

# Confession in LDS Doctrine and Practice

*While the form of confession in the LDS Church has changed from public admission of sin to confession to a bishop, the doctrine and necessary functions of confession remain unchanged.*

Edward L. Kimball

In the Christian understanding, all are sinners (Rom. 3:23; Gal. 3:22); consequently, in order that all may be forgiven, repentance is one of the first principles of the gospel. A key element of repentance is confession: "By this ye may know if a man repenteth of his sins—behold, he will confess them and forsake them" (D&C 58:43). Accordingly, confession is one of the five steps of repentance outlined by Spencer W. Kimball: (1) conviction of and sorrow for sin, (2) abandonment of sin, (3) confession of sin, (4) restitution for sin, (5) doing the will of the Lord.<sup>1</sup> Confession is not a mechanical requirement, nor is it an ordinance, like baptism.<sup>2</sup> Undertaken in obedience to commandment, confession either to a bishop, to God, or to offended parties is a concomitant of the change of heart that constitutes true repentance and results in reconciliation with God. Pride and fear prevent confession, but if one has truly repented and received the Spirit of the Lord, pride and fear will be overcome.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Spencer W. Kimball, *Faith Precedes the Miracle* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 180. For a sensitive treatment of repentance and confession, see Brent L. Top, *Though Your Sins Be as Scarlet* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), 43–66; revised as *Forgiveness: Christ's Priceless Gift* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996).

<sup>2</sup>Indeed, no vicarious confession is required prior to performing the vicarious ordinance of baptism for the dead. While repentance is needed for all sins, major or minor, formal confession is not required for minor sins.

<sup>3</sup>J. Richard Clarke, "Confession: A Requirement for Forgiveness," in *Repentance*, ed. Ezra Taft Benson and others (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 91–94; Brad Wilcox, "Broken Arms, Broken Hearts, and Confession," in *Finding*

While this requirement that a person acknowledge guilt seems at first simple and straightforward, in fact it poses many questions. The obligation to confess is basic doctrine, but the scriptures prove silent or ambiguous when the question shifts to what, when, where, to whom, and even why to confess. This article examines current and past Latter-day Saint doctrine and practice, the reasons why Latter-day Saints confess, the scriptural background, and confession in other Christian churches. While the accompanying summaries and descriptions of authoritative Church statements, instructions, and various comments about this vital religious practice constitute the opinions of this author, hopefully this information will be useful to lawyers, counselors, other professionals, scholars, and Latter-day Saints in general.

## **Current LDS Doctrine and Practice**

A look at the LDS practice of confession identifies certain variations over time, principally in the decline of public confession and the institutionalization of confession to one's bishop. But these variations have always been consistent with the basic commandment to confess one's sins.

### **To Whom Is Confession Made?**

Today in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, penitents confess to God in prayer (for example, Ps. 32:5-6; Dan. 9:3-6, 20-23; Alma 17:4; D&C 64:7), to individuals they have hurt,<sup>4</sup> and to their ward bishop. The last of these is the primary focus of this study. Statements about confession do not always specify which mode of confession is intended, but it is clear that several forms may be involved. The scriptures say, "I, the Lord, forgive sins unto those who confess their sins before me and ask forgiveness"

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*the Light in Deep Waters and Dark Times* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1992), 57-66. Wilcox says, "In confession, we . . . strip ourselves of pride. In that moment when . . . shame [is] most intense, . . . God will clothe us . . . in . . . forgiveness" (65-66).

<sup>4</sup>Doctrine and Covenants 42:88-92 teaches that an individual offended is to confront the wrongdoer to give an "opportunity to confess in secret to him or her whom he or she has offended, and to God, that the church may not speak reproachfully of him or her." See also Matthew 5:24.



(D&C 64:7). They also instruct that a Sabbath-day obligation is to “offer . . . thy sacraments . . . confessing thy sins unto thy brethren, and before the Lord” (D&C 59:12). Therefore a duty exists to confess not only to God in all events, but also in certain circumstances to the Church, the organization that God has established for the welfare of his children. The modern Latter-day Saint application of the latter obligation is that “confession to a church official (in most cases the bishop) is necessary whenever one’s transgression is of a nature for which the Church might impose loss of membership or other disciplinary action.”<sup>5</sup>

While bishops and branch presidents are the principal recipients of confidential confessions, their priesthood leaders—stake presidents and General Authorities—may on occasion also receive such confessions.<sup>6</sup> If a bishop’s counselors come to know while

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<sup>5</sup>“Bible Dictionary,” King James Version of the Bible, LDS edition (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979), s.v. “confession,” 649. See also Boyd K. Packer, “Why Stay Morally Clean?” *Ensign* 2 (July 1972): 111–13: “You can stand clean. . . . Go to your bishop. He holds the key to this cleansing power.” H. Burke Peterson counsels, “When necessary, receive the blessing that comes in the confession process. Too many are harboring the inner feeling of guilt resulting from unrepented mistakes. Part of the repentance process is confession. If you happen to be one of those who has this need, I plead with you to go see your bishop before the sun sets tomorrow.” Peterson, “Touch Not the Evil Gift, nor the Unclean Thing,” *Ensign* 23 (November 1993): 42–44. See also *General Handbook of Instructions* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1989), 10–2; Ezra T. Benson, “The Law of Chastity,” in *Morality* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1992), 85–90 (relating to confession of sexual sins); Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969), 179–80; Edward L. Kimball, ed., *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 85, 93–94, 97; Harold B. Lee, *Stand Ye in Holy Places* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 220–21; and *Child Abuse: Helps for Ecclesiastical Leaders* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), 5. The last publication refers the reader to Mosiah 26:29, Doctrine and Covenants 58:43 and 59:12, and 1 John 1:9; however, these verses do not directly establish the proposition for which they are cited.

<sup>6</sup>If a person cannot bear confiding in the bishop because he or she and the bishop are too close or not close enough, it is permissible to approach the stake president to discuss the matter. Vaughn J. Featherstone, *A Generation of Excellence* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1975), 97–98. However, Stephen L. Richards said, “Is the offender justified in by-passing his immediate Church authority and judge, and going to those who do not know him so well to make his confession? Almost universally, I think the answer should be No.” *124th Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1954), 12 (hereafter cited as *Conference Reports*).



interviewing that there is something to be confessed, they refer the matter to the bishop.<sup>7</sup> A stake president's counselors, on the other hand, are not quite so restricted, depending on their charge from their stake president. The taking of confessions is a responsibility of priesthood leadership in line authority over the confessor.<sup>8</sup>

In rare instances, after private confession the bishop may require public confession for the well-being of the Church or interpersonal confession to facilitate resolution of hard feelings among the affected parties. The bishop may require a public confession because, in addition to the responsibility he has toward the individual seeking forgiveness, he has a responsibility to protect the good name of the Church,<sup>9</sup> to quell unsettling rumors, and to promote peace.

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<sup>7</sup>Beginning with *Bulletin 1991-1* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1991, no. 1), the bishop's counselors can regularly interview previously endowed members for temple recommends but are instructed not to deal with confessions. Counselors also routinely extend callings to serve in ward organizations and interview young people, circumstances that could trigger spontaneous confessions.

<sup>8</sup>President Kimball stated the responsibility of members to confess to the proper priesthood authority:

No priest nor elder is authorized by virtue of that calling to perform this act [of receiving confession] for the Church. The Lord has a consistent, orderly plan. Every soul in the organized stakes is given a bishop who, by the very nature of his calling and his ordination, is a 'judge in Israel.' In the missions a branch president fills that responsibility. (S. Kimball, *Faith Precedes the Miracle*, 181-82)

In the Church, some questioning by others than the bishop is common. The visiting teaching supervisor asks whether a visit has been completed; the welfare coordinator asks whether a canning assignment has been filled. These queries are much different in character from a bishop's interview and are an ordinary part of organizational life without any particular doctrinal significance.

<sup>9</sup>Reasons given for disciplinary action include protecting the Church's reputation by demonstrating abhorrence of wrongdoing. Excommunication can also help wrongdoers realize the gravity of their sin or expiate their guilt as part of the process of repentance and salvation. The lesser sanction of disfellowshipment also frees people from other Church responsibilities so that they can concentrate on their own situation. Doctrine and Covenants 42:79, 84-86 indicates that the killer, robber, thief, and liar are to be delivered up to the civil law; others are to be dealt with by Church procedures. The delivering up serves to distance the Church from the depredations of serious wrongdoers. See, for example, the cooperation of the Church with the government in the conviction of John D. Lee for his part in the Mountain Meadows Massacre. Juanita Brooks, *The Mountain Meadows Massacre*, rev. ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), 184-99, 219-20.



Unlike the Catholic tradition of making confession in a confessional booth<sup>10</sup> and using formulaic words, the LDS tradition is wholly informal and face-to-face with the bishop. The confession is conducted in a private setting so that discussion can be confidential.

## What Needs To Be Confessed?

Latter-day Saints are free to confess to their bishop any kind of misdeed that weighs upon their souls,<sup>11</sup> but what *needs* to be confessed to him varies with the circumstances. Specific guidelines come into effect mainly in connection with preparations to receive priesthood ordinances.<sup>12</sup>

**For Baptism.** At the time of baptism, at least a general confession is required:

All those who humble themselves before God, and desire to be baptized, and come forth with broken hearts and contrite spirits, and witness before the church that they have truly repented of all their sins, and are willing to take upon them the name of Jesus Christ, having a determination to serve him to the end, and truly manifest by their works that they have received the Spirit of Christ unto the remission of their sins, shall be received by baptism into his church. (D&C 20:37; see also Alma 32:16)

This passage is not taken to mean that a public profession of faith and confession of sins is required before baptism. Rather candidates are interviewed privately<sup>13</sup> —children of members by their bishop and converts by a mission leader—about their commitment

<sup>10</sup>As discussed below in note 206, Vatican II reduced the formalistic character of Catholic confession and made the use of the confessional booth optional.

<sup>11</sup>I acknowledge the danger that “to focus on the *action* of confession in the absence of the *attitude* of confession would be to view it merely as another ‘step’ in the ‘checklist’ of repentance, rather than as a natural outgrowth of godly sorrow. Questions such as ‘Do I have to confess my sins? What sins must I confess? To whom should I confess?’ may reflect this overemphasis on the action of confession at the expense of the attitude.” Top, “*Sins Be as Scarlet*,” 55.

<sup>12</sup>There may be still higher levels of expectations for participation in additional special activities. For example, in 1883 specific requirements for participation in the School of the Prophets were tithing, observance of the Word of Wisdom, Sabbath observance, no profanity, justice and kindness in families, and plural marriage. Merle H. Graffam, ed., *Salt Lake School of the Prophets: Minute Book 1883* (Palm Desert, Calif.: ULC Press, 1981), 55, 57.

<sup>13</sup>In the case of John the Baptist, “then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judea, and all the region round about Jordan, and were baptized of him in Jordan,

to the gospel generally and about certain external indications of resolve: meeting attendance, tithing, and the Word of Wisdom. They are not asked to detail all their past wrongful conduct. However, adult candidates are to be asked expressly about three things that are considered sufficiently serious to call for extra assurance that Church standards are understood and accepted. The three are commission of serious crime, involvement with abortion, and homosexual acts.<sup>14</sup> Assuming repentance, none of these is in itself disqualifying, with the possible exception of murder, but they do call for an interview with the mission president and, in some circumstances, with higher authorities.<sup>15</sup>

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confessing their sins" (Matt. 3:5-6). It is unclear how or to whom these confessions were made. In connection with Philip's baptism of the eunuch, faith and desire are mentioned but not confession (Acts 8:35-39).

<sup>14</sup>*Missionary Guide* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1988), 234-35. Since 1987 all convert baptism interviews are handled by full-time missionaries, not by local members.

Converts to Catholicism who are not yet baptized are not required to confess sins committed before baptism; confession will apply only to those sins committed afterward. Frans van de Paverd, "Testimonies from the Christian East to the Possibility of Self-Reconciliation," in *The Fate of Confession*, ed. Mary Collins and David Power (Edinburgh, Scotland: T & T Clark, 1987), 96; Rev. Raymond C. O'Brien, telephone conversation with author, April 3, 1992. Catholics, unlike Mormons (D&C 22:2-3), recognize the efficacy of baptism by other trinitarian Christians. Converts who have been previously baptized are required to confess sins in preparation for reception into full communion with the Catholic Church but do not need to be rebaptized. Since Mormon baptism is trinitarian in form but not in intention, there is a question whether a Mormon convert to Catholicism requires baptism.

<sup>15</sup>Joseph Smith taught that intentional murderers who repented might eventually be forgiven but only after suffering for their crimes until Christ should come again, and thus at this time they "could not be baptized *for the remission of sins*, for they had shed innocent blood." Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 188-89, 339 (italics added; hereafter cited as *TPJS*). The Lamanites who had committed murders before being converted to the law of God were absolved from their curse (Alma 23:5-8, 18), although they adopted an extraordinary oath to prevent their suspended bloodguilt from returning (Alma 24:13). For one who murders "against the light and knowledge of God, . . . it is not easy . . . to obtain forgiveness" (Alma 39:6).

The 1989 instructions for the Church say that those who have been convicted of or who have confessed to homicide (even if only in a private confession to a priesthood leader) cannot be baptized without permission from the First Presidency, which is based on a review of all pertinent details. *General Handbook of*



**For Baptized Members.** A baptized member must, as a matter of formal Church teaching, confess to God all failings, admit to other individuals the ways in which the member's conduct has injured them,<sup>16</sup> and reveal spontaneously or disclose voluntarily to the bishop anything that might justify Church discipline.<sup>17</sup>

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*Instructions* (1989), 5-2. All the general handbooks that appear under slightly variant titles—for example, *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: General Handbook of Instructions* 18—will hereafter be cited as the *General Handbook of Instructions* number [if applicable] (year).

From 1899 to 1910, instructions for bishops were published annually. After 1910 they were published every five years. Frank O. May, "General Handbook of Instructions," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 5 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:541 (hereafter cited as *EM*). At first, the handbooks related to tithing, property, and record keeping. With the 1921 edition, these written instructions began to include items on the spiritual roles of bishops, including receiving confessions. Over time, the instructions became more and more inclusive and specific.

