

## WE HAVE SINNED

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The people of the United States of America continue to try to end racial strife. Many white Christians have been doing all they can to be at peace with Black people, and to make amends for the wrongs done to them. In the year of Our Lord Nineteen-hundred and Ninety-five, the Southern Baptist Convention adopted a resolution which states:

Be it further RESOLVED, That we lament and repudiate historic acts of evil such as slavery from which we continue to reap a bitter harvest, and we recognize that the racism which yet plagues our culture today is inextricably tied to the past; and Be it further RESOLVED, That we apologize to all African-Americans for condoning and/or perpetuating individual and systemic racism in our lifetime; and we genuinely repent of racism of which we have been guilty, whether consciously (Psalm 19:13) or unconsciously (Leviticus 4:27); and Be it further RESOLVED, That we ask forgiveness from our African-American brothers and sisters, acknowledging that our own healing is at stake.

Four years ago, the Presbyterian Church in America adopted a resolution which states:

Therefore be it resolved, that the 44th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America does recognize, confess, condemn and repent of corporate and historical sins, including those committed during the Civil Rights era, and continuing racial sins of ourselves and our fathers such as the segregation of worshipers by race; the exclusion of persons from Church membership on the basis of race; the exclusion of churches, or elders, from membership in the Presbyteries on the basis of race; the teaching that the Bible sanctions racial segregation and discourages inter-racial marriage; the participation in and defense of white supremacist organizations; and the failure to live out the gospel imperative that “love does no wrong to a neighbor” (Romans 13:10); and Be it further resolved, that this General Assembly does recognize, confess, condemn and repent of past failures to love brothers and sisters from minority cultures in accordance with what the Gospel requires, as well as failures to lovingly confront our brothers and sisters concerning racial sins and personal bigotry, and failing to “learn to do good, seek justice and correct oppression” (Isaiah 1:17)

Several weeks ago, a small number of white and Hispanic Christians met with a small number of Black Christians, and a white man said to the white and hispanic Christians:

We owe the Black community an apology. Maybe it's for neglect. Maybe it's for the fact that we just didn't get involved in helping the Black community. Maybe it's something we said. Maybe it's our stereotypes. Maybe it's just being insensitive altogether. I don't know what yours is, but I'm going to own that as a white man. For me as a white man, I'm going to own that. And we

can bring true healing if we start owning it... So I just ask you to join me as we apologize. And so I would ask, as we reach out for forgiveness to the Black community that's present today, that you would take a knee with me, as we show them our hearts, that we want to be forgiven, and that we want to make a difference from this point on.

Then he prayed, "Father, we ask for forgiveness from our Black brothers and sisters for years and years of racism, of systematic racism, of bigotry, of hate, on behalf of the white race, the brown race." Racism is a sin. It is a failure to fulfill the second great commandment: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Any Christian who has committed this sin ought to repent. As Martin Luther stated in his first thesis, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent" (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." But, what of corporate confession of sin? There is a Scriptural basis for corporate confession of sin, but not as many today understand it.

When God revealed His glory to Moses, He said to him:

The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation. (Exodus 34:6, 7)

This revelation of God is foundational, and the prophets cited it to the people when they were under God's judgment. God is just, and so He punishes men for their sins. However, God is also merciful and so He forgives men their sins. He forgives their sins, but only if they acknowledge their sins and turn from them. This is to say, He forgives them when they repent. When King Solomon dedicated the temple, he prayed to God for the people, saying:

If they sin against thee, (for there is no man which sinneth not,) and thou be angry with them, and deliver them over before their enemies, and they carry them away captives unto a land far off or near; Yet if they bethink themselves in the land whither they are carried captive, and turn and pray unto thee in the land of their captivity, saying, We have sinned, we have done amiss, and have dealt wickedly; If they return to thee with all their heart and with all their soul in the land of their captivity, whither they have carried them captives, and pray toward their land, which thou gavest unto their fathers, and toward the city which thou hast chosen, and toward the house which I have built for thy name: Then hear thou from the heavens, even from thy dwelling place, their prayer and their supplications, and maintain their cause, and forgive thy people which have sinned against thee. ((2 Chronicles 6:36-39)

The people would sin, but God would graciously forgive them, if they would repent and turn back to Him. They did sin, just as Solomon knew they would, and Ezekiel the prophet warned them that God would destroy them if they did not repent. He said to them:

Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, saith the Lord GOD. Repent, and turn yourselves from all your transgressions; so iniquity shall not be your

ruin. Cast away from you all your transgressions, whereby ye have transgressed; and make you a new heart and a new spirit: for why will ye die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord GOD: wherefore turn yourselves, and live ye. (Ezekiel 18:30-32)

Jesus, before He ascended into heaven, told His disciples:

Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. (Luke 24:46, 47)

