

# I John 1:9, Confession of Sin and the Teaching of the Word

By Tim Nichols

“Why is it,” I was recently asked, “that you don’t begin every church service by inviting people to use 1 John 1:9 and confess their sins so that they can be walking in the Spirit and properly hear the teaching of the Word?” There are other, more candid ways of phrasing the question rumbling in the background: “If Tim can’t even begin class properly, why should I listen to anything else he has to say?” “Does he even *believe* in confession of sin?”

These are good questions, and they deserve an answer. Since they’re also questions that are likely to come up repeatedly, it seems best to write out an answer.

## **A Brief Answer**

Let me reassure you that I do believe in confession of sin. But before we get into what confession is, what its effects are, and how they relate to teaching and hearing the Word, let me begin by giving a short answer to that first question: Why do I not begin every church service by inviting people to use 1 John 1:9?

I have a few counterquestions. Why is it that *not even one* of the church epistles begins with an invitation to the readers to confess their sins before moving on to teaching doctrine? Why is it that there is *not even one* command to pastors to begin every sermon with such an invitation, and why is it that there is *not even one* command to believers to confess their sins before church? Why is it that when Jesus teaches the disciples to pray, He doesn’t teach them to start with confession? Why is it that 1 John 1:9 is in 1 John 1:9, and not in every single book of the New Testament? For that matter, why is it 1 John 1:9 and not 1 John 1:1? Or better still, Genesis 1:1?

So to return to the question “Why do I not invite people to confess their sins before every church service?” my short answer is “Because I believe in the authority of Scripture.” I believe that Peter, Paul, John and the other New Testament authors—as inspired by the Holy Spirit—knew what they were doing. I believe that if I teach the Word following the patterns laid out by these men and the Holy Spirit in the Word itself, I can’t go too far wrong.

But let’s explore the issue further: What is the place of 1 John 1:9 in 1 John, and what is it teaching us? How does the truth it teaches relate to confession, fellowship with God, and the teaching of His Word?

## **The Message of 1 John 1:9 in Context**

1 John begins by asserting that it is the testimony of eyewitnesses. They are declaring their testimony, they say, in order that their readers may have fellowship with God, and consequently, that they all may have fellowship with each other. The two concepts are inseparably intertwined throughout the book. They are also writing so that they may have full joy in fellowship with their readers.

The content of their testimony follows. The authors received a message from God which they, in turn, declare to their readers: God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. This fact has profound implications for the way a believer lives, and the authors explore these implications with three situational examples.

1. If a believer should “walk in darkness,” but claim that he is having fellowship with God, he’s lying rather than living the truth. How could he be having fellowship with God, in whom there is no darkness, while at the same time living in darkness? It just can’t happen. By contrast, if he “walks in the light,” he can have fellowship with other believers, and be cleansed from all sin (i.e., have fellowship with God as well).
2. If a believer should claim to be sinless (or even sinless *right now*), he is willingly self-deceived. He has kicked the truth out of his soul, and allowed a lie to take residence instead. Of course he may not be *aware* of any sin at the moment, but this does not suggest that he should claim that he is not sinning. By contrast, if he confesses the sins the light reveals to him, he is forgiven for those sins and cleansed of *all* unrighteousness, including those sins he is not aware of.
3. If a believer refuses to acknowledge his sins even though the light has revealed them to him, he in effect calls God a liar. God has said, “You have sinned by doing \_\_\_\_\_,” and he has responded, “Wait, that wasn’t wrong. I had every right to \_\_\_\_\_!” God’s word clearly is not in such a person’s mind in any meaningful way. The author goes on to reassure his readers that although he is writing in hopes of keeping them from sin, there’s no need for them to deny it when they have sinned. When any believer sins, he has Jesus as his advocate before the Father, and Jesus has already propitiated all sins, not just the believer’s sins but the sins of the whole world. So there’s no point in compounding our sin by denying it; it’s already paid for.

The author moves on from this point to explain a series of tests by which a believer can measure whether he is indeed having fellowship with God. These tests include keeping God’s commandments, loving the brethren, and a number of others.