The *General Handbook of Instructions* (sometimes called the Bishop's Handbook) is intended primarily for the use of priesthood leaders and therefore is not in general circulation, but it is available in some libraries. When appropriate, the Church quotes from it in court documents, for example, to establish the Church's position on confidentiality of confessions. See briefs and submissions in *Scott v. Hammock*, 133 F.R.D. 610 (D. Utah 1990), in both federal and state courts. Substantial excerpts of instructions pertaining to Church members in general are also quoted in *EM*, 3:1095-97 and on other similar occasions. Limited access to the *Handbook* may reflect reluctance to have outdated versions in circulation, disinclination to explain changes from one edition to another, concern over spelling out policies that are subject to discretion, or the irrelevance of much of the *Handbook* to the general membership.

<sup>16</sup>S. Kimball, *Miracle of Forgiveness*, 185. D&C 42:88-92 teaches private reconciliation as the first resort. It appears that this section is talking of conduct that is offensive to an individual but does not amount to serious sin, because for serious sin, such as adultery or iniquity (verses 75, 80-81, 87), the person is to be delivered to the law of God. In contrast, for killing, robbing, stealing, or lying (verses 79, 84-86), the offender is to be delivered to the law of the land. Since verse 89 says that those who refuse to make amends privately are to be reported to the elders, such recalcitrant refusal is also treated as a serious offense.

I know of no answer to the question whether only serious sins or major offenses that affect others must be confessed to them or when or how confessions to others should be made.

<sup>17</sup>Since only serious sins need to be confessed to one's bishop, it appears that such confession is a means to an end, not a universal requirement for forgiveness of all sin. If all sin had to be confessed to the bishop, it would be very difficult to draw the line between conduct that was simply unwise and that which was sinful. At what point does close personal contact that is sexually stimulating become sin? What of things on the edge of the Word of Wisdom (eating chocolate or too much meat, gorging)?



Currently, the last category is further described<sup>18</sup> as including any sexual relations outside marriage,<sup>19</sup> involvement with abortions (subject to some exceptions<sup>20</sup>), and any deliberate and major offense against the law (such as murder, burglary, theft or fraud, sale of drugs, and serious bodily harm to another—particularly physical or sexual abuse of spouse or child). Other acts may, under their own circumstances, be just as serious. Failures to live up to some of the commitments made at baptism such as paying tithing, attending meetings, paying debts, avoiding contention, or obeying the Word of Wisdom are normally not matters that call for formal Church discipline,<sup>21</sup> but confession may still be encouraged.<sup>22</sup> Confession has been urged if someone even contemplates serious wrongdoing: “If someone has . . . even considered abusing or

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<sup>18</sup>For what might justify discipline, the source is *General Handbook of Instructions*, most recently published in 1989, and changes announced in subsequent priesthood bulletins.

<sup>19</sup>The definition of sexual relations calling for confession to the bishop is intentionally somewhat vague but clearly includes impure or unnatural practices (1 Cor. 6:9) and probably heavy petting and persistent masturbation. The latter is a “weakness” that should be abandoned “before he goes on a mission or receives the holy priesthood or goes in the temple for his blessings.” Spencer W. Kimball, “President Kimball Speaks Out on Morality,” *Ensign* 10 (November 1980): 97. See also S. Kimball, *Miracle of Forgiveness*, 77–78. Such evils are difficult to overcome without confession and open commitment to change.

<sup>20</sup>Currently, abortion may be excused if the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest, the mother’s health is in jeopardy, or the fetus is known to have fatal birth defects. Even in these cases, parents should seek divine confirmation of the decision. *EM*, 1:7; *General Handbook of Instructions* (1989), 10-4, 11-4; *Bulletin* 1990-1.

<sup>21</sup>*General Handbook of Instructions* (1989), 10-4 .

<sup>22</sup>The generalization is often made that young people should disclose freely to their bishop not only serious matters, but also lesser ones, in the interest of receiving guidance and warning. For example, in 1974, President Kimball said:

If there is any young person who has had misfortune to break the commandments of the Lord, let him or her seek an interview with the bishop on a very confidential basis. [He is] . . . named by your Heavenly Father through processes to be your common judge. It isn’t a matter of just another man. He’s the bishop; he has the responsibility, and you have the privilege of going to the bishop for a confidential interview. . . . There is sometimes disciplinary action, but the bishop is entitled to the revelations of the Lord to make that judgment. (E. Kimball, *Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, 93)

If more is confessed than needs to be, the bishop can still offer guidance, reassurance, and support.



offending a child [sexually], may he, this day, confess and repent and forsake such evil thoughts or actions.”<sup>23</sup>

**For Ordination or Temple Recommend Renewal.** One who desires to receive priesthood ordination or to participate in temple ordinances must meet a set of high religious standards. For Aaronic Priesthood ordination, interviews with boys twelve to sixteen are likely to be less pointed than are those with adults, although the standards are nominally the same. In interviewing adults for temple recommends, the bishop or stake leader asks a set of detailed questions<sup>24</sup> about matters of faith,<sup>25</sup> loyalty, and obedience.<sup>26</sup> The bishop is instructed to use great care in interviewing so that no unworthy person is given a recommend.<sup>27</sup> Dishonestly

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<sup>23</sup>David B. Haight, “Personal Morality,” in *Morality*, 121. See similarly Matthew 5:28 on lust.

<sup>24</sup>Interviewers are instructed generally not to deviate from the recommend questions. To reduce evasion, interviewers are to ask the specific questions. “Instructions for Issuing Recommends to Enter a Temple” (1976, 1996). All interview instructions regardless of any variations in title will hereafter be cited as “Instructions for Issuing Recommends.”

<sup>25</sup>In 1985, questions were first added that directly addressed matters of belief in the Godhead and in the restored gospel; in 1996, a question was added concerning testimony of the atonement of Jesus Christ.

<sup>26</sup>In a temple recommend interview, a member is also asked about sustaining the President of the Church and the other leaders of the Church; living the law of chastity; conducting family relations in harmony with the teachings of the Church; not affiliating with any whose teachings or practices are contrary to those accepted by the Church; doing one’s duty in the Church; attending meetings; obeying the commandments of the gospel; dealing honestly; paying a full tithe; keeping the Word of Wisdom; keeping any obligations in connection with a divorce; keeping temple covenants; resolving any sin or misdeed; and considering oneself worthy to enter the temple.

<sup>27</sup>“Instructions for Issuing Recommends” (1963, 1968, 1996). See also *EM*, 2:697–98. A letter of October 15, 1982, instructed that bishops should avoid asking about intimate sexual practices between married couples. Expanding on the general admonition to stay with the listed questions, the present instructions state:

When interviewing an applicant for a recommend, do not inquire into personal, intimate matters about marital relations between a husband and his wife. . . . If, during an interview, an applicant asks about the propriety of specific conduct, do not pursue the matter. Merely suggest that if the applicant has enough anxiety about the propriety of the conduct to ask about it, the best course would be to discontinue it. If you are sensitive and wise, you usually can prevent those being interviewed from asking such explicit questions. (“Instructions for Issuing Recommends” [April 1996])

answering the questions asked by the bishop, who stands as a representative of God, and entering the temple unworthily are grievous sins compounding the original sin.<sup>28</sup> In addition to the serious sins listed above that might call for Church discipline, the temple interview questions are also concerned with whether a candidate is presently living the general standards of the Church. Thus, if a person has not previously confessed and resolved any significant religious transgressions or moral failings, the questions asked in these interviews are designed to prompt the person to confess those sins.

Indeed, in such interviews, people also frequently tell the bishop voluntarily about matters he does not need to hear about and possibly would prefer not to hear about.<sup>29</sup> Partly because there is some uncertainty about just what should and should not be confessed, some confess more, others less; a person with a scrupulous conscience tends to err on the side of saying too much rather than too little.<sup>30</sup> Also, there is little publicity concerning even the

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<sup>28</sup>One who obtains a temple recommend by misrepresentation commits a new and often more serious sin:

Those who lie to Church leaders forget or ignore . . . that when [the Lord] has called men to high places in his kingdom and has placed on them the mantle of authority, a lie to them is tantamount to a lie to the Lord; a half-truth to his officials is like a half-truth to the Lord; a rebellion against his servants is comparable with a rebellion against the Lord; and any infraction against the Brethren who hold the gospel keys is a thought or an act against the Lord. (S. Kimball, *Miracle of Forgiveness*, 183)

See also David B. Haight, who warns that obtaining a recommend dishonestly “compounds the seriousness of concealed sins.” Haight, “Come to the House of the Lord,” *Ensign* 22 (May 1992): 15. And also see Neal A. Maxwell, who says, “Partial disclosure to appointed leaders brings full accountability.” Quoting from Wilford Woodruff’s journal, Elder Maxwell continues, “The Prophet Joseph said, ‘We ought to . . . keep nothing back.’” Maxwell, “Repentance,” *Ensign* 21 (November 1991): 32. It is understood, however, that vicarious temple ordinances performed by an unworthy surrogate are nonetheless efficacious, just as are ordinances performed by an unworthy priesthood holder. See Matthew 23:2–3.

<sup>29</sup>While confessing minor matters to the bishop might sometimes be helpful, it can lead to distortion, even scrupulosity.

<sup>30</sup>In striving to keep *all* the commandments, one can lose sight of the fact that some conduct is much more serious than other conduct. In my experience, a young woman who freely admitted sexual promiscuity could, ironically, barely bring herself to admit to even occasional masturbation. Some feel great guilt even



guidelines that are clear, perhaps out of concern that such might appear too legalistic and that identifying some sins as not serious enough to require confession to the bishop might be understood as labeling them inconsequential.<sup>31</sup>

**For Missionary Service.** Those being considered for a missionary calling must meet additional criteria.<sup>32</sup> Generally, once something has been properly resolved with priesthood authorities, it need never be mentioned again;<sup>33</sup> but in the interview with

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though they were not morally culpable. A victim of incest wrote, "I feel so guilty. I could've took control of the situation and I didn't. I was a stupid little scared girl. I hate myself so much." Statement in parole file of Utah State Prison inmate. The First Presidency has made explicit that the victim of rape [or incest] is guilty of no moral offense simply because she does not die rather than submit. First Presidency to all General Authorities; Regional Representatives; Stake, Mission, and District Presidents; Bishops; and Branch Presidents, February 7, 1985; superseding letter of June 4, 1984. Child abuse may come to light when the child, feeling guilty, "confesses" to her bishop. C. Ross Clement, "Steps to Recovery and Repentance," in *Confronting Abuse*, ed. Anne L. Horton, B. Kent Harrison, and Barry L. Johnson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993), 318-26.

<sup>31</sup>Legalism is a serious danger. One commentator suggested to youth:

Too many are willing to offer clear-cut lists of just what needs to be talked about with the bishop and what doesn't. Be cautious, for all sin is wrong. Making a distinction between "bad" sins that we must talk to a bishop about and "okay" sins that we don't [is ridiculous]. . . . "Whenever you wonder whether you should or shouldn't, you should." If a list is needed . . . it is appropriate and important to talk with a bishop about any violation of the standards clearly outlined in that booklet [*For the Strength of Youth*]. (Wilcox, "Broken Hearts," 60-61)

A church that believes in striving for perfection can hardly list all possible sins (see Mosiah 4:29) or label any sin or flaw inconsequential.

<sup>32</sup>The focus in this study is on moral criteria. There are, of course, other requirements for missionary service, such as physical and mental health. Further, young men and women, ages 19-26, who are divorced are not called as full-time missionaries, and men and women who, while members of the Church, have been involved with abortions resulting from their immorality will not be called on missions—irrespective of repentance—without First Presidency approval. *General Handbook of Instructions* (1989), 7-1; repeated in *Bulletin* 1991-1.

<sup>33</sup>"Providing there has been no repetition of the offense, nor a commission of any other serious transgression [circumstances that might call for review of previous conduct], usually the matter may be considered settled." S. Kimball, *Miracle of Forgiveness*, 187. The temple recommend question asks only about sins that have not previously been resolved with one's bishop (see note 26).

prospective missionaries, a few matters are considered so significant that, even if previously confessed and resolved, they are the subject of further inquiry to ascertain that confession and repentance has been complete. These include adultery, fornication, heavy petting, homosexual activities, or other sexual immoralities; drug misuse; or a serious violation of the civil law.<sup>34</sup>

### When Should Confessions Be Made?

Anyone with personal concerns is always free to arrange a time to meet privately with the bishop, but there are many other opportunities for confession. Some, such as tithing settlement and temple recommend interviews, normally occur at the initiative of the member. But other occasions are initiated by the bishop or his counselors, such as callings to Church positions or priesthood offices and periodic youth interviews (ideally once or twice a year for each young person). All these provide recurring private opportunities to talk.<sup>35</sup> If the bishop has reason to believe there is a problem, he may, of course, request an otherwise unscheduled interview for the specific purpose of discussing the perceived problem.

The ideal is for confessions to be spontaneous, motivated by conscience alone. But often they come when triggered by an interview initiated by the bishop<sup>36</sup> or by encouragement or pressure from family members or friends who are aware of a problem. Confessions may also occur during an investigative inquiry<sup>37</sup> or in a Church disciplinary proceeding after formal accusation.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>*General Handbook of Instructions* (1989), 7-1. The expectation of clearance by a General Authority was withdrawn by an attachment to a First Presidency letter. First Presidency to General Authorities; Regional Representatives; Stake, Mission, and District Presidents; Bishops; and Branch Presidents, October 19, 1993.

<sup>35</sup>Tithing settlement is often done with couples or families. Home teachers or visiting teachers could also be recipients of confessions, but they are instructed to refer any such matters immediately to the bishop rather than involve themselves further. Compare to the role of teachers in the Aaronic priesthood of the nineteenth century. William G. Hartley, "Ordained and Acting Teachers in the Lesser Priesthood, 1851-1883," *BYU Studies* 16 (spring 1976): 375-98.

<sup>36</sup>The bishop may be acting spontaneously or in response to a complaint by a member who has been offended by one who refuses to make amends (D&C 42:88-89).



When asked about improper conduct, a person who is at fault can confess, lie, or refuse to answer. But since a refusal to answer would be perceived as an indirect admission, that option is rarely chosen unless the person is at the point of withdrawal from the Church.<sup>39</sup> Consequently, the real choices are to tell the truth or to lie, and to lie is itself compounding the sin.<sup>40</sup> A believer is thus under great moral and personal pressure to confess whenever a priesthood leader asks directly about misconduct.

