Renewed confession and embodiment of the Belhar vision will appropriately take forward the attempts of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, under leadership of Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, to enhance forgiveness, truth, reconciliation, and restitution.

And in churches of the Dutch Reformed tradition in South Africa, the faith and hope, sin and guilt that is confessed in Belhar calls for renewed confession and embodiment. Although this was not exclusively so, it was especially churches in this tradition that were responsible for the theological legitimation of apartheid. The mainly white Dutch Reformed Church, the mainly black Dutch Reformed Church in Southern Africa, the mainly black Dutch Reformed Church in Africa, and the mainly Indian Reformed Church in Africa, do have a special calling to confess and embody the vision of justice, reconciliation, and unity. Although formal structural re-uni-ication still seems far-off, the many courageous and visionary attempts by members and bodies in these churches to collaborate for the sake of re-uni-ication is a crucial source of hope.

Lastly, where injustices, alienation, and divisiveness manifest on the most personal level, amongst others in the context of marriage, family life, circle of friends, and the workplace, we confront these challenges with the confession of faith and hope, sin and guilt in our hearts. Even a painful divorce is not carried out with concession but with confession, i.e. confession of sin and guilt because we could not keep the marital vows and we were forced to choose for the lesser of two evils, for an unavoidable evil. For Christians a divorce takes place with confession of faith and hope in the God of justice, reconciliation, and unity who will open and actualise new possibilities for us.

As Christians in Africa we participate in the journey of confessing and embodying justice, reconciliation, and unity in all walls of life. And we revel in the knowledge that the God of justice, reconciliation, and unity calls, assembles, and cares for his people (incarnation of the Belhar Confession), and in the knowledge that Jesus Christ is the Lord who reigns and who is worthy of our highest loyalty (conclusion of Belhar).

Editor’s Note: A special committee authorized by the 218th General Assembly (2008) has recommended that it will recommend to next summer’s 219th Assembly that the Belhar Confession be added to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.’s Book of Confessions. The full text is available here: http://www.pca.org/downloads/committee/confession.html

CONFESSION:
GOOD FOR THE SOUL, HARD FOR THE HEART,
AND A MARK OF MATURITY

Bonnie L. Miller-McLemore

You never say you’re wrong. You never say you’re right. Words of accusations flung across the room like a dart in the warning hex of an argument. I had heard them before. And I knew their truth. I do not like to say I am wrong.

Rationally people know the importance of acknowledging the harm and hurt we inflict. But we resist. We do not like to disclose our faults or declare our sins. It goes against our deepest inclinations, like running against the wind. Confession is a basic psychological and spiritual good. But it is so hard for the pinched and narrow heart.

Hard for the heart: live with no regrets

Flipping through a holiday catalogue, I saw the words neatly inscribed on sterling silver, the “Live Life with No Regret Bracelet,” available for only $68.95. The blurb promised: “You can read these words in two ways. Don’t waste precious time looking back, and do things today you’ll be proud of tomorrow.” No one can argue with the second tip. But is looking back such a waste? “The new generation of Germans,” I heard a churchman announce at a conference, “no longer feel they have to apologize for the Holocaust.” No longer feel the need to apologize? Can shared history be so easily let go? Can Americans escape the scar of decimating a native people or South Africans, the lingering impact of apartheid? No history, personal or communal, stands untouched by failure and atrocity. One need not be a professing Christian to admit this.

Why then is confession so hard? One reason is that it bears witness to our precious purchase on life. The posture of contrition is inevitably one of vulnerability. Nor only does confession speak to the fleeting nature of our existence. It also reveals that as we move forward in time, we unavoidably create pain and leave a mess in our wake.

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Why would anyone want to attend to this manure-making aspect of life? The practice of confession also has a troubled history. People in early medieval, Reformation, and Romantic times have debated its location, its motivation, and its need. Should confession happen privately or in community? Is it the love or God's love that allows us to see sin? Is sin a particular act or a general condition of alienation? Is it merely personal or does one need to consider social sins (racism, war, etc.)? Moreover, every era and tradition has seen the practice tarnished and corrupted. The medieval church praised on people's picketbooks and tears in an elaborate system of penance. Reformers rejected the sacrament as a compulsory act of the parishioner won over by a priest in favor of general congregational confession. But the ceremonies that followed saw the practice wane. Of the primary functions of pastoral care identified by historians William A. Celsich and Charles Jagger, reconciliation is the most eroded today. "There is no place in the structure and rhythm of the life of modern congregations where a serious discussion concerning the state of one's soul is expected." Although some churches include confession and absolution in worship, many congregations rarely do. Traditions like my own Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) that feature early worship practices of "teaching and fellowship ... the breaking of bread and prayer" (Acts 2:42) remain unsure about when, where, and how often to include confession. But what do we miss when we come and go from worship each week, without its practice?

