# 23. Confession to a priest

**Often heard:** "Only God can forgive sins. Why would I confess to a man?"
**Also heard:** "Jesus gave the apostles power to forgive and retain sins (John 20:23). How can they retain sins they never hear?"

## Confession directly to God, without priestly absolution

**HELD BY** Reformed pardon proclaimed in preaching · Methodist · Baptist

Confess sins directly to God through Christ, the one mediator; no priest is needed. Christians may confess to one another, but not for absolution.

**VERSES CITED**

1 John 1:9; 1 Tim 2:5; Mark 2:7; Heb 4:14–16; Ps 32:5; Luke 18:13.

**WHERE THE IDEA COMES FROM**

Wycliffe and the Reformed churches rejected priestly absolution as a sacrament. The Lutheran confessions kept private absolution, and the Apology (XIII.4) even calls it a sacrament; Reformed churches dropped required private confession but allowed a troubled believer private counsel with a minister (Second Helvetic Confession 14). Baptists have no sacramental confession.

## God forgives through His ministers' absolution

**HELD BY** Catholic · Orthodox · Lutheran private absolution, no enumeration · Anglican offered, not required

Only God forgives sins, and He chose to do it through ministers. The risen Jesus breathed the Spirit on the apostles and gave them power to forgive or retain sins, which requires hearing them. The crowd praised God for giving such authority "to men."

**VERSES CITED**

John 20:21–23; Matt 9:6–8; 16:19; 18:18; 2 Cor 2:10; 5:18–20; Jas 5:14–16; Acts 19:18.

**EARLY CHURCH AND HISTORY**

*Didache* 4.14 and 14.1 (confess your sins in church). Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus* 2.4 (declare your sin to a priest of the Lord). Cyprian, *On the Lapsed* 28–29 (c. 251). Ambrose, *On Penance* (c. 390). Grave sins were first handled by public penance, often allowed only once; repeatable private confession spread through Irish monks (6th–7th centuries); the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) required annual confession.

Catholic and Orthodox writers add second- to fourth-century texts on confessing sin. Irenaeus tells of a deacon's wife misled by the Gnostic Marcus who afterward "spent her whole time in the exercise of public confession," and of other followers who "make a public confession of their sins" while some are "ashamed to do this" (*Against Heresies* 1.13.5, 1.13.7). Tertullian says most people "shun this work, as

being a public exposure of themselves, or else defer it from day to day," like those who avoid physicians and "so perish with their own bashfulness" (*On Repentance* 10). In the East, Aphrahat tells church leaders, as physicians: "Whosoever shows his wound to you, give to him the medicine of penitence," and of what is revealed, "do not publish it" (*Demonstration* 7.4, c. 336-337). Baptist and Reformed writers note that Irenaeus and Tertullian describe public confession before the congregation, with penitents bowing "before the feet of the presbyters" (*On Repentance* 9), that Tertullian later, as a Montanist, refused forgiveness for grave sins altogether (*On Modesty*), and that Aphrahat's physician is a pastor giving counsel and penance, not a sacrament of absolution. Lutherans keep private confession and absolution (Augsburg XI, XXV) and cite these writers as showing the practice's antiquity.

**CATECHISM AND COUNCILS**

CCC 1422–1498 (esp. 1441–1442, 1455–1458; 1467 the seal); Trent, Session 14 (1551).

## Across the traditions

How each major tradition answers this question, in its own words and from its own documents.

### Catholic

Only God forgives sins, and the risen Christ gave the apostles power to forgive or retain them, so sins are confessed to a priest who absolves in Christ's name; the form developed from public penance to private confession, but the power to bind and loose is held to be original. The full case is set out above.

Sources: CCC 1422–1498 (esp. 1441–1442, 1455–1458, 1467); Council of Trent, Session 14 (as cited in the chapter).

### Orthodox

Penitence is one of the seven mysteries: the penitent confesses to God and, on the priest's outward declaration of pardon, is loosed from sin by Christ himself. The priest is a witness, physician and guide rather than a judge, and many keep a spiritual father. The penitent brings contrition, purpose of amendment, faith and hope, prepared by fasting and prayer; a penance (epitimia) may be given as remedy. Frequency is left to the person, but serious sin requires confession before Communion.

Sources: Longer Catechism of St Philaret, Q 285, 351–356; Confession of Dositheus (Synod of Jerusalem, 1672), decrees 15–16; Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, "Understanding the Sacraments of the Orthodox Church" (Fr Thomas Fitzgerald), section Confession.

### Lutheran

Private absolution is to be kept in the churches, though a full listing of sins is not required.

### Reformed

Every believer must confess sins privately to God, and one who has given offence should

Confession has two parts: confessing sins and receiving absolution from the confessor "as from God Himself." The Apology calls absolution, the sacrament of repentance, truly a sacrament. Lutheran worship books provide both corporate and individual confession and forgiveness, and the ELCA calls its congregations to make faithful use of both.

Sources: Augsburg Confession XI, XXV; Smalcald Articles III.8; Small Catechism, How Christians Should Be Taught to Confess; Apology XII.41, XIII.4; ELCA, *The Use of the Means of Grace* (1997), Principle 12, Application 12A.

### Anglican

Penance is not counted a sacrament of the Gospel, and general confession and absolution belong to public worship. Yet the Prayer Book invites anyone who cannot quiet his conscience to open his grief to a discreet and learned minister and receive the benefit of absolution, and moves a sick person troubled by a weighty matter to special confession, after which the priest says "I absolve thee." Private confession is offered rather than required; the Episcopal Church's 1979 Prayer Book has a Reconciliation of a Penitent.

Sources: Thirty-Nine Articles XXV; Book of Common Prayer 1662, Lord's Supper, exhortation; BCP 1662, Visitation of the Sick; Canons of the Church of England B 29.2–3; Episcopal BCP 1979, Reconciliation of a Penitent, pp. 447–452.

### Baptist

Sins are confessed directly to God through Christ, the one mediator, and no priest is needed; believers may confess to one another, but not for absolution. The full case is set out above.

confess to those wronged and be reconciled. Confession to a priest is not necessary for forgiveness, since Scripture gives neither command nor example of it, though a troubled believer may seek private counsel from a minister. The keys are the preaching of the gospel and church discipline, so ministers truly absolve when they proclaim Christ's pardon.

Sources: Westminster Confession 15.6; Second Helvetic Confession ch. 14; Heidelberg Catechism Q 83–85.

### Methodist

Methodists confess directly to God, privately and together. The communion services include a prayer of confession followed by words of pardon, "In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven!", spoken by the leader and returned by the people. Penance is not counted a sacrament of the Gospel. Wesley's bands met weekly to confess sins to one another, a practice of mutual accountability rather than priestly absolution.

Sources: *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, A Service of Word and Table I, Confession and Pardon (umcdiscipleship.org); Methodist Articles of Religion XVI; United Methodist Church, "Before God and one another: United Methodists and confession" (umc.org).

Sources: As cited in the chapter (1 John 1:9; 1 Tim 2:5).

**Where it gets contested:** The outward form clearly developed, from public penance to private confession. Catholics say the substance, the Church's power to bind and loose, was there from the beginning.

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