Jesus told them that repentance and forgiveness, which is to say, repentance for forgiveness, and faith in the risen Christ is the Gospel that would be preached to all nations. After Jesus ascended into heaven, on the Day of Pentecost, Saint Peter told a gathering of Jews, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins.” (Acts 2:38) The Scriptures give examples of men who repented of their sins, and so received God’s forgiveness. After King David sinned with Bathsheba, He wrote:

Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. (Psalm 51:1-3)

Jesus told of the tax collector who repented and was forgiven by God. He said, “And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner.” (Luke 18:13) There can be no doubt but that repentance is necessary for forgiveness. If anyone will not repent, then God will not forgive him. More than once, God’s people Israel did not repent, and so He did not forgive them, but rather judged them for their sins. When the people of the southern kingdom of Judah did not repent, God caused the army of the Babylonians to conquer them, and to carry them away into exile in Babylon. There Daniel the prophet prayed, “As it is written in the law of Moses, all this evil is come upon us: yet made we not our prayer before the LORD our God, that we might turn from our iniquities, and understand thy truth. Therefore hath the LORD watched upon the evil, and brought it upon us: for the LORD our God is righteous in all his works which he doeth: for we obeyed not his voice.” (Daniel 9:13, 14)

If a man would be forgiven by God, then he must repent of his sin. He must not, however, repent merely in a general way. It is not enough for a man to confess that he is a sinner, or even that he has sinned. The Westminster Confession of Faith states, “It is every man’s duty to endeavor to repent of his particular sins, particularly.” If a man is truly sorry for a particular offense, then he will acknowledge it; he will confess it, and repent of it. King David, when Nathan the prophet rebuked him for his sin with Bathsheba, confessed his sin, saying, “I have sinned against the LORD.” (2 Samuel 12:13) He wrote in his psalm, “For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight.” (Psalm 51:3, 4) When Zacchaeus the tax collector repented of his theft, He said to Jesus, “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold.” (Luke 19:8) After Saint Peter denied Christ three times, he repented of his treachery. Saint

Matthew records, “And Peter remembered the word of Jesus, which said unto him, Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. And he went out, and wept bitterly.” (Matthew 26:75) Saint Paul characterized himself before he believed in Christ as “a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious.” (1 Timothy 1:23) If a man would have God forgive his sins, then he must repent, not merely of being a sinner, but of his particular sins.

Every man, if he would be forgiven by God, must repent of his sins, and of his particular sins, particularly. He may also pray for his nation, that God would forgive their sins, if they repent. After the children of Israel were taken captive into Babylon, Daniel the prophet prayed to God for his people, and he began his prayer with an appeal to God’s revelation of Himself to Moses. He prayed:

O Lord, the great and dreadful God, keeping the covenant and mercy to them that love him, and to them that keep his commandments; We have sinned, and have committed iniquity, and have done wickedly, and have rebelled, even by departing from thy precepts and from thy judgments.  
(Daniel 9:4, 5)

Daniel prayed that God, because of His great mercy, would be no longer angry with His people. He prayed, “O Lord, according to all thy righteousness, I beseech thee, let thine anger and thy fury be turned away from thy city Jerusalem, thy holy mountain.” (Daniel 9:16) Daniel wrote that he was praying, and confessing his sin and the sin of his people Israel, and presenting his supplication before the LORD his God for the holy mountain of his God. (Daniel 9:20) Of course, Daniel believed that he was guilty, not of the sins of the people, but only of his own sins. Nevertheless, he acknowledged that he and the people are all sinners, deserving of God’s judgment, and He pleaded to God for mercy.

A man may confess his sins individually, and he may confess the sins of his people and ask for mercy. There can also be occasion for corporate confession of sin. When Ezra the priest, along with some other Israelites, left Babylon and settled in the city of Jerusalem, he learned that some of the Jewish men there had married women of other nations, contrary to the law of God. (Deuteronomy 7:1-3) Moses had told the people:

When the LORD thy God shall bring thee into the land whither thou goest to possess it, and hath cast out many nations before thee, the Hittites, and the Girgashites, and the Amorites, and the Canaanites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and mightier than thou; And when the LORD thy God shall deliver them before thee; thou shalt smite them, and utterly destroy them; thou shalt make no covenant with them, nor shew mercy unto them: Neither shalt thou make marriages with them; thy daughter thou shalt not give unto his son, nor his daughter shalt thou take unto thy son. For they will turn away thy son from following me, that they may serve other gods: so will the anger of the LORD be kindled against you, and destroy thee suddenly. (Deuteronomy 7:1-4)

When Ezra heard the news that some of the men of Israel had married foreign wives he fasted and mourned, and prayed to God for the people. In his prayer, he spoke of his shame for the sinfulness of the God’s people, including his own sinfulness. They people of God had always been a sinful people, and God punished them for their sins, finally sending them into exile. God showed them mercy, however, and allowed them to return to their land, but, even then they sinned by taking heathen wives. Ezra acknowledged that the people had once again sinned, and so once again deserved God’s judgment, if they did not repent. One of the men who had taken

a foreign wife confessed to Ezra that he and the others had sinned, and that they would put away their wives, and throw themselves upon the mercy of God. When the men gathered before Ezra, he said to them:

