

Confession & Forgiveness | Oct 20, 2024

The Worship-Shaped Life: Spiritual Practices in Anglican Worship

Icebreaker

Describe one time that you had to confess a minor transgression or sin against someone else when you were a teenager or a kid. Or maybe a time when you should have confessed to your parents and instead you “got away with it.”

What role(s) does confession play in Anglican liturgy and spiritual life, particularly in relation to the eucharist?

Confession Reveals ...

Two truths about the nature of the Father’s forgiveness.

1. We cannot earn the gift of forgiveness and are never worthy of it.
 - A. It is always a gift
 - B. The only right response is to offer thanksgiving and love for our neighbor as a return gift
2. Confession moves us into a new kingdom of values where recompense is no longer needed.

Two truths about our bodies and the body of Christ, the Church.

3. We are enslaved to sin—and/or sinners living in sinful bodies.
4. Confession facilitates reconciliation with our brothers and sisters.

On Forgiveness / Lack of Worthiness

Wrong Response — Avoid the Eucharist Because We are Unworthy Sinner

Faced with Paul’s warnings in 1 Cor. 11, we can “paradoxically ... become proud judges of our own state of unworthiness, and so withhold ourselves from the eucharist rather than giving ourselves to God’s loving judgment and reconciling action.”¹

Right Response — Confess and Receive Communion More Often

“We must not avoid communion because we deem ourselves to be sinful. We must approach it more often for the healing of the soul and the purification of the spirit, but with such humility and faith that considering ourselves unworthy . . . we would desire even more the medicine for our wounds. Otherwise it is impossible to receive

¹ Harriet Harris, “Confession,” *Liturgical Spirituality: Anglican Reflections on the Church’s Prayer*, Seabury Books, 2013, p. 42.

communion once a year, as certain people do . . . considering the sanctification of heavenly Mysteries as available only to saints. It is better to think that by giving us grace, the sacrament makes us pure and holy. Such people manifest more pride than humility . . . for when they receive, they think of themselves as worthy. It is much better if, in humility of heart, knowing that we are never worthy of the Holy Mysteries we would receive them every Sunday for the healing of our diseases, rather than, blinded by pride, think that after one year we become worthy of receiving them.”²

On Recompense

Confession, in relation to the eucharist, “reveals the nature of the father’s forgiveness as moving us into a new kingdom of values were recompense is no longer relevant.” This is because “those who forgive take upon themselves the consequences of what others have done.” This is what Jesus Christ has done for us and offers to all those who confess.

“Forgiveness, therefore, always entails sacrifice.”³

Example: Matthew 18:21-35

Confession bridges the gap between our baptism, receiving the Holy Spirit, being forgiven by God for our sins and the fact that we continue to sin. Confession “mediates the way between baptism and participation in the eucharist.”

On Enslavement

Confession teaches us that we are enslaved to sin, we are sinners living in sinful bodies. Thus, during The Prayer of Humble Access we say,

We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table, ...
Grant us, therefore, gracious Lord,
so to eat the flesh of your dear Son Jesus Christ,
and to drink his blood,
that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body,
and our souls washed through his most precious blood ...

“If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleans us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:8-9).

² St. John Cassian, *Conferences*, 23.21:Third Conference of Abbot Theonas on Sinlessness

³ Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings*, quoted in *Liturgical Spirituality*.

On Reconciliation

'We profane Christ body, rooted in Christ on bodily sacrifice, if we celebrate the Eucharist with divisions among us.'⁴

“A new life built on the risk of mercy and peace”

As followers of Christ we are called to put death our sense of righteous indignation toward others who have harmed us and build “a new life built on the risk of mercy and peace.”

After we confess our sins, and the celebrant speaks The Comfortable Words, we greet one another with a sign of peace during “The Peace.” This is intentionally ordered.

We confess, ask for forgiveness, the celebrant asks the Lord on our behalf to forgive us for our sins (one of which we specifically note is not loving our neighbor as ourself). Then the celebrant recites a series of Scripture versus which are designed to comfort those who have just confessed that they are sinners by reminding us that all who turn to Christ and ask for forgiveness, will receive it through Christ, who is the propitiation for our sins. Only after we've asked God to forgive us, do we turn to our neighbors and speak peace. We are literally making peace with one another—saying in essence, “all is well between us because we are both forgiveness and I forgive you if you have wronged me.” It is a way for us to fulfill Christ's exhortation in Matthew 5:23-24,

“So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.”

Only after we confess, hear the comfortable words, speak peace to our neighbors, do we give our gifts during the offertory. And after the offertory we begin, in earnest, to celebrate the Lord's Supper.

Again, this is all intentionally ordered. And confession plays a crucial preparatory role in getting us ready to receive communion together, as a united body.

Discussion

Divide up the text of The Confession with your group. Then take a few minutes to think through how the different phrases and sections are related to one another. You can use labels such as, “What, How, Why, Who, or even Action, Attitude.” Make a note of anything that stands out or any connections you see. Then share your discoveries as a group.

⁴ Harris, “Confession,” *Liturgical Spirituality*

Congregation

Most merciful God, [who?]
we confess [action]
that we have sinned against you [what?]
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done,
and by what we have left undone.

We have not loved you
with our whole heart
We have not loved our neighbors
as ourselves

We are truly sorry,
and we humbly repent.

For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ,
have mercy on us
and forgive us;
that we may
delight in your will,
and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your Name.

Amen.

Celebrant

Almighty God, our heavenly Father,
who,
in his great mercy
has promised forgiveness of sins
to all those who sincerely repent
and with true faith turn to him,
have mercy upon you,
pardon and deliver you
from all your sins,
confirm and strengthen you
in all goodness,
and bring you to everlasting life;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.