it, and repent" (Rev 3:1-3). And to the church in Laodicea he writes: "I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. For you say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.' You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. . . . I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent" (Rev 3:15-19). While the churches, and more precisely the angels of the respective churches, are addressed, the individual members and leaders are responsible for the church's misguided behavior, the violating of Christian conduct, the attitude of permissiveness. It is significant that the particular sins of each church are a representative sample of the grave sins that two hundred years later would require Christians who were found guilty of any of them to enroll in the order of penitents. The sins listed in Revelation are: a sagging love for Christ or a falling away (apostasy), idolatry, sexual immorality, and pride (the root cause of all other sins), respectively. But all is not lost for the churches: There

are available remedies and measures of penance that will restore members to God: “Do the works you did at first” (Rev 2:5); “hold fast to what you have until I come” (Rev 2:25); “wake up, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death” (Rev 3:2); “buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see” (Rev 3:18). From the letters of Ignatius, the second-century bishop of Antioch, we know of the ministry of one of these churches in need of repentance: the church at Ephesus, which Ignatius praises repeatedly for its members’ courage in opposition to false teachers, their devotion to God, and their maturity in Christ.<sup>5</sup> We can assume that the Ephesians had yielded to John’s call to repentance and confession, most likely as a community at large.

5. Ignatius, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 49–58.