

When A Christian Sins

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The New Testament plainly teaches that we sometimes sin as Christians. To children of God, John wrote: "IF WE SAY THAT WE HAVE NO SIN, WE DECEIVE OUR SELVES, AND THE TRUTH IS NOT IN US.... IF WE SAY THAT WE HAVE NOT SINNED, WE MAKE HIM A LIAR, AND HIS WORD IS NOT IN US" (**1 John 1:8, 10**). Paul wrote: "FOR ALL HAVE SINNED, AND FALL SHORT OF THE GLORY OF GOD" (**Romans 3:23**). As much as a child of God might desire to live in perfect harmony with Divine Law, these verses remind us that we will fail to do so due to weaknesses of the flesh. When we transgress God's will, either by going beyond or falling short of it, we sin: "WHOSOEVER COMMITTETH SIN TRANSGRESSETH ALSO THE LAW: FOR SIN IS THE TRANSGRESSION OF THE LAW" (**1 John 3:4, KJV**).

Some sins are private in nature (**Matthew 5:28**), and some are public sins (**1 Corinthians 5:1**). It logically (and practically) follows that there are, between these extremes, "semi-private" sins, known by only one or a few others.

The Bible teaches us to confess our sins: "IF WE CONFESS OUR SINS, HE [IS FAITHFUL AND RIGHTEOUS TO FORGIVE US OUR SINS" (**1 John 1:9**). To "confess" a sin is to acknowledge or admit to the one(s) sinned against and/or to those who are aware of our sin, that we have violated God's law. Further, there is an implication of repentance in a confession of sin (assuming the confession is genuine), for repentance means to change one's mind. When Simon the sorcerer sinned, Peter told him, "REPENT THEREFORE OF THIS THY WICKEDNESS, AND PRAY..." (**Acts 8:22**). An impenitent person does not make a genuine confession of sin.

What about public confession of sins? Such is likely the setting of **James 5:16**: "CONFESS THEREFORE YOUR SINS ONE TO ANOTHER, AND PRAY ONE FOR ANOTHER, THAT YE MAY BE HEALED." It seems obvious to me that the "healing" here is a reference to forgiveness of sins, the spiritual "healing" of the soul, that comes through confession and prayer.

What sins should be publicly confessed? The obvious answer is those that are publicly committed or known. A sin of thought needs to be confessed only to God, for He alone knows it besides the one thinking it. A sin in the privacy of one's home, known only to his family, should be confessed to and corrected with only those few. However, sins committed publicly demand public confession, which principle we see in the release of Paul and Silas from the Philippian jail:

"BUT PAUL SAID UNTO THEM, THEY HAVE BEATEN US PUBLICLY, UNCONDEMNED, MEN THAT ARE ROMANS, AND HAVE CAST US INTO PRISON; AND DO THEY NOW CAST US OUT PRIVILY? NAY VERILY; BUT LET THEM COME THEMSELVES AND BRING US OUT" (**Acts 16:37**).

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When one has shamed the whole church by neglect, immorality, dishonesty, gossip, drunkenness, false doctrine, or otherwise, that person should confess such sins before the church. “Gutter-language” and sensitive details that are unnecessary to convey the confession and penitence should (and can) be avoided in announcing such confessions.

Many of the Lord’s finest people respond to the invitation from time to time, asking for prayers from the church for a particular need, weakness, or trial. Is this good or bad? Personally, I covet the prayers of the whole church for me, and I am greatly encouraged when I hear my name called in the prayers of our assemblies. I can hardly begrudge anyone else this source of strength. While requests for such prayers may be made at other times (e.g., through public announcements), I can see nothing wrong with making such requests known when the invitation is extended.