1 John 1:5-2:2 gives a comprehensive look at sin as it relates to fellowship. A person who has fellowship with God lives in the light of God’s word, which reveals to him both his sinfulness in general and certain specific sins in particular. In order to remain in the light, he must deal with these sins without delay. To ignore what the light reveals is to “walk in darkness.” So a believer who has fellowship with God must deny neither his general sinfulness nor his particular sins, but rather face them squarely. By confessing those particular sins that the light reveals, he invokes God’s promise to forgive *those* sins and also to cleanse him from *all* unrighteousness.

## **Having Fellowship with God**

Let's observe the passage more closely. What does it say about being "in fellowship" or "out of fellowship?" You'll notice that those expressions never appear anywhere in the passage. Unfortunately, believers tend to think of fellowship with God as a sort of room that they can live in, and confession of sin as the doorway: confess your sin, and you're back in the room, and then you can go about your business. Nothing could be further from the truth. You'll notice that the expression in the passage is "*have* fellowship," and it is pictured as "*walking* in the light." It is an *active* endeavor. This should be obvious to us from the fact that God is a Person with whom we are invited to have a relationship. Personal relationships are active.

In this case, the Person with whom we have a relationship is the Creator and Lord of the universe, so that colors the relationship. When He tells us something, we have a moral duty to consider how that information changes our understanding of Him, ourselves, and the world. This is the process I often refer to as "mapping your world with Scripture." It is part of the biblical meaning of meditation, and a believer is either doing it or he is not. Likewise, the Person with whom we have this relationship has told us that it is impossible for us to maintain a relationship with Him, but that He will provide us with the ability to please Him. A believer either depends on God to work the daily miracle required for Christian life, or he does not.

But both of these are ongoing activities, not simply a doorway that a believer can pass through and then go about his business. This means that a believer either actively maintains his fellowship with God, or he is not having fellowship with God. The tragedy is that many believers are stuck in an endless cycle of sin-confess-sin-confess-sin-confess, never discovering that the active process of *having* fellowship with God is the missing ingredient that would prevent them from falling back into the same sin yet again.

## **Confession and Restoration**

Now that we've laid the groundwork, let's consider how 1 John 1:5-2:2 relates to church. Let's look at a couple of common beliefs, and what Scripture says about them.

"If you don't confess your sins before the teaching, you won't get anything out of it."

According to 2 Timothy 3:16, "All Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness...." If Scripture is profitable for reproof, then those who need reproofing have to be able to hear and understand it. This is the premise of the Corinthian letters, Galatians, portions of Philippians, Colossians, etc.—to say nothing of the Old Testament prophets. So it simply isn't true that refusing to confess your sins means you'll get nothing from the teaching. Of course, what you'll get from the Word is rebuke, and you may well fail to understand other things because your sin distorts your vision. But God's word always has what you need—wherever you are.

“If you confess your sins, you’re in fellowship and prepared to hear the Word.”

This one is much more slippery. It is possible to understand these words in a way that comports with Scripture, but the way that people usually mean this statement, it is not true. Let’s take a closer look at it by way of an example.

Suppose we have in our congregation a young drug dealer named Mike. Now Mike knows it’s wrong to deal drugs, but he’s making great money, and he just doesn’t want to give it up. In fact, he’s got a big sale to make at 2:00 Sunday afternoon. But at 11:30 that Sunday morning, he comes to church, and before we begin, he prays, “Lord, I’ve sinned by dealing drugs this week. I know it’s wrong. Thank You for Your forgiveness,” BUT he still fully intends to go through with the sale at 2:00. Does God restore Mike to fellowship?

Psalm 66:18 says “If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.” Mike may have confessed last week’s sins, but he still intends to keep dealing. He regards iniquity in his heart. He has set up his drug dealing as an idol, and he loves it more than God. According to Psalm 66:18, God is not listening to Mike’s prayers until this changes.

On the other hand, we have 1 John 1:9. Mike confessed his sins, and God is therefore obligated to restore him, right? Isn’t that what 1 John 1:9 says?