### Who Grants Forgiveness?

Christ gave his apostles power to bind or loose on earth, and told them, "Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 18:18). This power included authority to remit or retain sins on earth, and they would be remitted or retained in heaven (John 20:23). Latter-day Saints understand that in New Testament times Christ granted to his apostles more than a power merely to recommend forgiveness;<sup>41</sup> Christ vested a present spiritual power

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<sup>37</sup>Consider Joshua's interrogation of Achan in Joshua 7:16-25. Church discipline of those who are unrepentant about having offended other people shades off into civil disputes. While Church leaders may try to help resolve civil disputes, they are instructed to act unofficially as private advisers and not to involve the Church. Church courts are today only for ecclesiastical discipline. *General Handbook of Instructions* (1983), 51, 52.

<sup>38</sup>See also Mosiah 26, especially verses 34-35; D&C 42:24-26, 80, 91. In a disciplinary council, the member is given an opportunity to admit the alleged misconduct. *General Handbook of Instructions* (1989), 10-7. Voluntary confession is much preferred over coerced admission, but even the latter may be an important first step in repenting.

<sup>39</sup>See also Garland Hurt to Governor Cumming, in David L. Bigler, "Garland Hurt, the American Friend of the Utahs," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 62 (spring 1994): 162 n. 52.

<sup>40</sup>Stephen L. Richards, *Conference Reports* (April 1959), 47. Note also the strictness with which belated confessions of serious sins committed by missionaries are treated. Even with a prompt confession, unless unusual extenuating circumstances are present, the missionary will be sent home until at least a year has passed since the last incident. First Presidency to General Authorities; Regional Representatives; Stake, Mission, and District Presidents; Bishops; and Branch Presidents, March 4, 1993, reaffirmed October 14, 1994.

<sup>41</sup>Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 1:857; See also J. Reuben Clark Jr., *On the Way to Immortality and Eternal Life* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1949), 170, 386. The only



in the apostles and in their successors and assigns that is itself efficacious.<sup>42</sup> In the restoration of the gospel, God gave the same powers to the Prophet Joseph Smith<sup>43</sup> and to his successor prophets and those to whom the prophets may delegate the power of absolution. The power to forgive on behalf of the Lord has not, however, been delegated to stake presidents or bishops. They may waive penalties that the Church is entitled to exact, but they are not empowered to absolve.<sup>44</sup> Those who can forgive or remit sins are extremely few in this world:

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reference in the Book of Mormon to power to seal or loose is in Helaman 10:7, where God gave such power to Nephi, son of Helaman, but that appears to be related only to power over natural forces, so as to “smite the earth with famine, and with pestilence, and destruction.” Third Nephi does not expressly state that Jesus gave power to absolve sin to his twelve Book of Mormon disciples.

<sup>42</sup>Catholicism shares that view, illustrated by St. Thomas Aquinas’s reference to absolved sins being “hidden even from the sight of God.” J. L. McCarthy, “Confession, Seal of,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. William J. McDonald, 17 vols. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 4:134. Even as a metaphor that phrase says a great deal in a theology attributing omniscience to God.

One commonly held Protestant interpretation of John 20:23, which explicitly deals with forgiveness of sins, is that Christ gave the apostles not the power to absolve sin, but both the power to deliver someone over to Satan and the power of life and death (exercised in Peter’s condemnation of Ananias and Sapphira, Acts 5:1–10). Adam Clarke, *Clarke’s Commentary*, 6 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, reproduction of 1824 U.S. printing), 3:658. In Protestant view, the passages referring to the power of binding and loosing (Matthew 16:19 and 18:18) relate to forbidding and permitting conduct that was commanded or forbidden by the law of Moses, such as circumcision and eating strangled meat. That is, Christ was delegating to his apostles the right to instruct disciples in an authoritative way. Clarke, *Clarke’s Commentary*, 1:171–72, 184–85. According to the *Interpreter’s Bible*, “later Christian tradition extended this principle [that Peter could declare what parts of the Law continued binding] to include the power to forgive or retain sins, but this was not its original meaning.” “Matthew,” in *Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick and others, 12 vols. (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1951), 7:453. See also “John,” in *Interpreter’s Bible*, 8:798, which states that the power to forgive is rather an insight into whether God has already forgiven.

<sup>43</sup>The Lord said to Joseph Smith that by priesthood power “whosoever sins ye remit on earth shall be remitted eternally in the heavens” (D&C 132:46).

<sup>44</sup>“LDS Bible Dictionary,” s.v. “confession,” 649. President Packer notes, “Bishops can guide you through the steps required to obtain forgiveness insofar as the Church is concerned. Each one of us must work out individually forgiveness from the Lord.” Boyd K. Packer, “The Brilliant Morning of Forgiveness,” *Ensign* 25 (November 1995): 19. See also Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 236. Priesthood acts performed by mortals are conditional because mortals are fallible and God is just.



The bishop, and others in comparable positions, can forgive in the sense of waiving the [Church] penalties. In our loose connotation we sometimes call this forgiveness, but it is not forgiveness in the sense of 'wiping out' or absolution. . . . It is the Lord . . . who forgives sin. . . . Let it be said in emphasis that even the First Presidency and the apostles do not make a practice of absolving sins.<sup>45</sup>

## What Confessions Are Confidential?

It appears that confidentiality is more a matter of Church policy and practice than of doctrine, although a general religious obligation exists to keep all sacred things private to an appropriate extent (Matt. 7:6). A bishop is generally expected to maintain strict secrecy,<sup>46</sup> not voluntarily to disclose anything told to him, without the confessor's consent, even if the matter confessed is a crime. However, the LDS bishop is expected normally to conform to the compulsion of law, if it requires divulgence of confidential matter.

Frequently a person confesses without stating any reservations and with no specific expectations about confidentiality, simply trusting the bishop to do whatever ought be done. Such a confessor may be willing, in pursuit of forgiveness, to do whatever is asked—submit to excommunication, make public confession, report to the police, or offer restitution.

But sometimes the confessor has spoken only reluctantly and is unable, at that time, to accept the full consequences of confession. The bishop then is free to encourage openness but not to insist on it. A common occurrence is for young people to confide in the bishop but to balk initially at his urging that they disclose their conduct to their parents. If the confessor refuses to let the bishop divulge the confession, it cannot be used, even in an internal Church disciplinary council.<sup>47</sup> In that situation, it is not clear

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<sup>45</sup>S. Kimball, *Miracle of Forgiveness*, 332–33. See also E. Kimball, *Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, 101 (December 16, 1964). In the School of the Prophets, as one example of modern apostolic ablution, the ordinance of washing of feet took place, and in that context sins were expressly forgiven. Graffam, *School of the Prophets*, 31, 50–51, 64.

<sup>46</sup>*General Handbook of Instructions* (1989), 10-2; see also Proverbs 11:13.

<sup>47</sup>*General Handbook of Instructions* (1989), 10-2, specifies that a confidential confession cannot be used as evidence in a disciplinary council without the member's permission. In seeking this permission, bishops emphasize that

whether the bishop can properly divulge the information even to his administrative superior, the stake president.<sup>48</sup> Such a bishop might well feel a need to seek advice on how to proceed, but that normally can be obtained without identifying the person involved. The difficulty is compounded when the bishop has not asked permission and thus has not been formally forbidden by the confessor to discuss the case.<sup>49</sup>

The insistence of the confessor that the bishop tell no one (or no one outside the Church disciplinary mechanism) does not ordinarily create any legal problems for the bishop, since the law does not impose on citizens any general duty to report a crime to the police, no matter how serious.<sup>50</sup>

Child abuse, however, is a major legal exception. As of 1995, fifteen states made it a misdemeanor for any person, including clergy, to fail to report information received about physical or sexual abuse of a child.<sup>51</sup> If, for example, the bishop is told by a

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refusal reflects a lack of contrition that prevents justice and mercy from operating fully. If permission is not given, the bishop can still impose informal discipline on the basis of the confession. Of course, other evidence may independently justify disciplinary action. See also *General Handbook of Instructions* (1989), 10-7.

<sup>48</sup>Confidential information given in confessions and interviews is to be shared only with authorized ecclesiastical leaders. *General Handbook of Instructions* (1989), 10-2. Legally, the bishop can divulge information. The question is whether this divulgence would run counter to the reasonable expectations of the confessor.

<sup>49</sup>Margaret Battin says that, in light of widespread awareness of the unconditional nature of the seal of the Catholic confessional, a Mormon confessing to a bishop may erroneously believe that he or she has the same unlimited promise of confidentiality. She is critical of Mormon confession practice because members are usually not told about the limits of confidentiality and bishops may push too hard to persuade members to allow the confession to be used to confront others involved with the confessor. Margaret P. Battin, *Ethics in the Sanctuary: Examining the Practices of Organized Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 48-60.

<sup>50</sup>Rollin M. Perkins, *Criminal Law*, 2d ed. (Mineola, N.Y.: Foundation, 1969), 512-17. But see Leviticus 5:1.

<sup>51</sup>Sexual abuse is a fairly clear category, but physical abuse is much less so. The Utah statute defines child abuse as "damage or threatened damage to the physical or emotional health and welfare of a child through neglect or abuse, and includes causing nonaccidental physical or mental injury . . . or repeated negligent treatment or maltreatment." Utah Code Annotated § 62A-4-502.



confessor that he or she sexually abused a child, the law in those states requires the bishop to report that fact to public authorities, if the confessor will not. In another ten states, the bishop need not report the confession itself, but he must report information about abuse if it comes to him from some other source, such as the offender's spouse or child. And in the remaining half of the states, the bishop has no legal obligation to report<sup>52</sup> and generally does not, because of his ecclesiastical obligation of confidentiality.<sup>53</sup>

A few of the states that make it a crime to fail to report child abuse also threaten civil liability for any further injury to the child victim that would not have occurred if the required report had been made. So many uncertainties are involved in such cases that clergy have so far generally escaped civil liability,<sup>54</sup> but the prospect of litigation itself creates another pressure to breach confidentiality and report the abuse.

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<sup>52</sup>The obligation to report is imposed by some states only on those professionals, such as doctors, nurses, teachers, and psychologists, who are involved in child care.

<sup>53</sup>States vary widely. Depending on the local law, the bishop may be prohibited from reporting, allowed to report, or required to report. However, uncertainties about the legal requirements are no longer so great a problem for LDS leaders, since a Presiding Bishopric letter of May 10, 1995, and a subsequently published Church brochure notified bishops and stake presidents of a toll-free number that would give access to social services and legal specialists to guide them. See also *Responding to Abuse: Helps for Ecclesiastical Leaders* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1995), 1, 3.

<sup>54</sup>Even without special statute, in the case of threatened serious physical injury a lurking possibility exists that civil liability may be imposed on the bishop and/or the Church if the bishop fails to prevent the harm that he knows, through confession, might well occur. The harm could be either the suicide of the confessor or injury to someone else. In *Nally v. Grace Community Church*, 763 P.2d 948 (Cal. 1988), a divided court held that pastoral counselors had no duty to get help for a potential suicide. On the other hand, *Tarasoff v. Regents of the University of California*, 551 P.2d 334 (Cal. 1976), held that there is an affirmative duty for a psychiatrist to breach confidentiality to warn a particular person whom it is reasonably believed is endangered by the patient.

At the same time, there is also threatened liability for excessive disclosure. If confession leads to public announcement of wrongdoing (or announcement of unwillingness to confess when accused), then the confessor may sue for invasion of rights of privacy. See Lynn Buzzard, "Scarlet Letter Lawsuits: Private Affairs and Public Judgments," *Campbell Law Review* 10 (1987): 1-62.



When faced with the question of reporting crime, presumably even with respect to people dangerous to themselves or others, the LDS bishop is advised to maintain silence if the law allows.<sup>55</sup> In order to do this, if called as a witness to testify in court, he would first invoke the confessor's priest-penitent privilege to maintain the secrecy of confessions;<sup>56</sup> and second, the bishop could assert his own constitutional right to the "free exercise of religion" on the grounds that he is under Church obligation to keep confidences secret.

However, if the legal demand to report or testify is determined to be constitutional, it is then logical for the bishop to comply with the law, even though this violates the confessor's expectations and runs counter to the bishop's normal practice.<sup>57</sup> If the bishop knows in advance that he will be legally obligated to breach confidentiality, he is advised to inform the member of that

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<sup>55</sup>*Child Abuse*, 5-6. The status of this booklet is unclear. It is no longer in print, but the later publication, *Responding to Abuse: Helps for Ecclesiastical Leaders*, while covering much of the same ground, does not "repeal" it. Obviously, in case of conflict, the later instruction would govern, but it is uncertain whether nonconflicting instructions have been superseded. The reason for maintaining silence even in unappealing circumstances is that if a person cannot rely on confidentiality there will be reluctance to divulge incriminating information. If the bishop knows about the threatened misconduct, he may be able to persuade the confessor of right action. It is believed that by maintaining trust clergy can prevent more harm than would be prevented if all such intimations were reported to the state authorities.

<sup>56</sup>In every state, the privilege applies at least to the kind of private admission of sin associated with the Catholic confessional. In most states, the privilege applies also to the kind of spiritual counseling all pastors perform. If the admission is made in the context of marriage counseling that is indistinguishable from that done by lay counselors or is made while others are present, the applicability of the privilege becomes doubtful. William Harold Tiemann and John C. Bush, *The Right to Silence* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2d. ed., 1983), 207-32, and West Virginia Code §49-6A-2.