Good for the soul: a matter of communal honesty and religious habit

Modern psychology and age-old religion know confession is good for the soul. Contemporary forms of therapy, from Freud's first "talking cure" to marriage counseling and self-help groups, actually resemble the confessional and its effect on people once provided by the church. Some psychologists even see failure as essential to development and healing. A parent's non-trumatic response to appropriately to a child impairs the child's ability to assume emotional roles of working, affirming, and valuing previously played by parents. The most important moment in therapy, according to seventeenth-century analyst Heinz Kohut, occurs when client and therapist strive to understand the "basic" or "wound" caused by the therapist's lack of empathy. Family-systems theory reveals the destructive effect of secrets on the health of extended systems. Families who hide abuse, addiction, violence and illnesses in the face of social pressure and public shame often do so to their detriment. John Gottman, a marriage therapy guru and psychology professor who studies communication and behavior among couples, narrates the "four horses of the apocalypse" that most visibly predict divorce—criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. These patterns stand in direct opposition to the Grace of Confession. In short, psychologists know confession cures.

So do congregations and ministers. Confession is both a pedagogy to grace and yet only possible in the context of God's love. For centuries, Christianity has linked confession with companion practices of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. The detailed penitential manuals of the fifth-century allowed the repentant sinner to engage God and enact a change of heart through specific acts. The sixteenth-century Reformation

and the eighteenth-century Second Vatican Council sought to reassert corporate confession and often the significance of communal support and formation. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission knew little progress in face relations would occur without truth telling. Strong religious leaders know confession is good for a community's health despite its difficulty. Pastors, such as the Episcopal priest in Gail Goddard's novel Evenings, prepare themselves with "a makeshift confession" in case the person who comes to talk chooses "to go to that route." In all these instances, habits of confession shaped within religious communities over long periods of time have an amazing power to form and reform us as participants in the practice of God's love. Following divine example helps no one. But occupying responsibility for shared failure creates a space for compensation and transformation.

A mark of spiritual maturity become like animals and children

Ultimately, the capacity to confess is a mark of spiritual maturity. Church institutions have instilled it through personal and communal ritual. But in the end, the posture of confession is a grace bestowed. When one steps to consider where such maturity most readily appears, children and animals come to mind.

Most of us like to think of wisdom as acquired chronologically with age. But spirituality does not always follow natural patterns of physical development. "The capacity to confess is as likely to be lost with maturity as gained. Children and animals, by contrast, wear their vulnerability on their sleeve. So it should not surprise us that they have a keen ability to know their faults and seek amends. Although we should take care not to romanticize and trivialize either children or animals, we can still appreciate the glared ease with which they acknowledge failings and give up grievances. Following the priorly mentioned of animal and childlike example offers the perspective and grace needed to let go and admit wrong. So the next time you struggle to do so, regard the children and animals as us and become more like them.

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The practice of confession also has a troubled history. People in every medieval, Reformation, and modern times have debated its location, its motivation, and its need. Should confession happen privately or in community? Is it the law or God's love that allows us to see sin? Is sin a particular act or a general condition of alienation? Is it merely personal or does one need to consider social sins (racism, war, etc.)? Moreover, every era and tradition has seen the practice tarnished and corrupted. The medieval church prayed on people's pulsebooks and tears in an elaborate system of penance. Reformers rejected the sacrament as a compulsion act of the punishment received by a priest in favor of general congregational confession. But the ceremonies that followed saw the practice wane. Of the primary functions of pastoral care identified by historians William A. Clemish and Charles Jaccard, reconciliation is the most cited today: "There is no place in the structure and rhythm of the life of modern congregations where a serious discussion concerning the state of one's soul is expected." Although some churches include confession and absolution in worship, many congregations rarely do. Traditions like my own Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) that instantly early worship practices of "teaching and fellowship ... the breaking of bread and pray [sic]" (Acts 2:42) remain unsure about when, where, and how often to include confession. But what do we miss when we come and go from worship each week without its practice?

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