Not so fast. *Mike hasn’t actually fulfilled the requirements of 1 John 1:9; he has not confessed his sins.* The root of “confess” literally means to “say the same as,” and from this some people have gotten the idea that simply mouthing words is enough. But you can’t define a word according to its origins. If you could, “embarrass” would mean “prevent,” “weird” would always have to do with witchcraft, and let’s not even get started on “butterfly.” You have to define a word by its usage, and the usage of “confess” tells a different story. Simply mouthing words is not genuine confession. We’re not talking about some mantra or “abracadabra” phrase that has power in itself; confession is part of a *relationship* and it is not real confession if it is simply a vain repetition of “magic words.” Genuine confession occurs when you regard the sin as God regards it, and acknowledge this to God.

This ought to be self-evident to married people. Imagine telling your spouse “I was wrong” when you both know you would do it again, and in fact you both know that you *intend* to do the same thing again tomorrow morning. Most of us don’t have to imagine—we’ve tried it at least once. So how did that work out for you? Did it make things better? Of course not; it’s worse than useless. It’s an insult to your spouse’s dignity and intelligence. How much more is such empty verbiage an insult to God, who perfectly knows the intentions of your heart?<sup>1</sup>

So with these things in mind, let’s return to considering Mike the drug dealer. He has mouthed the right words about last week’s idolatry, but his intent to continue his worship after the brief interruption of Sunday morning church reveals the insincerity of his confession. He does not think of his sin as God does. He still has regard for his

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<sup>1</sup> The fact that we fail to notice this gives evidence that we’ve subscribed to a pagan view of God’s character, as though God were the ultimate Machine-In-The-Sky, and if we just pull the right levers, spiritual blessings will rain on our heads. But that’s for another paper.

iniquity in his heart. His drug dealing remains an idol, and he remains guilty of worshipping it. Therefore, his confession is a sham, and God sees right through it. Mike should meditate on Amos 5:21-27. The details of our outward worship are different from Israel's, but the principle remains the same: insincere worship doesn't impress God. It never has, and it never will.

On the other hand, when Mike does regard his sin as God regards it, and his confession is genuine, Psalm 51:17 assures us that "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart; these, O God, You will not despise." When Mike no longer regards iniquity in his heart, the Lord will hear him, and He will be faithful and just to forgive Mike's sins, and cleanse him from all unrighteousness.

### **Genuine Confession: The Doorway to the Dining Room**

In a word, genuine confession accomplishes restoration. It removes the sin which was an impediment to fellowship. We should not think, however, that this is sufficient for maintaining fellowship with God. As we have seen, fellowship with God is an active process. So while confession is certainly necessary to the believer who seeks to have fellowship with God, it is only the first step. Having confessed and been restored, the believer must continue to partake in the active process of sharing a relationship with God. Many passages address this active relationship; here is a sampling:<sup>2</sup>

- "This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may do according to all that is written in it...."
- "His delight is in the Law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night."
- "The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart."
- "Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day."
- "I have more wisdom than all my teachers, for Your testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the ancients, because I keep Your precepts."
- "Every word of God is pure; He is a shield to those who put their trust in Him."
- "You also consider yourself dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord."
- "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."
- "Do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation, but be filled by the Holy Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another in the fear of God."
- "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord, and whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to the Father through Him."

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<sup>2</sup> The quotations are from the following passages, respectively: Joshua 1:8, Psalm 1:2, Psalm 19:8, 119:97, 99-100, Proverbs 30:5, Romans 6:11, Galatians 5:22, Ephesians 5:18-21, Colossians 3:16-17, Philippians 4:8, Revelation 3:20.

- “Whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.”
- “Behold, I [Jesus] stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice, and opens the door, I will come in to him, and dine with him, and he with me.”

Clearly as believers we are meant to enjoy God. This simply isn't possible if we are busy ignoring Him (except for when we confess).

Imagine the situation this way. The Triune God has prepared a great feast, and all believers are invited to come, eat, delight in the tastes of the foods, and grow strong and healthy by their nourishment. The bread is baked, the meats and vegetables have been carefully prepared, and now the feast-table has been laid. Confession is the doorway into the dining room. But it is unfortunately possible for a believer to come in the door and somehow fail to catch the aromas of venison, beef, and turkey, fail to see the steam rising from heaps of vegetables freshly brought to table, and fail to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit saying to him, “Come, sit down and eat.”