<sup>57</sup>*Child Abuse*, 5. Legal demand is not addressed in *Responding to Abuse*, which merely refers bishops to the "hot line." LDS Church practice is to advise the bishop to comply with the law, although conflict between the law and Church practice is no new problem, as LDS resistance to laws on polygamy illustrates. James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 343-47, 356-58, 390-415; Edwin Brown Firmage and Richard Collin Mangrum, *Zion in the Courts* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 129-260.



duty as soon as the bishop becomes alerted to this possibility by the direction of the conversation.<sup>58</sup>

The issues just discussed do not exhaust the moral or ethical problems. There may be highly unusual circumstances, aside from legal compulsion or the confessor's consent, in which a bishop might feel bound to breach confidentiality. Sometimes the expectation of confidentiality is unreasonable. For example, one who makes a statement to the bishop as a neighbor (rather than as bishop) or makes a statement in defiance rather than in confession might be entitled to no protective secrecy.<sup>59</sup> Or the confessor may threaten future harm of such gravity as to tip the balance. If he or she were to confess the serious contemplation of suicide, the inability to resist hurting someone, an intention to commit an abortion, or a plan to marry without disclosing to the marriage partner a sexually transmissible disease, the balance may favor the bishop's disclosure,<sup>60</sup> even at the cost of decreasing some people's trust in the bishop as one who will maintain strict confidence.<sup>61</sup>

## Functions of Confession, Sincere and Insincere

Confession serves several functions. Sincere confession effects change as part of the repentance process, reconciles and supports, relieves psychic tension, and is an important factor in determining Church sanctions. Occasionally, insincere confession is used to deceive and manipulate.

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<sup>58</sup>*Child Abuse*, 5.

<sup>59</sup>However, what appears to be defiance may be just an opening gambit of a counseling session. Willingness to meet with the bishop suggests an openness to discussion.

<sup>60</sup>In some states, one is legally obligated to report knowledge of HIV infection. In Utah, which has such a statute, there is no exception for clergy. Utah Code Annotated §§ 26-6-6, 26-23-3, 26-23-6. The Church's instruction to its bishops in those circumstances is to obey the law.

<sup>61</sup>This is in contrast to the Catholic "seal of confession," which recognizes no exceptions. The Council of Trent in 1551 elaborated the obligation of confidentiality. Canons 983 and 984 (formerly canons 889 and 890), *Code of Canon Law* (Washington, D.C.: Canon Law Society of America, 1983). Even so, not all confessions are under the seal—the penitent may consent to divulgence, the confession may have been made in pursuit of counseling and not absolution, or the confession may be somehow designed to harm the priest. Caspar E. Schieler, *Theory and Practice of the Confessional*, 2d ed. (New York: Benziger Bros., 1905), 468–70.

## Aid to Change<sup>62</sup>

The scriptures repeatedly command confession of failures to obey God's mandates: "I command you again to repent . . . and . . . confess your sins" (D&C 19:20). However, people approach confession with a wide range of attitudes: some confess out of fear of Church penalties or God's wrath; others confess in mechanical obedience to commandment or in search of help to overcome temptation or out of a desire to please God. When confession is understood to be an element of repentance and thus a prelude to God's forgiveness, the person who can overcome fears of the possible earthly consequences will confess in order to obtain the spiritual benefit.<sup>63</sup>

Confession to one's bishop does sometimes avoid penalties and does please God, but its greater importance may be in its capacity to aid change. Such confession helps bring about the humility and submission that is part of harmonizing human will with God's will.<sup>64</sup> Confession helps break down pride, since one cannot easily admit error and remain proud.<sup>65</sup> Humbling is especially likely if one

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<sup>62</sup>Especially helpful in this area is Top, "Sins Be as Scarlet," 42-66.

<sup>63</sup>In some other faiths, confession may be conceived rather as a *fruit* of repentance. After one has acknowledged to God weakness and dependence on Christ's grace and feels God's forgiveness, there is no longer shame or embarrassment in admitting one's past; gratitude for God's grace makes one unashamed. According to this view, confession will often follow forgiveness but is not a prerequisite to forgiveness, and while confession in a counseling relationship may be useful to one struggling with sin and guilt, no formal confession to another human being (aside from one who has been injured) is necessary in obtaining forgiveness.

<sup>64</sup>Part of confession is acknowledging not only specific acts, but also more general imperfection and dependence on God. A Catholic without mortal sins is encouraged to engage in the "confession of devotion," in which one confesses venial sins and even sins for which one has already received absolution, as a means of perfecting oneself. John J. Dietzen, *The New Question Box: Catholic Life for the Nineties* (Peoria, Ill.: Guildhall, 1988), 402, 405. For a plea for revitalization of the confession of devotion, which suffered steep decline after Vatican II, see Arthur Barker Chappell, *Regular Confession* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992).

<sup>65</sup>"Let not any man publish his own righteousness . . . ; sooner let him confess his sins." *TPJS*, 194. President Kimball said, "I am sure you are proud and it will take much courage to admit your errors and to accept assistance. My door will be open when you come." E. Kimball, *Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, 93. Confession requires humility. James A. Cullimore, "Confession and Forsaking: Elements of Genuine Repentance," *Ensign* 1 (December 1971): 85. Confession requires courage. "Q&A," *New Era* 21 (October 1989): 16.



admits weakness to a bishop whose regard the confessor values.<sup>66</sup> Public confession would involve additional social humbling.<sup>67</sup> Confession reminds people of their own weaknesses and God's strength, the acknowledgment of which is itself commanded.<sup>68</sup>

Articulation of fault strengthens resolve to change. It gives a name to the enemy.<sup>69</sup> As a marker of commitment, it reinforces a determination not to slip back. It indicates acceptance of responsibility for one's conduct. It helps to assure the contrite that they have really repented and are ready to move on. Even reluctant or partial

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<sup>66</sup>People sometimes excuse their failure to confess by expressing mistrust of the mortal who receives confession, but this rationalization indicates incomplete repentance. One who is truly repentant yearns so much for the benefits that can come through confession that pride is sacrificed. Embarrassment is a lesser concern. S. Kimball, *Miracle of Forgiveness*, 178. George Q. Cannon stated, "We should not be afraid to confess our sins; for there is no man among us that is not a sinner." Cannon, *Conference Reports* (October 6, 1897), 69, quoted in Jerreld L. Newquist, comp., *Gospel Truth: Discourses and Writings of President George Q. Cannon*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), 1:176. See also a letter to Wilford Woodruff in 1857 alluding to a transgression that the writer had discussed with Woodruff. He wrote that he would go to his local leaders if required, but he feared they would be less understanding. Thomas G. Alexander, "Wilford Woodruff and the Mormon Reformation of 1855-57," *Dialogue* 25 (summer 1992): 33.

Ultimately all our sins will be known. Doctrine and Covenants 1:3 says of the rebellious that in the last dispensation their "iniquities shall be spoken upon the housetops, and their secret acts shall be revealed." See also 2 Nephi 30:16-17.

<sup>67</sup>Wilcox relates the experience of a young man who confessed drinking beer despite his assumption that the bishop would announce that fact in his ward. Wilcox, "Broken Hearts," 64.

<sup>68</sup>"And in nothing doth man offend God . . . save those who confess [that is, acknowledge] not his hand in all things, and obey not his commandments" (D&C 59:21).

Roman Catholic theologians make a distinction between confession of *sin* (acknowledgment of humankind's fallen state, contingency, and differences and distance from God) and confession of *sins* (admitting one's breaches of rules set by God). Michel, "Confess," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1967), 5:202-5; Dieter Fürst, "Confess," in *The New International Dictionary of the New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1975), 1:344. Catholics confess sin in the liturgy but sins in the confessional. Gail Ramshaw-Schmidt, "Sin: One Image of Human Limitation," in Collins and Power, *Fate of Confession*, 4.

<sup>69</sup>Sissela Bok, *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 76-77.

confession opens the door. It gives the bishop an opportunity to persuade the confessing party of the desirability of full confession and repentance.<sup>70</sup>

Though most people probably err on the side of too little self-disclosure, some cannot feel satisfied, and they confess repeatedly, wondering compulsively whether their confession was adequate, legalistically cataloging every failing, unable to trust in the principle of forgiveness.<sup>71</sup>

## Reconciliation and Support

A person confessing offense against another will ordinarily<sup>72</sup> be instructed by the bishop to seek out the offended person, acknowledge fault spontaneously, and ask forgiveness.<sup>73</sup> Such action opens a door to reconciliation, which lies near the heart of the Christian gospel. Christ prayed fervently for the unity of believers (John 17:20-22).

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<sup>70</sup>Of voluntary confession, Spencer W. Kimball says:

The voluntary confession is infinitely more acceptable in the sight of the Lord than is forced admission, lacking humility, wrung from an individual by questioning when guilt is evident. . . . Even making the admission upon confrontation is better than continuing to lie and evade the truth. In fact, many of those forced sooner or later to admit their sins do come to a full, sincere repentance. (S. Kimball, *Miracle of Forgiveness*, 181-82)

<sup>71</sup>Brigham Young said, "Some people will come and confess to me things as simple [that is, as innocent] as it would be for a woman to take the last egg from her hen's nest . . . and talk about that which the Lord cares nothing about." Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855-86), 4:286, March 15, 1857 (hereafter cited as *JD*).

Catholic confession of devotion is to be distinguished from the fault of "scrupulosity," in which one sees sin where there is none or wrongly exaggerates one's fault. Scrupulosity is not a matter of having too tender a conscience, but of making the error of distortion.

<sup>72</sup>It is possible, if the offended person is unaware of the breach of trust, that confession might do more harm than good. While the *General Handbook of Instructions* 18 (1960), 97, specified that an adulterer must confess to his or her spouse, a supplement to the *General Handbook of Instructions* 21 (1976), 5, recognized that under special circumstances informing the spouse would be unwise. *General Handbook Supplement*, no. 1, July 1, 1976. The *General Handbook of Instructions* (1989) states that confession to the spouse is generally indicated (10-2).

<sup>73</sup>Neal A. Maxwell, "Insights," *New Era* 8 (April 1978): 4-6. If the offended person fails to forgive, the greater sin remains in him or her (D&C 64:9).



People called to teach may sometimes use their own past or present weaknesses for illustrative purposes. Confession of this sort can teach humility by example and demonstrate both that good people are flawed and that flawed people can become good.<sup>74</sup> Such openness may lead to discussion that benefits class members who may have been discouraged because they perceive everyone else as perfect or who may have interpreted Church members' reluctance to admit to failings as hypocrisy.

Confession to a receptive, sympathetic individual or group can have the effect of mobilizing support, both psychic and personal.<sup>75</sup> A secular analog is seen in Alcoholics Anonymous and the many programs patterned after AA, where group help is available to those who admit their need.<sup>76</sup>

But openness is not without risk. Hearing public confession of others in Church could lead to rationalizing sin: "No one is perfect! I can go through a rebellious time and still turn out all right." Furthermore, there is tension between the idea that adopting the appearance of good leads one to do good and the idea that appearing good when one is not constitutes hypocrisy.

## Relief

One who seeks to abandon sin may feel a need to pay for the wrong done, and confession is one means of expiation through suffering humiliation by the exposure of one's shame. By confessing, such a person may feel that he or she has personally paid off

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<sup>74</sup>For example, Joseph Smith (JS-H 1:28-29), Alma the Younger and the sons of Mosiah (Mosiah 27:30, 35), and Paul (Acts 26:9-11). Benjamin Johnson recounts that once while preaching his mind went blank and he realized how proud he had been of his eloquence. He was moved to confess to the congregation that the Holy Ghost had left him. He closed the meeting but asked the congregation whether they would hear him on another occasion, and they agreed. Benjamin Johnson, *My Life's Review* (Independence, Mo.: Zion's Printing, 1979), 73-74. See also the fictional account in Michael Fillerup, "Gifts of the Spirit," *Dialogue* 26 (fall 1993): 199-213.

<sup>75</sup>"If we confess to one or more fellow believers, they can support, encourage and pray for us." Gary R. Collins, *Christian Counseling* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1980), 110.

<sup>76</sup>Paul E. Johnson, *Psychology of Pastoral Care* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1953), 104-6, additionally notes that confession is difficult and many people will avoid it or approach it legalistically.

some cosmic debt. On the other hand, when one realizes that the debt is beyond one's ability to pay (Mosiah 2:23-24; 4:19), he or she may experience relief through understanding that godly sorrow and confession open one up to divine forgiveness through Christ's atonement.<sup>77</sup> That forgiveness is symbolized in the ordinances of baptism and the sacrament of the Lord's supper.

Confession can bring great psychological relief, just as exposure of a sore to air and light generally helps in the healing,<sup>78</sup> although excess can do harm. Sometimes full revelation of oneself is not therapeutic.<sup>79</sup> Brigham Young said:

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<sup>77</sup>People who see confession, rather than change and atonement, as the main ingredient in the repentance process misunderstand. See S. Kimball, *Miracle of Forgiveness*, especially chapters 10-15. The Atonement and the repentance process are efficacious to wash scarlet sins white as snow (Isa. 1:18; see also Alma 42:29).

<sup>78</sup>If, as Joseph Smith said, "a man is his own tormenter," confession should bring relief. *TPJS*, 357. Many have noted the relief that comes from confession to one's bishop. See E. Kimball, *Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, 93; Vaughn J. Featherstone, "'Forgive Them, I Pray Thee,'" in Benson, *Repentance*, 57-65; J. R. Clarke, "Confession," 91-94; Norman C. Hill, *The Road Back* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989); S. Kimball, *Miracle of Forgiveness*, 187; "Q&A," *New Era* 21 (October 1989), 16-17.

Voluntary confession of long-past sins coupled with years of good living that demonstrate repentance may make the holding of a disciplinary council unnecessary. Confession can thus finally dissipate the fear of consequences that has made life miserable for so long. *General Handbook of Instructions* (1989), 10-4, 10-10.

Sometimes relief may come for the wrong reason. There is some risk of feeling that once the fault has been articulated, the process of repentance is completed—that vocalization is a magic bullet to kill the evil. Ezra Taft Benson, *God, Family, Country* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974], 196. After listening to a young man's confession, I told him that a disciplinary council would have to be held; he said in alarm, "You can't do that; I confessed!" He thought confession would be like pressing the delete key on a computer. One can see something of "legalistic morality" in those LDS youths who expect to sow their wild oats, "live it up with the boys, and then settle down for a short season before . . . missionary service." L. Tom Perry, "Called to Serve," *Ensign* 21 (May 1991): 39; see also Bruce C. Hafen and Marie K. Hafen, "Repentance," in *The Fight for Right: Strength for Youth in the Latter Days* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 83-88. Some would delay their repentance in order to "enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season" (Heb. 11:25).

