

Confessing Our Sins Together



By Dave Butts

There is a tendency for us to think of confession as a personal act we do before God. Certainly much confession is of this personal, private nature that is only between ourselves and God. But God's Word gives us another picture of confession that is corporate in its practice. It is confession from a group of people who are aware of the corporate aspect of their sin and aware that private confession is inadequate to deal with this problem.

I believe that the call of God to the Church today is for confession of this type. If we are to see revival in our day, it will come to a people who have humbled themselves together before their God and sought His face. This humility comes as we recognize that much of what has passed for Christianity in our day has been self-centered, worldly and an affront to the Lord. The only way to deal with the sin of the Church is for the Church to confess its sins and repent.

The biblical example that comes to mind is the story of Israel during the time of Ezra, when the people of God were dealing with the sin of intermarriage with the pagan tribes around them. The seventy years of exile in Babylon had ended. The exiles returned to Jerusalem over a number of years in different groups. One of these groups was lead by the great biblical scholar and man of God, Ezra.

Ezra's godly presence prompted the people to confess that they had once again damaged Israel's standing with God by

disobeying His clear command not to intermarry with the non-Jewish peoples around them. The sorrow and prayer of Ezra following this revelation is powerful.

As you read the text from the Book of Ezra printed below, notice several points that we need to bring into our own lives:

1. Ezra identified with the sins of the people. Even though he himself had not committed this sin, he prayed about “our sin.”

2. Ezra (and his people) had a great sorrow over this sin. He would pray, “I am too ashamed and disgraced to lift up my face.”

3. Ezra based his awareness of sin on Scripture, not just his own tradition. He literally quoted Scripture back to God in his prayer to demonstrate his awareness of the gravity of the rebellion that had taken place.

4. He affirmed the righteousness and mercy of God. He even tells God, “You have punished us less than our sins have deserved.”

5. Following the prayer of repentance and confession, there is action taken to make right the situation. It was a hard choice for many. Families were torn apart in order to bring the nation back into right alignment with the Word of God. This was not mere religious talk, but hard action in obeying God.

EZRA 9:1 – 10:4:

After these things had been done, the leaders came to me and said, “The people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the neighboring peoples with their detestable practices, like those of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites. They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their

sons, and have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them. And the leaders and officials have led the way in this unfaithfulness.”

When I heard this, I tore my tunic and cloak, pulled hair from my head and beard and sat down appalled. Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel gathered around me because of this unfaithfulness of the exiles. And I sat there appalled until the evening sacrifice.

Then, at the evening sacrifice, I rose from my self-abasement, with my tunic and cloak torn, and fell on my knees with my hands spread out to the LORD my God and prayed:

“O my God, I am too ashamed and disgraced to lift up my face to you, my God, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens. From the days of our forefathers until now, our guilt has been great. Because of our sins, we and our kings and our priests have been subjected to the sword and captivity, to pillage and humiliation at the hand of foreign kings, as it is today.

“But now, for a brief moment, the LORD our God has been gracious in leaving us a remnant and giving us a firm place in his sanctuary, and so our God gives light to our eyes and a little relief in our bondage. Though we are slaves, our God has not deserted us in our bondage. He has shown us kindness in the sight of the kings of Persia: He has granted us new life to rebuild the house of our God and repair its ruins, and he has given us a wall of protection in Judah and Jerusalem.

“But now, O our God, what can we say after this? For we have disregarded the commands you gave through your servants the prophets when you said: ‘The land you are entering to possess is a land polluted by the corruption of its peoples. By their detestable practices they have filled it with their

impurity from one end to the other. Therefore, do not give your daughters in marriage to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. Do not seek a treaty of friendship with them at any time, that you may be strong and eat the good things of the land and leave it to your children as an everlasting inheritance.'

"What has happened to us is a result of our evil deeds and our great guilt, and yet, our God, you have punished us less than our sins have deserved and have given us a remnant like this. Shall we again break your commands and intermarry with the peoples who commit such detestable practices? Would you not be angry enough with us to destroy us, leaving us no remnant or survivor? O LORD, God of Israel, you are righteous! We are left this day as a remnant. Here we are before you in our guilt, though because of it not one of us can stand in your presence."

While Ezra was praying and confessing, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a large crowd of Israelites—men, women and children—gathered around him. They too wept bitterly. Then Shecaniah son of Jehiel, one of the descendants of Elam, said to Ezra, "We have been unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women from the peoples around us. But in spite of this, there is still hope for Israel. Now let us make a covenant before our God to send away all these women and their children, in accordance with the counsel of my lord and of those who fear the commands of our God. Let it be done according to the Law. Rise up; this matter is in your hands. We will support you, so take courage and do it." This is true confession and repentance. The people of God stood convicted of their sin by the Word of God. In sorrow and humility they bowed before God in prayer and in action. God heard their prayers and restored their nation.

Will we have the courage of their prayers and deeds?

God, send a spirit of repentance upon your people. Help us to accept the judgment of Your Word in our lives and assemblies. May we walk in that humility that continually confesses that You alone are righteous. Give us the courage to stand together as Your people in confession and repentance, that we might experience a fresh sense of Your Presence in our midst.

–Dave Butts (1953-2022) was the president of Harvest Prayer Ministries, and the author of multiple books, articles and resources on prayer. Some of his books are [Prayer, Peace and the Presence of God](#), [The Giving Church](#), and [Prayer Ministry Volunteer Handbook](#) co-authored with his wife, Kim.