In fact, it is possible for that believer to spend his whole life simply passing through the doorway, slipping out, coming in again, slipping out, and so on. And in between, when he's in the room, he stands with glazed eyes at the end of the table, completely unaware of the delights that are right in front of him. The sad truth is that some preachers will teach this person to be content with his starvation, so long as he can continue to pass through the doorway into the dining room at will. But what a fool you would have to be, to think that this sad, lonely, starving fellow is actually receiving the benefits and joys of the feast.

### **Sin, Confession, Fellowship and Receiving Teaching**

We are now in a position to consider receiving the teaching of the Word. At the opening of the church service, a person who is actively *having* fellowship with God is fully prepared to receive teaching. He is already seated at the table with his fork in hand, enjoying the lively conversation; the preacher is just serving the next course. All believers should endeavor to be in this condition *all the time*, not just during the church service. A believer *always* needs this fellowship. It is *always* essential to his life and spiritual health. There is never a time in his life that it is less important than some other time, and therefore, fellowship with God is not any more important during church than it is at other times. It is always essential.

A person who is harboring unconfessed sin clearly needs to confess his sins, not primarily so that he can receive teaching, but so that he can have a chance to fellowship with God. He is not even in the dining room, and cannot enjoy the feast. As we have seen, such a person is not beyond the reach of the Word; the Scriptures will rebuke him in the course of the teaching. So it is not true that he “just won't get anything out of the teaching;” rather, if the teaching is faithful to the Word, he'll get the kicking he richly deserves. But of course getting kicked is not the same thing as enjoying the feast.

A person who is not harboring known unconfessed sins, but is also not having fellowship with God, needs to take the next step. This person is standing in the dining room, but he is not yet seated at the table, and so the delights of the Lord's feast elude him, even though they are within arm's reach. Rather than neglecting the Lord after confession, he must return to having fellowship with God. This is not just so that he can receive teaching more effectively; fellowship with God is the goal, and teaching is a small but important part of that. If he only bothers to fellowship with God during teaching, he's missing out—he should be sharing fellowship with God *constantly*.

There can be a subtle idolatry here. If we are not careful, we begin to think “I need to get in fellowship so I can receive teaching.” Did you spot the problem there? This attitude makes fellowship with God a tool by which you accomplish the more important goal of receiving teaching. Of course this is not only false, but silly: first because teaching is *part of* fellowship, not something separate from it, second because teaching is *only part* of fellowship, not the whole thing, and third because a life of fellowship with God is the *goal*, not a means to an end. This believer can only see one dish, say, a delicious cornbread, on the table. He comes through the door when the cornbread is served, sits down and eats a piece, and then gets back up, somehow not noticing the rest of the feast. The poor fellow won't starve, but his imbalanced diet will stunt his growth. He's not having near as much fun as he could, either.

## **Conclusion**

Every believer ought to confess his sins to God on an *ad hoc* basis, as soon as he realizes that he is in sin. The biblical practice is to confess one's sins *as soon as possible*, not to confess one's sins *before church*. Including confession in the liturgy is perhaps a good reminder that one ought always to do this, but it is not biblically required or prohibited. Therefore, to make a big issue out of including confession in the liturgy (or excluding it) goes beyond Scripture, and misses the whole point.

The point is fellowship with God, and confessing sin is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for fellowship. Confession doesn't make fellowship happen; it makes fellowship possible. To put it bluntly, a believer who wishes to have fellowship with God *must actually fellowship with God*, not just confess his sins.

A believer should strive to fellowship with God through meditation on His Word, through depending on God moment-by-moment to supply the miracle that makes a life pleasing to God a possibility, through maintaining an awareness of God's constant presence and support. This fellowship should occupy a believer's every waking moment, whether he is in church or not.

Of course by God's grace many believers experience more fellowship with God than their theology would suggest. God is gracious with us, and “He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.” Whatever our misconceptions about fellowship might be, God meets us where we are. But this is no excuse for complacency; He expects us to share fellowship with Him and to grow, so that we come into conformity with the mind of Christ—even in our theology.