<sup>79</sup>In *Bulletin* 1989-3 and again in *Bulletin* 1993-2, the Church warned against involvement in questionable self-awareness groups whose methodology includes "open confession or disclosure of personal information normally discussed only in confidential settings." The latter notice is quoted in *Ensign* 24



Confess your faults . . . not on the house tops. . . . If persons lose confidence in themselves, it takes away the strength, faith and confidence that others have in them; it leaves a space that we call weakness. . . . The enemy . . . would . . . say, 'Here is your wickedness made manifest,' and would overcome you and destroy all the confidence you have in yourselves and in your God.<sup>80</sup>

Pursuit of human counseling may be one result of confession.<sup>81</sup> The bishop can, through pastoral counseling, help a person

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(March 1994): 80. See also Ezra Taft Benson, *Conference Reports* (April 4, 1969), 13–14; and Alvin R. Dyer, *Conference Reports* (April 4, 1969), 56.

<sup>80</sup>Young, in *JD*, 4:78–79, November 9, 1856; see also *JD*, 8:361–62, March 10, 1860.

<sup>81</sup>Counseling may be sought for secular reasons—to deal with character or social problems rather than spiritual sins. Thus a person asking a bishop for help in obtaining treatment may acknowledge addiction, or a person seeking marital counseling may admit adultery without seeing the addiction or adultery as anything more than a foolish mistake.

Secular psychotherapy associated with Hobart Mowrer urges that confession of “sins” to other persons helps overcome the burden of guilt and results in reintegration of the personality. O. Hobart Mowrer, *The Crisis in Psychiatry and Religion* (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand, 1961), 81–102. Mowrer notes approvingly that Latter-day Saints have a monthly testimony meeting for “open confession.” He also praises the Catholic confession as helpful, but criticizes Protestant churches for adopting a Freudian attitude that sin is to be dealt with inwardly and therefore considered as essentially imaginary (208–9). See also Erik Berggren who claims that an “innate psychic need for unity” can be satisfied by confession. Erik Berggren, *The Psychology of Confession* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 211.

Karl Menninger decries the loss of a sense of sin and its concomitant feeling of individual responsibility and capacity for change. He subscribes to Mowrer’s view that, as an extension of the necessary self-disclosure to a psychotherapist, confession is a valuable aspect of therapy for believers. Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1973), 182, 195–98. Some Christian counselors, however, criticize Mowrer’s technique as offering only temporary relief, urging that permanent relief from sin can come only by accepting Christ’s forgiveness. Jay E. Adams, *The Christian Counselor’s Manual* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1973), 86–89; Walter J. Koehler, *Counseling and Confession* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1982), 20–21.

Similarities and differences between psychotherapy and Catholic confession are explored in Robert J. Lovinger, *Working with Religious Issues in Therapy* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1984), 140–42, 175–76, 184–85.

Carl Jung urged that secret guilt isolates us from others, while confession of our fallibility reestablishes community. Carl G. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, trans. W. S. Dell and Cary F. Baynes (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1933), 33–36. See also Julianne McLean, “The Role of the Confessional Process in Psychotherapy,” in *Confession and Absolution*, ed. Martin Dudley and Geoffrey Rowell (London: SPCK, 1990), 168–78.



change from sinful to righteous living. Although the bishop may lack professional training, he can draw on his personal and practical experience to console and advise, and he also has access to inspiration. To a person who believes the bishop's calling is divinely recognized, the bishop's advice carries extra authority. The bishop may also properly refer the confessor to professional counselors.<sup>82</sup>

### A Consideration in Church Discipline

Confession to the bishop has a special relationship to Church discipline, since the sins one must disclose to the bishop may well result in institutional discipline. The bishop, as a common judge in Israel, has the responsibility to make a decision about consequences appropriate to the sin confessed or reported to him. The ordeal of real repentance and confession may itself be enough, but the bishop may feel it appropriate for the person to also be placed on informal probation. If that is not enough, the bishop may refer the matter to a ward or stake disciplinary council (formerly called a bishop's court or a high council court), which has authority to impose three sanctions: formal probation, disfellowshipment, or excommunication.<sup>83</sup>

After formal sanction, a member's restoration to full status may require substantial time and activity in the way of restitution and proof of sincerity. Conditions of probation may include self-reporting of criminal conduct to the police but usually not public confession.<sup>84</sup>

Sanctions imposed may depend on the degree of repentance the bishop perceives, which perception in turn might be influenced

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<sup>82</sup>S. Kimball, *Miracle of Forgiveness*, 187-88.

<sup>83</sup>Disciplinary councils must be held in cases of murder, incest, and apostasy; for serious transgressions that are predatory, repetitive, well known, or committed while the transgressor serves as a bishop or holds some other prominent Church position; for transsexual surgery; and for inexcusable abortion. Councils are generally not necessary for old sins followed by full reformation or for inactivity in the Church, withdrawal from the Church, lawful business difficulties, or civil disputes. *General Handbook of Instructions* (1989), 10-3 to 10-5. Even when a council must be held, only deliberate homicide requires excommunication. The outcome of each case is otherwise individually determined.

<sup>84</sup>On reporting to police, see *General Handbook of Instructions* (1989), 10-2. Public confession is no longer mentioned in the *Handbook* as a requirement for forgiveness by God, although provision is made for announcement of discipline to a limited circle in cases involving predatory conduct or teaching



by the spontaneity of confession or willingness to confess when asked. Spontaneous confession is a very strong indication of repentance. "Therefore, blessed are they who humble themselves without being compelled to be humble" (Alma 32:16). But confession in a disciplinary proceeding, especially if made only after extensive questioning or confrontation with evidence, may not reflect a sincere desire to repent. Conversely, where there is abundant evidence of a member's repentance before confession, conduct that might otherwise have called for a severe sanction may be treated more gently.<sup>85</sup>

When the purpose of confession or discipline has been served, Church sanctions end, and eventually full status may be restored. The bishop may say he believes God has forgiven the transgressor, but the bishop does not himself extend absolution. If he says that *he* forgives, he can mean only that he waives penalties that the Church is entitled to exact; forgiveness belongs to God.<sup>86</sup>

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of false doctrine (to warn the unwary) or flagrant transgressions (to inform members that the conduct has not been ignored). It may still be true that if the conduct has created scandal, public explanation of the situation is needed. "And if any one offend openly, he or she shall be rebuked openly, that he or she may be ashamed" (D&C 42:91). Compare to the sons of Mosiah's public confession of their scandalous past (Mosiah 27:35).

<sup>85</sup>When years of faithfulness and service demonstrate full reformation and repentance, a disciplinary council is often not necessary. *General Handbook of Instructions* (1989), 10-4. That member will probably have suffered years of distress or of missed opportunities, knowing that confession was called for and must eventually be made yet being unable to take that step.

Unless there is a need to warn Church members of danger from teaching false doctrine or predatory conduct, a decision to disfellowship or excommunicate is generally disclosed only to those who need to know. *General Handbook of Instructions* (1989), 10-8. That means specifically the ward priesthood executive committee and, in case of a woman, the Relief Society president. Circumstances may dictate a larger group. This policy, justified by a desire to make the return to full status as easy as possible, is reinforced by the possibility of successful lawsuit by the disciplined person, claiming the Church violated privacy rights through giving the conduct or discipline unnecessary publicity. In *Guinn v. Church of Christ of Collinsville*, 775 P.2d 766 (Okla. 1989), a church's elders announced to the congregation a woman's sexual misconduct *after* she had withdrawn from the church. The jury awarded her \$390,000. See Buzzard, "Scarlet Letter Lawsuits," 1-4.

<sup>86</sup>See note 44 above.

## Deception

Not all confession is sincere. For example, when people have been accused of wrongdoing, they may confess in mere pretense of repentance, or they may make a partial confession to prevent revelation of the whole truth.<sup>87</sup> Their sin having been discovered, they may see confession as a device to persuade others that repentance has taken place, thus avoiding discipline or other consequences.<sup>88</sup>

## Confession in Scriptures

We turn now to the history and practice of confession in various dispensations of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Modern Latter-day Saints have been reared to see the need for confession to one's bishop as almost self-evident, but the scriptural and historical records paint a more varied picture. The present LDS practice of confession to one's bishop relies primarily on the authority of tradition and modern-day inspiration, rather than on a specific instruction found in the standard works.<sup>89</sup>

Of the several kinds of confession—to God (in prayer), to a person offended (seeking reconciliation), to the Church congregation (either confessing specific acts or making only a general acknowledgment of wrongdoing), and to the bishop (seeking consolation, advice, and/or forgiveness)—the first three are referred to repeatedly in the scriptures. But private confession to a bishop or analogous Church officer is not ever clearly commanded, although there are several passages describing what could be private confession. The silence in the scriptures is ambiguous. It can mean that there was no regular practice of private confession, that the practice of private confession was so common as to be unre-

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<sup>87</sup>Wilcox, "Broken Hearts," 64-65.

<sup>88</sup>A factually false confession is possible, although rare. A manipulative or disturbed person could confess in a play for sympathy or notoriety.

<sup>89</sup>Russell M. Nelson, "Standards of the Lord's Standard-Bearers," *Ensign* 21 (August 1991): 11; and Neal A. Maxwell, "Repentance," 31-32, declare and encourage this practice without effort to show a scriptural basis for private confession. The latter says, "All sins are to be confessed to the Lord, some to a Church official, some to others, and some to all of these. A few may require public confession." Their emphasis in these talks to the general Church membership was on personal change, not on administrative procedure.



markable, or that the practice came into use so gradually that no one thought to comment on it.

## Bible

The Old Testament features various forms of confession.<sup>90</sup> The most prominent cases involve collective acknowledgments of sin or guilt by the assemblies of Israel. Sometimes the priest or prophet acted as voice for all. For example, once each year during the Day of Atonement ceremonies, the high priest was required to lay his hands on the head of a live goat and “confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins” (Lev. 16:21),<sup>91</sup> in particular their “premeditated, intentional sins.”<sup>92</sup> Confession transformed brazen sins “into inadvertencies,” thus making them the kind of transgression that could be expiated by sacrifice.<sup>93</sup> Other times the people themselves admitted their wrongdoings. Upon their return from Babylon, the Jews assembled together. Ezra “confessed, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God,” and the people answered, “We have trespassed against our God” (Ezra 10:1–2; see also Neh. 9:2; Lev. 26:40).<sup>94</sup>

<sup>90</sup>See generally Raffaele Pettazzoni, *La Confessione dei Peccati*, 2 vols. (Bologna: Forni, 1936). I am indebted to John W. Welch for his help, particularly in development of the biblical material.

<sup>91</sup>The liturgy of Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) included repeated recitation by the congregation of a common confession of sin. Eric Werner, *The Sacred Bridge: Liturgical Parallels in Synagogue and Early Church* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970; originally published by Columbia University Press, 1959), 12–13. The outward signs of humiliation, such as sackcloth and ashes (Neh. 9:1–3), made a public general acknowledgment of one’s sinfulness. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 9th ed., s.v. “confession.” There was also group acknowledgment of sinfulness by the whole people (Num. 21:7) and by the Levites (2 Chr. 30:22).

<sup>92</sup>Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 25.

<sup>93</sup>Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 1043. Also, after Israel had been in captivity seventy years, Daniel prayed and confessed the sins of Israel to God (Dan. 9:3–6).

<sup>94</sup>Some Christian commentators believe public confession of individual sins was also expected. Michel, “Confess,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1977), 5:202, 204–5, cites Jewish, Greek, Babylonian, and Egyptian practices of public confession before priest and the congregation. He cites Nehemiah 9:3, Daniel 9:4, 20, and Ezra 10:11, but more to the point is Ezra 9:1–2. See also Ugo Bianchi, “Confession of Sins,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade, 16 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 4:1–7.

There are also frequent references in the Old Testament to the confession of sins in prayer. In making these confessions, the penitent was encouraged to hold back nothing from the Lord. David sings, "I acknowledge my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin" (Ps. 32:5).

In addition, the Old Testament refers to individual confession in connection with sacrifice. Leviticus says of the penitent, "When he shall be guilty in one of these things, that he shall confess that he hath sinned in that thing: And he shall bring his trespass offering unto the Lord for his sin . . . and the priest shall make an atonement for him [by sacrifice]" (Lev. 5:5-6; see also Num. 5:7-8).<sup>95</sup> Commentaries emphasize the importance of verbalizing such confessions,<sup>96</sup> saying, "A guilt-offering requires the laying on of hands [by the sinner], as do all private animal sacrifices. . . . He confesses over it the sin of which he is guilty. . . . The guilt-offering requires a particular (expressed) intention that it shall atone for the sin on account of which it is offered."<sup>97</sup>

An obvious connection existed between confession and sacrifice, but a personal connection did not necessarily exist between confession and the Israelite priest. If the confession were spoken aloud, the priest undoubtedly heard it, as might others attending the sacrifice, but the Old Testament does not indicate that the confession was made to the priest as such or to the public. Since the priest was concerned with the sacrifice and apparently had no

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<sup>95</sup>"The sacrificial cult provided for a sin-offering, which was brought to the altar by the offender, who made a confession of his misdeeds while laying both hands upon the head of the sacrificial animal." Isaac Landman, "Confession," in *The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, ed. Issac Landman, 10 vols. (New York: Universal Jewish Encyclopedia, 1941), 3:328. See also Jacob Milgrom, "Repentance," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Cecil Roth and Geoffrey Wigoder, 17 vols. (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971), 14:73-78.

<sup>96</sup>Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 301.

