

Confession

Are all of our sins—past, present, and future—forgiven once and for all when we become Christians? Not according to the Bible or the early Church Fathers. Scripture nowhere states that our future sins are forgiven; instead, it teaches us to pray, "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt. 6:12).

The means by which God forgives sins after baptism is confession: "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). Minor or venial sins can be confessed directly to God, but for grave or mortal sins, which crush the spiritual life out of the soul, God has instituted a different means for obtaining forgiveness—the sacrament known popularly as confession, penance, or reconciliation.

This sacrament is rooted in the mission God gave to Christ in his capacity as the Son of man on earth to go and forgive sins (cf. Matt. 9:6). Thus, the crowds who witnessed this new power "glorified God, who had given such authority to men" (Matt. 9:8; note the plural "men"). After his resurrection, Jesus passed on his mission to forgive sins to his ministers, telling them, "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you. . . . 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 20:21–23).

Since it is not possible to confess all of our many daily faults, we know that sacramental reconciliation is required only for grave or mortal sins—but it is required, or Christ would not have commanded it.

Over time, the forms in which the sacrament has been administered have changed. In the early Church, publicly known sins (such as apostasy) were often confessed openly in church, though private confession to a priest was always an option for privately committed sins. Still, confession was not just something done in silence to God alone, but something done "in church," as the *Didache* (A.D. 70) indicates.

Penances also tended to be performed before rather than after absolution, and they were much more strict than those of today (ten years' penance for abortion, for example, was common in the early Church).

But the basics of the sacrament have always been there, as the following quotations reveal. Of special significance is their recognition that confession and absolution must be received by a sinner before receiving Holy Communion, for "[w]hoever . . . eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Cor. 11:27).

The Didache

"Confess your sins in church, and do not go up to your prayer with an evil conscience. This is the way of life. . . . On the Lord's Day gather together, break bread, and give thanks, after confessing your transgressions so that your sacrifice may be pure" (*Didache* 4:14, 14:1 [A.D. 70]).

The Letter of Barnabas

"You shall judge righteously. You shall not make a schism, but you shall pacify those that contend by bringing them together. You shall confess your sins. You shall not go to prayer with an evil conscience. This is the way of light" (*Letter of Barnabas* 19 [A.D. 74]).

Ignatius of Antioch

"For as many as are of God and of Jesus Christ are also with the bishop. And as many as shall, in the exercise of penance, return into the unity of the Church, these, too, shall belong to God, that they may live according to Jesus Christ" (*Letter to the Philadelphians* 3 [A.D. 110]).

"For where there is division and wrath, God does not dwell. To all them that repent, the Lord grants forgiveness, if they turn in penitence to the unity of God, and to communion with the bishop" (*ibid.*, 8).

Irenaeus

"[The Gnostic disciples of Marcus] have deluded many women. . . . Their consciences have been branded as with a hot iron. Some of these women make a public confession, but others are ashamed to do this, and in silence, as if withdrawing from themselves the hope of the life of God, they either apostatize entirely or hesitate between the two courses" (*Against Heresies* 1:22 [A.D. 189]).

Tertullian

"[Regarding confession, some] flee from this work as being an exposure of themselves, or they put it off from day to day. I presume they are more mindful of modesty than of salvation, like those who contract a disease in the more shameful parts of the body and shun making themselves known to the physicians; and thus they perish along with their own bashfulness" (*Repentance* 10:1 [A.D. 203]).

Hippolytus

"[The bishop conducting the ordination of the new bishop shall pray:] God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . Pour forth now that power which comes from you, from your royal Spirit, which you gave to your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, and which he bestowed upon his holy apostles . . . and grant this your servant, whom you have chosen for the episcopate, [the power] to feed your holy flock and to serve without blame as your high priest, ministering night and day to propitiate unceasingly before your face and to offer to you the gifts of your holy Church, and by

the Spirit of the high priesthood to have the authority to forgive sins, in accord with your command" (*Apostolic Tradition* 3 [A.D. 215]).

Origen

"[A final method of forgiveness], albeit hard and laborious [is] the remission of sins through penance, when the sinner . . . does not shrink from declaring his sin to a priest of the Lord and from seeking medicine, after the manner of him who say, 'I said, "To the Lord I will accuse myself of my iniquity"' (*Homilies on Leviticus* 2:4 [A.D. 248]).

Cyprian of Carthage

"The apostle [Paul] likewise bears witness and says: ' . . . Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord' [1 Cor. 11:27]. But [the impenitent] spurn and despise all these warnings; before their sins are expiated, before they have made a confession of their crime, before their conscience has been purged in the ceremony and at the hand of the priest . . . they do violence to [the Lord's] body and blood, and with their hands and mouth they sin against the Lord more than when they denied him" (*The Lapsed* 15:1–3 [A.D. 251]).