Ye have transgressed, and have taken strange wives, to increase the trespass of Israel. Now therefore make confession unto the LORD God of your fathers, and do his pleasure: and separate yourselves from the people of the land, and from the strange wives. (Ezra 10:10, 11)

The men together answered Ezra, saying, "As thou hast said, so must we do." (Ezra 10:12) Ezra did not join them in confessing their particular sin of taking heathen wives, because he did not commit that sin. He told them to confess their particular sin, and to make things right with God, and so they did. They put away their heathen wives.

A little over ten years after Ezra arrived in Jerusalem, Nehemiah, who resided in Persia, received word that the people in Jerusalem were in distress. When he learned of their state, he wept, and mourned, and fasted, and prayed:

I beseech thee, O LORD God of heaven, the great and terrible God, that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love him and observe his commandments: Let thine ear now be attentive, and thine eyes open, that thou mayest hear the prayer of thy servant, which I pray before thee now, day and night, for the children of Israel thy servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against thee: both I and my father's house have sinned. We have dealt very corruptly against thee, and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the judgments, which thou commandedst thy servant Moses. Remember, I beseech thee, the word that thou commandedst thy servant Moses, saying, If ye transgress, I will scatter you abroad among the nations: But if ye turn unto me, and keep my commandments, and do them; though there were of you cast out unto the uttermost part of the heaven, yet will I gather them from thence, and will bring them unto the place that I have chosen to set my name there. (Nehemiah 1:5-9)

Nehemiah confessed that he and the people had sinned, and he appealed to God to be merciful on the basis of His revelation of Himself to Moses. He also reminded God that Moses had told the people that, if God judged them for their sins, then He would forgive them if they repented. Not long after Nehemiah prayed this prayer, the people gathered together, fasting and repenting in sackcloth. After recounting the history of Israel's sins and God's mercy, they prayed:

Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the terrible God, who keepest covenant and mercy, let not all the trouble seem little before thee, that hath come upon us, on our kings, on our princes, and on our priests, and on our prophets, and on our fathers, and on all thy people, since the time of the kings of Assyria unto this day. (Nehemiah 9:32)

They appealed to God's revelation of Himself to Moses as one who is merciful and faithful to His covenant. Then they prayed:

Howbeit thou art just in all that is brought upon us; for thou hast done right, but we have done wickedly: Neither have our kings, our princes, our priests, nor our fathers, kept thy law, nor hearkened unto thy commandments and thy testimonies, wherewith thou didst testify against them. For they have not served thee in their kingdom, and in thy great goodness that thou gavest them, and in the large and fat land which thou gavest before them, neither turned they from their wicked works. (Nehemiah 9:33-35)

They acknowledge before God that their forefathers were sinful, and that is why they were judged by God and sent into exile. They were a sinful people from the highest to the lowest, and that in spite of God's goodness to them. So, they said, "And because of all this we make a sure covenant, and write it; and our princes, Levites, and priests, seal unto it." (Nehemiah 9:38) They made a national covenant, promising to obey the Lord.

The Christian must always repent of his sins if he would be forgiven, and he must repent of his particular sins, particularly. He may confess them privately, or publicly. He may confess them as an individual, or as part of a body. He may not, however, confess sins he has not committed. How wrong it would be for the members of a body to confess the sin of adultery, when not all in the body had committed the sin. How wrong it would be for a body to confess the sin of sodomy, when not all in the body had committed that sin. They that approve resolutions on racial reconciliation like the resolutions of the Southern Baptist Convention and of the Presbyterian Church in America, may mean well, and some of their statements are appropriate, but some of them are not. Do these resolutions mean that Asian and Latino ministers and elders in those bodies repent of the sins whites committed against Blacks? That would be ridiculous. Do they mean that Black ministers and elders in those bodies repent of the sins whites committed against Blacks? That would be absurd. Should not all who have committed racial sins, and not whites alone, confess them? Confession of sin must be honest, and repentance must be from the heart. No one ought to confess to a sin which he did not commit. Such a confession would not be in accord with truth. One making such a confession would be insincere and he would bear false witness against himself. The Christian may, along with others, confess his sins. He must confess them. He may confess that he is one sinner among a sinful people. However, he must never say that he committed a particular sin when he knows he has not.

Let us always repent of our sins, and of our particular sins, particularly. Let us sincerely repent of the sins we have committed, and never confess sins that we have not committed. Let us pray for our nation, that the people will repent of their sins, and turn to God.

Unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and hath made us kings and priests until His God and Father; to Him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.