<sup>97</sup>Meyer Berlin, ed., *Encyclopedia Talmudica*, 3 vols. (Jerusalem: Talmudic Encyclopedia Institute, 1978), 3:133. The sin offering made atonement for the person, whereas the trespass offering atoned for a specific offense committed through ignorance or where the wrongdoer voluntarily confessed. The law offered no atonement for intentional wrongs without confession. Alfred Ederheim, *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services as They Were at the Time of Jesus Christ* (New York and Chicago: Fleming H. Revell, 1874), 100-101.



counseling role with respect to the confessed information, it appears that the confession was directed solely to God,<sup>98</sup> not only in the form of an admission of guilt, but also in praise of God. The English word *confession* has several meanings, religious, legal, and social, but the Hebrew word *yadah* has an even broader range of meanings. While it often means to confess sin, its root concept is to acknowledge, such as to recognize one's human nature, to confess or extol God's character, to praise or to give thanks.<sup>99</sup>

The later Rabbinic tradition held that "public confession of sin was frowned upon as displaying a lack of shame except when the transgressions were committed publicly."<sup>100</sup> In Judaism, generally, "confession, whether collective or individual, is always made directly to God and never through an intermediary,"<sup>101</sup> unless a required confession to an injured party is rejected by that person, in which case the confession may be made to "a quorum of ten, and God would then forgive."<sup>102</sup>

There are also biblical incidents of involuntary confession in response to accusation. Joshua singled out Achan, who had disobediently hidden spoils from the conquest of Jericho, and said, "My son, give, I pray thee, glory to the Lord God of Israel, and make confession unto him; and tell me now what thou hast done; hide it not from me" (Josh. 7:19). Thus challenged, Achan confessed his wrong and was consequently executed (Josh. 7:16-25). Similarly, in the face of accusation, Saul made confession to the

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<sup>98</sup>The offerer of the sacrifice laid hands on the animal and prayed, "I entreat, O Jehovah: I have sinned, I have done perversely, I have rebelled, I have committed [naming the sin]; but I return in repentance, and let this be for my atonement." Edersheim, *The Temple at the Time of Jesus Christ*, 88.

<sup>99</sup>See G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1986-), 5:427-43. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 1:364.

<sup>100</sup>Milgrom, "Repentance," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 14:75.

<sup>101</sup>"Confession of Sins," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 5:879. In the two thousand years since the destruction of Herod's temple, there has been no priestly function of sacrifice; if private confession ever was used, it has no place in the ongoing Judaic tradition. Rabbis are teachers, not priests, and have no responsibility to receive confessions. They may, of course, in counseling hear admissions of wrongdoing in the same way Protestant ministers do.

<sup>102</sup>Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 303.



prophet Samuel (1 Sam. 15:24), and David confessed to the prophet Nathan (2 Sam. 12:13).<sup>103</sup> In whatever manner, sins must be brought to light and purged. The wisdom of Proverbs admonishes: “He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy” (Prov. 28:13).

In the New Testament, the most common meanings of the word *exomologeo*, “to confess openly,” are to make a solemn statement of faith, to confess Jesus Christ (Phil. 2:11), to testify, to agree, to admit, or to praise God (Rom. 15:7-13).<sup>104</sup> The word also means to confess sin, without implying when or how. James admonished the Saints, “Confess your faults one to another” (James 5:16), apparently calling for public confession, either general<sup>105</sup> or specific, within the Church setting.<sup>106</sup> People who went to the river to be baptized by John the Baptist confessed their sins (Matt. 3:6; Mark 1:5), whether privately, publicly, or silently we are not told.<sup>107</sup> Elsewhere in the New Testament there are indications of communal acknowledgment of sin, individual reconciling with

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<sup>103</sup>In the face of death, Yucatec Indians publicly confessed their acts of homicide, theft, adultery, and so on—confessions that posed serious problems for them if they survived. Francisco Guerra, *The Pre-Columbian Mind* (London and New York: Seminar, 1971) quoted in Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1973), 182-83. See also H. H. Cohn, *Human Rights in Jewish Law* (New York: Ktav Publishing, 1984), 216, which states, “Before a death sentence is executed, the accused is asked to confess before God in order that he may not lose his share in the world-to-come.” Compare to the public confession of Sherem (Jacob 7:19). These confessions are of somewhat different character than those induced by inner persuasion alone.

<sup>104</sup>Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1967), 5:199-220.

<sup>105</sup>Group liturgical confession of fault was a Judaic practice that carried over into Christianity. Joseph A. Favazza, *The Order of Penitents* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1988), 120.

<sup>106</sup>Acts 19:18-19 tells that, when certain Ephesians believed, they “confessed, and shewed their deeds. Many of them also which used curious arts brought their books together, and burned them before all men.”

<sup>107</sup>The covenant ceremony for entry into the Qumran community involved a ritual confession of shared responsibility for the sins of the children of Israel and a baptism. Michael A. Knibb, *The Qumran Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 82-83, 85, 92 (citing 1 QS 1:24). See also James C. Vanderkam, “Implications for the History of Judaism and Christianity,” in *The Dead Sea Scrolls after Forty Years*, ed. Hershel Shanks and others (Washington, D.C.: Biblical Archeology Society, 1991), 34.



a brother whom one has offended, and also public confession, but there is no commandment to make private confession to a priestly officer. However, the lack of a commandment in the New Testament does not mean private confession did not occur, considering that today private confession is the norm without any direct command from the scriptures.<sup>108</sup>

## Book of Mormon

The Book of Mormon teaches general confession—acknowledging wrongdoing without necessarily giving specifics. For example, when the multitude to whom King Benjamin preached comprehended their nothingness, they made general confession: “O have mercy, and apply the atoning blood of Christ that we may receive forgiveness of our sins” (Mosiah 4:2). Christ commanded reconciliation, which may involve the sinner confessing to those offended: “[If thou] rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee—Go thy way unto thy brother, and first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come unto me with full purpose of heart, and I will receive you” (3 Ne. 12:23–24; see also Matt. 5:23–24). Moroni described general confession to the Church: “Neither did they receive any unto baptism save they came forth with a broken heart and a contrite spirit, and witnessed unto the church that they truly repented of all their sins” (Moro. 6:2).<sup>109</sup>

A passage strongly suggesting private confession to a Church leader tells that when the preaching of Samuel the Lamanite brought people to repentance, “they confessed unto [Nephi] their

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<sup>108</sup>Christ’s giving his apostles power to forgive sins sets the scene for private confession, but does not in itself require it. Christian historians find no direct evidence of auricular (private) confession. Favazza, *Order of Penitents*, 77, 81. But some from the Catholic tradition infer its existence. Jeffrey John, “‘Authority Given to Men’: The Doctrinal Basis of Ministerial Absolution in the New Testament,” in Dudley and Rowell, *Confession and Absolution*, 33–36.

<sup>109</sup>These passages appear to involve general liturgical confessions rather than detailed descriptions of specific sins. Other Book of Mormon scriptures involving confession of wrong are Alma 1:15 (involuntary confession prior to execution); Alma 17:4 (confess sins before God); Alma 39:13 (confess to people offended); Helaman 9:17, 35, 37 (confession of crime to the judges); 3 Nephi 1:25 (believers confessed faults).

sins” as a prelude to receiving baptism (Hel. 16:1, 5).<sup>110</sup> While the passage does not specify that the confession was private and particular, it could well have been.

Confessions were also to be made to Alma in order to avoid excommunication (Mosiah 26:29, 35). Bruce R. McConkie generalizes from this text a duty of private confession,<sup>111</sup> but the specific context is a case involving only people who had been taken in iniquity and stood publicly accused. Their confession before Alma may well have been made in public (see Moro. 6:7), inasmuch as the public confessions of the sons of Mosiah were part of their effort to repair the injuries to the Church caused by their earlier public conduct (Mosiah 27:35). In any event, none of the relevant passages undertake to define what *should* be the practice universally; they primarily describe what *did* happen on those occasions.<sup>112</sup> That which has been approved on one occasion is generally permissible on another, but not necessarily required.

## Doctrine and Covenants

In the Doctrine and Covenants, most passages are general statements of the importance of confession,<sup>113</sup> but some relate specifically to confession to God,<sup>114</sup> to persons offended (D&C 42:88–92 and 64:12),<sup>115</sup> and to “thy brethren” (D&C 59:12). None appear to call for confession to a Church officer in so many words, although again that may be implied.<sup>116</sup>

<sup>110</sup>See also Helaman 5:17, where confession was followed by baptism, but nothing indicates to whom confession was made.

<sup>111</sup>McConkie, *A New Witness*, 236–37.

<sup>112</sup>The ancient scriptures are heavy on exhortation and doctrine, light on procedure (with some exceptions, such as the Pentateuch and Moroni 2–6). Consequently, one must be cautious about inferences from silence.

<sup>113</sup>Doctrine and Covenants 19:20 (Martin Harris must repent and confess his sins) and 58:43 (a sign of repentance is confession and forsaking sins). Similar statements are found in 58:60 and 61:2.

<sup>114</sup>“I, the Lord, forgive sins unto those who confess their sins before me” (D&C 64:7).

<sup>115</sup>If the offender confesses to wrongdoing, the injured person is expected to be reconciled, but if the offender does not admit the wrong, he or she should be brought before the Church for censure.

<sup>116</sup>Hoyt Brewster cites passages in the Doctrine and Covenants (19:20, 42:88, 58:42–43, 64:7) supporting the making of confession to God and to the person offended, but for confession to a priesthood leader, he cites Marion G. Romney,



The phrase “confessing thy sins unto thy brethren” in section 59 has been interpreted doctrinally as referring to confession to a bishop,<sup>117</sup> but historically it appears to be speaking of public confession, that is, confession to other Church members, such as evidently occurred in early testimony meetings.<sup>118</sup> Confession was listed as a Sabbath activity for when the Saints met together.<sup>119</sup>

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*Look to God and Live: Discourses of Marion G. Romney* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 106–7. Hoyt W. Brewster Jr., in *Doctrine and Covenants Encyclopedia* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), s.v. “confess,” 96.

<sup>117</sup>“From the Lord’s word to modern Israel—‘confessing thy sins unto thy brethren, and before the Lord’ (D&C 59:12)—it is plain that there are two confessions to make: one to the Lord and the other to ‘the brethren,’ meaning the proper ecclesiastical officers.” Spencer W. Kimball, *Miracle of Forgiveness*, 179–80. President Kimball also points out that the commandment to confess to the Lord is not inconsistent with an expectation that confession *also* be made to the bishop. But see the following note.

<sup>118</sup>Concerning testimony meeting, Spencer W. Kimball said in 1948, “The privilege is here granted for the members to bear testimony, with a ‘broken heart and a contrite spirit,’ with thanksgiving and a cheerful heart, confessing to the Lord and the brethren their imperfections, and worshipping with the brethren and sisters. The meeting belongs to the people.” E. Kimball, *Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, 138 and also see pages 96–97.

Of Doctrine and Covenants 59:12, President Kimball said, “This, of course, does not mean that the people must detail their major sins and crimes, but as has often been heard in testimonies, on fast day and otherwise, [they acknowledge weakness].” E. Kimball, *Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, 516. Specific confession is not necessarily inappropriate. Heber J. Grant recounts approvingly a testimony meeting in which the widow of one of the Apostles confessed at age 83 that she had recently overcome a coffee habit. Heber J. Grant, *Gospel Standards: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Heber J. Grant*, comp. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Improvement Era, 1941), 284–85; Heber J. Grant, *Conference Reports* (October 4, 1907), 22.

<sup>119</sup>Hyrum Smith interpreted the phrase as referring to confession of faults to one another. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 6:299 (hereafter cited as *HC*). And Brigham Young repeatedly and consistently alluded to this commandment when he spoke of the Sabbath as a day on which the Saints were to meet and confess to one another. Young, in *JD*, 6:278, August 29, 1852; 9:369, August 31, 1862; 10:187, May 31, 1863; 15:82, June 2, 1872; 16:168, August 31, 1873. Compare to his expressed concern that public confession in excess can also be unwise. Young, in *JD*, 4:78–79, November 9, 1856; 8:362, March 10, 1860.

Other recognitions that the Saints are to confess to one another are found in Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Joseph F. Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1919), 245; Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), s.v. “fast meetings,” 277; Newquist, *Gospel Truth*, 176.

Furthermore, in 1831, when the revelation in section 59 was received, Edward Partridge was the only bishop in the Church, having been called a few months earlier with responsibility to be concerned about the temporal affairs of the whole Church, not to minister to the spiritual needs of individuals (D&C 41:9). The various organized branches of the Church were under the direction of a presiding elder, analogous in function to the modern bishop,<sup>120</sup> but nowhere is the responsibility of receiving private confession formally given to the presiding elder, either. If private confession occurred, it was a matter of unrecorded practice.

There is no mention of confession in the Pearl of Great Price.

## Confession in LDS Church History

### Foundation Years

The precise LDS understanding and practice of confession in the early years of the Church are not easily established.<sup>121</sup> Nor were they necessarily uniform. Understanding of doctrine, organizational structure, and practice changed over time as experience, new revelations, and growth necessitated adapting previous perceptions.

Early Mormon journals refer to confession at baptism. Sometimes apparently what was meant is simply being repentant or perhaps it is acknowledging in a general open way one's sinfulness and expressing a desire to live righteously and make a commitment to God in baptism. The descriptions of early missionary activity seem to indicate that baptism followed belief and desire but not

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<sup>120</sup>James B. Allen, Ronald K. Esplin, and David J. Whittaker, *Men with a Mission, 1837-1841* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 102. See also James B. Allen and Thomas G. Alexander, eds., *Manchester Mormons: The Journal of William Clayton, 1840 to 1842* (Santa Barbara and Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1974), relating Clayton's activities as presiding elder in Manchester, England.

<sup>121</sup>*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* contains no entry that relates specifically to private confession, although Joseph Smith taught that a person should confess to another he had injured, and he also spoke of the obligation of the Twelve and all Saints to "be willing to confess all their sins, and not keep back a part." *TPJS*, 155.



private confession.<sup>122</sup> There is a sense of drawing in believers, not of screening out the unworthy. If people, however sinful in the past, heard and accepted the gospel and wished to undertake the covenant of baptism in this small, unpopular, even persecuted sect, that was evidence enough of repentance without detailing their preconversion sins to anyone but God.<sup>123</sup> As with current instructions, which only a few kinds of previous misconduct need be disclosed by the person applying for baptism, early Church practice apparently did not involve rehearsing to one person prior to one's baptism a list of sinful acts.<sup>124</sup>

Wards were first designated in Nauvoo in 1839. The bishops of those wards were to look out for the physical welfare of people

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<sup>122</sup>For purposes of comparison, the Campbellites received members "on confession [of faith] and baptism, without further examination, whereas Baptists required the telling of an 'experience' and a vote by the church." Winfred E. Garrison and Alfred T. DeGroot, *The Disciples of Christ: A History*, rev. ed. (St. Louis: Bethany, 1958), 204. The Methodists required prospective members to pass through a probationary period and to participate in "class meetings," which were weekly gatherings of a group of about a dozen under direction of a leader who would ask members individually about their lives and temptations, expecting voluntary confession in this small group. Halford E. Luccock and Paul Hutchinson, *The Story of Methodism* (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1926), 168–73.