"Of how much greater faith and salutary fear are they who . . . confess their sins to the priests of God in a straightforward manner and in sorrow, making an open declaration of conscience. . . . I beseech you, brethren, let everyone who has sinned confess his sin while he is still in this world, while his confession is still admissible, while the satisfaction and remission made through the priests are still pleasing before the Lord" (*ibid.*, 28).

"[S]inners may do penance for a set time, and according to the rules of discipline come to public confession, and by imposition of the hand of the bishop and clergy receive the right of Communion. [But now some] with their time [of penance] still unfulfilled . . . they are admitted to Communion, and their name is presented; and while the penitence is not yet performed, confession is not yet made, the hands of the bishop and clergy are not yet laid upon them, the Eucharist is given to them; although it is written, 'Whosoever shall eat the bread and drink the cup of the Lord unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord' [1 Cor. 11:27]" (*Letters* 9:2 [A.D. 253]).

"And do not think, dearest brother, that either the courage of the brethren will be lessened, or that martyrdoms will fail for this cause, that penance is relaxed to the lapsed, and that the hope of peace [i.e., absolution] is offered to the penitent. . . . For to adulterers even a time of repentance is granted by us, and peace is given" (*ibid.*, 51[55]:20).

"But I wonder that some are so obstinate as to think that repentance is not to be granted to the lapsed, or to suppose that pardon is to be denied to the penitent, when it is written, 'Remember whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works' [Rev. 2:5], which certainly is said to him who evidently has fallen, and whom the Lord exhorts to rise up again by his deeds [of penance], because it is written, 'Alms deliver from death' [Tob. 12:9]" (*ibid.*, 51[55]:22).

Aphraahat the Persian Sage

"You [priests], then, who are disciples of our illustrious physician [Christ], you ought not deny a curative to those in need of healing. And if anyone uncovers his wound before you, give him the remedy of repentance. And he that is ashamed to make known his weakness, encourage him so that he will not hide it from you. And when he has revealed it to you, do not make it public, lest because of it the innocent might be reckoned as guilty by our enemies and by those who hate us" (*Treatises* 7:3 [A.D. 340]).

Basil the Great

"It is necessary to confess our sins to those to whom the dispensation of God's mysteries is entrusted. Those doing penance of old are found to have done it before the saints. It is written in the Gospel that they confessed their sins to John the Baptist [Matt. 3:6], but in Acts [19:18] they confessed to the apostles" (*Rules Briefly Treated* 288 [A.D. 374]).

John Chrysostom

"Priests have received a power which God has given neither to angels nor to archangels. It was said to them: 'Whatsoever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever you shall loose, shall be loosed.' Temporal rulers have indeed the power of binding; but they can only bind the body. Priests, in contrast, can bind with a bond which pertains to the soul itself and transcends the very heavens. Did [God] not give them all the powers of heaven? 'Whose sins you shall forgive,' he says, 'they are forgiven them; whose sins you shall retain, they are retained.' What greater power is there than this? The Father has given all judgment to the Son. And now I see the Son placing all this power in the hands of men [Matt. 10:40; John 20:21–23]. They are raised to this dignity as if they were already gathered up to heaven" (*The Priesthood* 3:5 [A.D. 387]).

Ambrose of Milan

"For those to whom [the right of binding and loosing] has been given, it is plain that either both are allowed, or it is clear that neither is allowed. Both are allowed to the Church, neither is allowed to heresy. For this right has been granted to priests only" (*Penance* 1:1 [A.D. 388]).

Jerome

"If the serpent, the devil, bites someone secretly, he infects that person with the venom of sin. And if the one who has been bitten keeps silence and does not do penance, and does not want to confess his wound . . . then his brother and his master, who have the word [of absolution] that will cure him, cannot very well assist him" (*Commentary on Ecclesiastes* 10:11 [A.D. 388]).

Augustine

"When you shall have been baptized, keep to a good life in the commandments of God so that you may preserve your baptism to the very end. I do not tell you that you will live here without sin, but they are venial sins which this life is never without. Baptism was instituted for all sins. For light sins, without which we cannot live, prayer was instituted. . . . But do not commit those sins on account of which you would have to be separated from the body of Christ. Perish the thought! For those whom you see doing penance have committed crimes, either adultery or some other enormities. That is why they are doing penance. If their sins were light, daily prayer would suffice to blot them out. . . . In the Church, therefore, there are three ways in which sins are forgiven: in baptisms, in prayer, and in the greater humility of penance" (*Sermon to Catechumens on the Creed* 7:15, 8:16 [A.D. 395]).

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Bernadeane Carr, STL, Censor Librorum, August 10, 2004

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