<sup>123</sup>George Morris details the confession he made to God before his baptism: "About a week before I was baptized [on June 28, 1841] . . . I prayed to my Heavenly Father in secret and confessed my sins . . . as I lay prostrate on the ground." George Morris, autobiography, typescript, Special Collections and Manuscripts, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 15 (hereafter cited as BYU Archives). The emphasis seems to be on commitment and change. Silence about the necessity for either private or public confession of specific sins leaves open both possibilities—that it was required and that it was not—although the more likely explanation for silence is that no such particularized confession was expected.

<sup>124</sup>A man seeking a sign was accused by Joseph Smith of adultery, to which the man confessed when he was later baptized. The way this unusual event is reported suggests it was a public confession. The man, who had been publicly accused, might have wanted now, as a believer, to vindicate the Prophet by making public confession. *TPJS*, 278.

At an 1839 conference, "John Gaylord was admitted into the Church upon his confession." This suggests public confession as a requirement for baptism, but it is not clear whether that was a confession of sins or a confession of faith. *HC*, 4:13. Orson Pratt, however, more specifically reported, "There were two who came forward repenting and confessing their sins, and were baptized." Orson Pratt, *Orson Pratt Journals*, comp. Elden J. Watson (Salt Lake City: Elden J. Watson, 1975), 37.



in their area, particularly the poor. They did not conduct worship services or have primary responsibility for spiritual matters; they were almost exclusively temporal officers.<sup>125</sup> Bishops left spiritual matters to the high priests. Worship services were held not by wards, but by groups meeting in private homes, by priesthood quorums, or by the whole community.<sup>126</sup>

While there is no clear documentary indication in early practice that confessing sin privately to the presiding elder of a branch was expected,<sup>127</sup> numerous indications exist of public confession—either of individuals before the congregation or of small groups in mutual confessions—as an exercise in piety or reconciliation. The Doctrine and Covenants reference to the Sabbath day as a time for “confessing thy sins before thy brethren” could apply to either or both. Various occasions for confession can be documented—apologizing to persons offended,<sup>128</sup> working out of interpersonal relations,<sup>129</sup> responding

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<sup>125</sup>The three wards and bishops in 1839 increased to ten in 1845. Allen and Leonard, *Story of the Latter-day Saints*, 161–63. William Clayton records the appointment of four bishops for Nauvoo in 1841. Allen and Alexander, *Manchester Mormons*, 206–7. See also William G. Hartley, “Nauvoo Stake, Priesthood Quorums, and the Church’s First Wards,” *BYU Studies* 32 (winter/spring 1992): 60–63; William G. Hartley, “Mormon Sundays,” *Ensign* 18 (January 1978): 21.

<sup>126</sup>Allen and Leonard, *Story of the Latter-day Saints*, 78. See also David C. Bradford, “Bishop, History of the Office,” in *EM*, 1:119.

<sup>127</sup>William Clayton was presiding elder in Manchester, England and much involved in the personal lives of Church members, conferring about their doubts, struggles, and sins. He describes public admission of wrongdoing (particularly after accusation or excommunication), public reconciliation (by confession) with persons offended, and admissions of guilt to him as presiding elder when he inquired about allegations of wrongdoing. He does not mention private confessions made to him spontaneously as a prerequisite to receiving God’s forgiveness, although his account also does not rule that out. See Allen and Alexander, *Manchester Mormons*, 65, 71, 73, 92, 130, 199, 205.

<sup>128</sup>Gregory R. Knight, “Journal of Thomas Bullock,” *BYU Studies* 31 (winter 1991): 75. Bullock and his wife Lucy mutually asked forgiveness “for all past offenses.”

<sup>129</sup>When Hyrum Smith pointed out that carping among a group of Saints traveling together created bad feelings, “we saw the evil, felt humble and readily confessed to each other and to God and with uplifted hands covenanted to forget and forgive.” “Journey of the Church of Pontiac on Its Journey to Zion,” 1834, typescript, Archives Division Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, 3 (hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives).



to demands of Church discipline,<sup>130</sup> and preparing to partake of the sacrament.<sup>131</sup>

People who had been found guilty by a Church court were often asked to make public confession. For example, in 1840 the

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On another occasion, Warren Foote reported:

After meeting . . . they thought it best to have a general settling up, and confessions. There were considerable wrangling, but they succeeded in getting things fixed up by twelve o'clock at night. Not being a member of the church, of course I had nothing to say. . . . We had trouble in the camp again. After considerable talking in tongues, and confessions, it was again settled. (Warren Foote, *Warren Foote Autobiography*, comp. Garth Homer Killpack, typescript, 3 vols., BYU Archives, 1:17, 18)

<sup>130</sup>In the late 1830s in England, transgressors “were asked to confess their transgressions in open meeting”—although perhaps not in explicit detail—and thereby help from the Saints was mobilized. Allen and others, *Men with a Mission*, 103; James B. Allen, *Trials of Discipleship: The Story of William Clayton, a Mormon* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 26, 31–32. See also Doctrine and Covenants 20:69 (1830) and 46:4 (1831).

In the congregation at Ramus, Illinois, several men who had disrupted the meeting “concluded to make a partial confession which they did to keep themselves from being disfellowshipped by the Church.” Joel Johnson, excerpts from autobiography, 1802–1868, typescript, BYU Archives, 9.

<sup>131</sup>W. W. Phelps to Sally Phelps, October 27, 1835, demonstrates that the Saints met to “partake of the sacrament of the Lord Jesus, confessing their sins according to the commandments.” Bruce A. Van Orden, ed., “Writing to Zion: The William W. Phelps Kirtland Letters (1835–1836),” *BYU Studies* 33, no. 3 (1993): 567.

At a Sunday meeting in Montrose, “Uncle John Smith . . . called upon all who had hardness and who had transgressed to confess and repent. . . . After many had confessed he called upon myself and Brother Nickerson to break bread and administer which was done.” William Clayton diary, March 28, 1841, typescript, BYU Archives, 99–100.

John R. Winder said that when he first attended church as a new member, “time was given [by the presiding officer] for any who had been overtaken in a fault to make confession before partaking of the sacrament of the Lord’s supper.” Winder, *Conference Reports* (October 6, 1902), 82.

During a shipboard meeting, March 7, 1841, the presiding elder admonished none to take the sacrament unless they were reconciled. Hiram [Hyrum] Clark, who had been accused of acting “unseemingly” toward some of the women, “begged their forgiveness. Many shed tears at his humility. His case was not put to a vote.” Alexander Neibaur diary, 1841–62, typescript, BYU Archives, 4.

At a meeting of the Massachusetts Conference (1835), Elder Chase was deprived of his membership “because of gambling for money, and then breaking bread to the Saints before he confessed his sins.” *HC*, 2:241.

Kirtland elders quorum “voted [Charles Wood’s] Licence be taken from him and withheld untill he make satisfaction by confession to the Church.”<sup>132</sup> Similarly, in 1841 Hyland Davis “come before the meetting and made confession and on the sabbath following went before the congregation and made his acknowledgment and was forgiven and the hand of fellowship was restored.”<sup>133</sup> And the same year, “it was voted that Brother Kerr was out of order on the last Sabauth and that he make a publick confesion of the Same.”<sup>134</sup> The same practice is reflected in the *Far West Record*.<sup>135</sup> In each case, the confession responded to an accusation, and sometimes, at least, the council voted on whether the acknowledgment was satisfactory. On occasion, the confession was found to be inadequate.<sup>136</sup>

Voluntary mutual confession (not required or in response to accusation) also occurred in the Kirtland elders quorum. Joseph Smith, on January 23, 1836, recorded, “Elder Alma Beaman had been tempted to doubt the things [spiritual experiences] which we received the evenings before, and he made an humble confession, and asked forgiveness of the school, which was joyfully accorded him, and he said he would try to resist Satan in the future.”<sup>137</sup> And the next day, the Prophet recorded that he “called upon the High Council of Kirtland to proceed and confess their sins, as they might

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In a Sunday meeting, “a number of the church then expressed their feelings by way of confessions. . . . We broke bread and then closed. . . . [In a Friday meeting,] a number of confessions were made of Coldness and a want of attention to prayrs &c.” Jan Shipps and John W. Welch, eds., *The Journals of William E. McLellin, 1831-1836* (BYU Studies and University of Illinois Press: Provo, Utah, and Urbana, 1994), 144, 146.

<sup>132</sup>Lyndon W. Cook and Milton V. Backman Jr., eds., *Kirtland Elders’ Quorum Record: 1836-1841* (Provo, Utah: Grandin Book, 1985), 50 (March 13, 1840). In another case, Dr. P. Hurlburt was restored (June 21, 1833) to good standing in the Church upon his confession to the Church court that was considering his case on appeal. George A. Smith, in *JD*, 11:8, November 15, 1864; *HC*, 1:354.

<sup>133</sup>Cook and Backman, *Kirtland Elders’ Quorum Record* (March 1, 1841), 53.

<sup>134</sup>Cook and Backman, *Kirtland Elders’ Quorum Record* (July 11, 1841), 60.

<sup>135</sup>“Whatever the charge, a humble confession was, almost without exception, rewarded with forgiveness.” Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *Far West Record: Minutes of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830-1844* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), xiv.

<sup>136</sup>For example, see *HC*, 2:346, 510.

<sup>137</sup>*HC*, 2:384-85. See also Cook and Backman, *Kirtland Elders’ Quorum Record*, 2 n. 1.



be directed by the Spirit, and they occupied the first part of the day, and confessed and exhorted as the Spirit led.”<sup>138</sup>

We do not know how explicit these confessions were. Responses to accusations are in their nature specific, but spontaneous confessions may be more general. The only wholly voluntary confession whose content was reported in the *Far West Record* is Heber C. Kimball’s statement that “wherein he had been out of the way, in any manner, he ment to mend in that thing.”<sup>139</sup> However, on one occasion William Smith and several others made public confession that they had wrongly believed Joseph was in transgression.<sup>140</sup> And when called to be in the high council across the river from Nauvoo, Ephraim Owens apparently declined,

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<sup>138</sup>*HC*, 2:385; Dean C. Jessee, ed. and comp., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 149. Oliver Cowdery’s diary for January 17, 1836, says, “The quorums of the Church were organized in the presence of the Church, and commenced confessing their faults and asking forgiveness. The Holy Spirit rested upon us.” Leonard J. Arrington, ed., “Oliver Cowdery’s Kirtland, Ohio, ‘Sketch Book,’” *BYU Studies* 12 (summer 1972): 416. In a letter, William Phelps describes the January 16 meeting of the Presidency, the Kirtland and Zion high councils, the Twelve, the seven Presidents of the Seventy, and the two bishops and their counselors: “The presidents commenced the meeting by confessing their sins and forgiving their brethren and the world. . . . The Lord poured out his Spirit in such a manner as you never witnessed. . . . When I was speaking, which was but few words, the Spirit of the Lord came upon me so that I could not speak, and I cried as little children cry in earnest.” Van Orden, “Writing to Zion,” 576.

The *Kirtland Elders’ Quorum Record* refers to mutual confessions but only in the first few weeks of meetings, suggesting that the practice continued only in the quorum’s organizational phase. Less than voluntary confessions also occurred when one was found guilty of improper behavior and acknowledged that wrong as a condition of continued fellowship in the quorum. Cook and Backman, *Kirtland Elders’ Quorum Record*, 2, 6, 8, 10, and 43, 52, 56.

<sup>139</sup>Cannon and Cook, *Far West Record*, 221. Jared Carter confessed publicly. “He did not, however, state what he had done that was wrong; nevertheless his confession was received.” Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1995), 212; reprint of 1853 publication. It was public knowledge that Carter had opposed Joseph Smith in Kirtland.

<sup>140</sup>Daniel Tyler, “Recollections of the Prophet Joseph Smith,” *Juvenile Instructor* 27 (February 15, 1892): 128. Joseph had prophesied that those who believed him to be in transgression would receive a testimony to the contrary. The next week his brother William and others confessed they had done so.

confessing publicly that he had disobeyed the Word of Wisdom.<sup>141</sup> Similarly, Luke Johnson asked to be excused from sitting on a council “because he had been previously tempted on some matters, and that he had sinned, and wished to make a more public confession than he could make here.”<sup>142</sup> At a meeting on the plains, Orson Hyde “preached his celebrated bogus sermon, denouncing all bogus makers, counterfeiter thieves &c & commanding all such & all who knew of any such to come forth with and tell him & also absolved them from all former acts and covenants to keep secrets. This made quite a stir & caused some to ‘confess their sins.’”<sup>143</sup>

### Early Pioneer Period

Although before and during the Nauvoo period, bishops were mainly temporal officers, concerned with Church properties and caring for the poor, in Winter Quarters during the move westward, the bishop’s role began to change. Five hundred men had left to serve in the Mormon Battalion, leaving many families behind who needed attention. In establishing Winter Quarters, the city council, under direction of Brigham Young, organized the city first into thirteen wards<sup>144</sup> and then into twenty-two,<sup>145</sup> each with a bishop to “see that none suffer” and “to have meetings in their several Wards for the men women & children once a week also to . . . have schools in their Wards.”<sup>146</sup>

In Utah the spiritual responsibility of bishops continued to increase.<sup>147</sup> Salt Lake City had five wards in 1847,<sup>148</sup> which

<sup>141</sup>Joseph G. Stevenson, ed., *The Life and History, Elder Edward Stevenson*, October 5, 1839, holograph, LDS Church Archives, 178 (page 74 of typescript).

<sup>142</sup>*HC*, 2:151.

<sup>143</sup>Juanita Brooks, ed., *On the Mormon Frontier: The Diary of Hosea Stout, 1844-1861*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1964), 1:261 (June 20, 1847).

<sup>144</sup>Brooks, *Hosea Stout*, 1:203, 205 (October 2 and 18, 1846).

<sup>145</sup>Brooks, *Hosea Stout*, 1:213-14, 222 (November 25-26, 1846, and January 2, 1847).

<sup>146</sup>Brooks, *Hosea Stout*, 1:217-18 (December 13, 1846). See also Bradford, “Bishop, History of the Office,” in *EM*, 1:119.

<sup>147</sup>When Albert Thurber in 1849 asked a friend to baptize him, the friend had to get permission from his bishop. Helen Thurber Dalton, “Journal and Diary of Albert King Thurber,” *Treasures of Pioneer History* (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1954), 3:272. See also Hartley, “Mormon Sundays,”



increased to nineteen in 1849,<sup>149</sup> and the bishops began to assume religious leadership in the community, holding weekly meetings and a monthly testimony meeting.<sup>150</sup> In that context, there came to be a mix of public and private confession.<sup>151</sup>

## The “Mormon Reformation”

During the powerful revival of 1856–57, commonly called by historians the Mormon Reformation,<sup>152</sup> great emphasis was placed

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22–23: “Meetinghouses for each ward made ward sacrament meetings and Sunday Schools possible for the first time. . . . Gradually community (or stake) sacrament meetings were replaced by ward meetings.”

<sup>148</sup>Eugene E. Campbell, *Establishing Zion: The Mormon Church in the American West, 1847–1869* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988), 18–19.

<sup>149</sup>Campbell, *Establishing Zion*, 159.

<sup>150</sup>Allen and Leonard, *Story of the Latter-day Saints*, 276–77. The nineteen city wards and six rural wards of the Salt Lake Stake remained static until 1877, when ten new wards were organized to help serve the greatly increased population of 20,000. [Howard] Stansbury, *Exploration of the Valley of the Great Salt Lake* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), 131, says that bishops “exercised not only a spiritual but temporal authority.” B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Century One*, 6 vols. (Provo, Utah: Corporation of the President, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1965), 3:452 n. 10 (hereafter cited as *CHC*).

<sup>151</sup>A statement by Orson Hyde in 1855 suggests that private confession may have been more prevalent than revealed by the record. In speaking of Heber Kimball and Jedediah Grant’s criticism of some people, he said, “I will not say by what means they were posted [became informed], whether by private confession of some conscience-smitten guilty participant in things not right, or by the common and ordinary means of knowledge.” Orson Hyde, in *JD*, 2:207, March 18, 1855. See also the letter to Wilford Woodruff cited in note 66, and Brigham Young’s statement, “I mourn and lament when any of my brethren come to me and confess that they have been guilty of this or that crime.” Young, in *JD*, 10:2, September 28, 1862.

<sup>152</sup>Paul H. Peterson, “The Mormon Reformation of 1856–57: The Rhetoric and the Reality,” *Journal of Mormon History* 15 (1989): 59–87. This reformation period is strongly reminiscent of Alma 5–6, and Alma 45:22. After burning feverishly through the latter part of 1856, the height of the revival was over by spring, particularly with the approach of Johnston’s Army. However, “thousands of Saints had submitted to the catechism, had openly confessed their sins of commission and omission, and had gone again into the waters of baptism for a renewal of their covenants.” Gene A. Sessions, *Mormon Thunder: A Documentary History of Jedediah Morgan Grant* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 259. Wilford Woodruff wrote that “some of the fruits are, all have confessed their sins either great or small, restored their stolen property; all have been baptized from the Presidency down; all are trying to pay their tithing.” Wilford Woodruff to George A. Smith, April, 1, 1857, in Sessions, *Mormon Thunder*, 259.



on a spiritual housecleaning. Early in that revivalist movement spearheaded by President Jedediah M. Grant,<sup>153</sup> there were some overzealous expectations of public confession,<sup>154</sup> but public confession was soon replaced with private confession<sup>155</sup> to a bishop or block teacher.<sup>156</sup> Richard Ballantine reported during early December of 1856:

During the week we met the people of each block in private houses each day at ten o'clock. We had power given us to melt the hearts of

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<sup>153</sup>Sessions, *Mormon Thunder*, 270, 272. Wilford Woodruff was also much involved. Alexander, "Wilford Woodruff and the Mormon Reformation of 1855-57," *Dialogue* 32 (summer 1992): 25-39. According to Woodruff's journal, he confessed his faults to his families and "told my families theirs." Wilford Woodruff, *Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 1833-1898, Typescript*, ed. Scott G. Kenney, 9 vols. (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983-84), 4:474 (hereafter cited as *WWJ*).

<sup>154</sup>Daniel Wood indicated that "thirty-seven people confessed to having wronged [him] by stealing, telling lies, etc." Davis Bitton, *Guide to Mormon Diaries and Autobiographies* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1977), 388.

Jedediah Grant stated, "In some of the wards men will rise up and confess their sins, and after a week's reflection, they will go to meeting and commence parrying [*sic*], and make themselves as good as an angel." Jedediah M. Grant, in *JD*, 4:74, November 2, 1856. During the Reformation, people were sometimes called on to speak in meetings and were expected to confess their sins. Rachel Lee notes confession of sloth (April 27, 1856), opposition to leaders (February 5, 1857), and faults (June 27, 1958). Journal of Rachel Andora Woolsey Lee, 1856-1860 (BYU Archives). An incident of public confession of adultery is reported in [William W. Bishop, ed.,] *Mormonism Unveiled: Life and Confessions of John D. Lee* (St. Louis: James H. Mason, 1891), 280-83.

<sup>155</sup>Heber C. Kimball, January 11, 1857, gave the following instructions:

Call upon the High Priests, the Seventies, Elders, Priests, Teachers, and Deacons, and first cleanse those ruling members, those that hold the Priesthood; and if you find those that deserve to be severed from the Church, sever them. Do not call in the females, when catechizing the males; but when you have done with them, then call the females together and talk to them and show them their duty. . . . Do not make that public . . . which should be kept private, lest you do more harm than good. (Heber C. Kimball, in *JD*, 4:172, January 11, 1857)

<sup>156</sup>"And all the bishops [or teachers they assigned] had to get the people one by one by themselves and ask them these questions that were on the code of laws. And if the people had broken any of these laws, they were told to do so no more, and they were all forgiven for what they had done." John Lowe Butler Autobiography, quoted in William G. Hartley, *My Best for the Kingdom: History of John Lowe Butler, a Mormon Frontiersman* (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1993), 299. See also Allen, *Trials of Discipleship*, 270.



the people. . . . Many confessed their sins in part and resolved to work righteousness. We had power in some meetings to tell each one by name of their condition and of their besetting sins. Afterward we blessed them.<sup>157</sup>

Although bishops were sometimes involved, the person normally assigned in the Reformation to question ward members and to receive such confession was the teacher,<sup>158</sup> who went from house

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<sup>157</sup>Journal of Richard Ballantine, quoted in Biography of Richard Ballantine, typescript, LDS Church Archives, 105. Although this sounds like public confession, he also wrote a week earlier, on November 28, about catechizing sixteen teachers of the First Ward: "There was no lack of confidence in revealing their feelings, though they were not called upon nor allowed to reveal individual acts except in so far as they were public." Biography of Richard Ballantine, 104.

Hannah King, a critical observer, wrote, "The people . . . were told to get up in meeting and confess their sins. They did so 'till it was sickening, and brought disease.'" King expressed relief when what she perceived to be bullying of the people was over. Hannah King Journals, October 8, 1856, quoted in Sessions, *Mormon Thunder*, 221, 259. A discussion of King's reaction appears also in Rebecca Bartholomew, *Audacious Women: Early British Mormon Immigrants* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 207.

That the pressure to confess might have been distressing is suggested by a letter from an anti-Mormon Indian agent named Garland Hurt to non-Mormon Governor Cumming. Hurt states that in October 1856

a proclamation issued from the Lord's anointed, announcing the solemn fact that the people had violated their covenants with God and commanding them indiscriminately to bow at the Confessional, and repair to the streams of the mountains and be baptized forth with. . . . I have seen men and women, weeping in the utterest agonies of soul, and when I attempted to console them would say, they abhorred the idea of being forced into a confessional but dare not refuse. (Bigler, "Garland Hurt," 162 n. 52)

The strictness of these expectations led some members to apostatize. Anna Jean Backus, *Mountain Meadows Witness: The Life and Times of Bishop Philip Klingensmith* (Spokane: Arthur H. Clark, 1995), 94. Opponents of the Church made much of the rhetoric about the sinfulness of the Saints, without taking into account the high standards aspired to and the zeal to motivate the Saints that may have led leaders to exaggeration. *CHC*, 4:124.

<sup>158</sup>While this interrogation by the teachers was more formal and more extensive than ever before, the responsibility of teachers from the beginning was to be overseers of conduct. Among other things, "the teacher's duty is to watch over the church always . . . And see that there is no iniquity in the church, . . . and also see that all the members do their duty" (D&C 20:53–55). See also Mosiah 26:7, where wrongdoers among Church members were "delivered up unto the priests by the teachers."

to house with a printed list, asking twenty-seven questions.<sup>159</sup> Thirteen questions dealt with various forms of dishonesty (not paying debts, using others' water, oppressing employees, branding strays, and the like); the remainder asked about murder, betrayal, adultery, swearing, coveting, intoxication,<sup>160</sup> tithing, teaching one's family the gospel, disloyalty to the Church and its teachings, praying, Sabbath observance, attendance at meetings, being a good parent, and bathing.

In 1860, Brigham Young reflected concern for the possible negative effects of detailed public confession:

Were I to relate here to you my private faults from day to day, it would . . . not strengthen either the speaker or the hearer, and would give the enemy more power. Thus far, I would say, we are justified in what some call dissembling. . . . Many of the brethren chew tobacco . . . If you must use tobacco, put a small portion in your mouth when no person sees you. . . .

But if you have stolen your neighbour's cattle, own it, and restore the property, with fourfold if it is requested. . . . I believe in

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In the nineteenth century, the teacher was an adult with the specific calling to visit the homes of the members. This function has been known by various names: block teacher, ward teacher, and home teacher. On the shift from adult teachers to youthful teachers, see William G. Hartley, "The Priesthood Reorganization of 1877: Brigham Young's Last Achievement," *BYU Studies* 20 (fall 1979): 23; and Hartley, "Ordained and Acting Teachers," 375-98.

<sup>159</sup>Peterson, "The Mormon Reformation," 70. Another version of the catechism, covering nearly the same ground in eighteen questions, was used in May 1857 in Fort Supply. See Brooks, *Mountain Meadows Massacre*, 12 n. 2. See also Allen, *Trials of Discipleship*, 270, and Sessions, *Mormon Thunder*, 220-21, which states the checklist was administered to General Authorities, bishops, and teachers.

<sup>160</sup>The concern only with intoxication reflects the fact that the Word of Wisdom was not yet as important a symbol as it was to become. But see notes 12 and 192. Leonard J. Arrington, "Have the Saints Always Given as Much Emphasis to the Word of Wisdom as They Do Today?" *Ensign* 7 (April 1977): 32; Paul H. Peterson, "An Historical Analysis of the Word of Wisdom" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1972); Robert J. McCue, "Did the Word of Wisdom Become a Commandment in 1851?" *Dialogue* 14 (fall 1981): 66-77; Thomas G. Alexander, "The Word of Wisdom: From Principle to Requirement," *Dialogue* 14 (fall 1981): 78-88. Members were always admonished to observe this wise counsel; strict adherence became an explicit temple recommend requirement in 1921. Alexander, "Word of Wisdom," 82. See also Graffam, *School of the Prophets*, 33 (Apostles negligent as to Word of Wisdom), 42 and 48 (need to set example), and 53 (considered commandment).



coming out and being plain and honest with that which should be made public, and in keeping to yourselves that which should be kept. If you have your weaknesses, keep them hid from your brethren as much as you can. . . . Confess your secret sins to your God, and forsake them, and he will forgive them; confess to your brethren your sins against them, and make all right, and they will forgive, and all will be right.

Keep your follies that do not concern others to yourselves.<sup>161</sup>

He thought it better for people to try to live up to their public image than to admit their faults in public and thus confirm their secret weaknesses.<sup>162</sup> Still, some degree of public confession persisted. For instance, in 1883 small group confession was practiced among the Twelve and in the School of the Prophets.<sup>163</sup> The same year, John Taylor referred to an expectation of public confession of adultery or fornication.<sup>164</sup> In connection with the dedication of the Salt Lake Temple in April 1893, the First Presidency called for

<sup>161</sup>Young, in *JD*, 8:361–62, March 10, 1860. See also Young, in *JD*, 4:78–79, November 9, 1856; and 4:286, March 15, 1857.

<sup>162</sup>“[In dealing with members’ shortcomings,] do not make that public . . . which should be kept private, lest you do more harm than good.” H. Kimball, in *JD*, 4:172, January 11, 1857 (see full quote in note 155, above). Spencer W. Kimball told a group of missionaries that people should not talk about their old sins that were previously confessed. Remaining silent about one’s past weakness is not hypocrisy, but proper reticence. E. Kimball, *Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, 96.

<sup>163</sup>Graffam, *School of the Prophets*, 33–36, 48, 59–63.

<sup>164</sup>Graffam, *School of the Prophets*, 29. On September 5, 1886, stake president Angus M. Cannon, having learned of the adultery of his nephew John Q. Cannon (who was age twenty-nine and second counselor in the Presiding Bishopric), obtained an admission and immediately took John to the front during a meeting in the tabernacle. There John made a public confession, “laid down his priesthood,” and was excommunicated on vote of the congregation. *Deseret News*, September 6, 1886. His leadership position may have dictated so dramatic and public a confession. A Salt Lake editorial jeered. John was rebaptized two years later. *Deseret News 1987 Church Almanac* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1986), 64.

In his diary entry for November 13, 1898, Charles Card reported that in Canada a woman asked forgiveness for adultery and fornication she had committed two years before and for which she had been excommunicated. The congregation voted to forgive her and consented to her rebaptism. Donald G. Godfrey and Brigham Y. Card, eds., *The Diaries of Charles Ora Card: The Canadian Years, 1886–1903* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1993), 478.

Isaac Hyde Bishop “was commanded to make public confession for speaking evil of high council.” Susan Easton Black, comp., *Membership of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: 1830–1848*, 50 vols. (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1989), 5:521 (entry for Isaac Hyde Bishop, comment 1).



universal public confession. Members were asked to meet together March 25, 1893, confess their sins, and forgive one another before they went to the temple dedication.<sup>165</sup>

### The Diminishing Role of Public Confession

While diminishing in use, the practice of public confession continued well into the twentieth century. For example, instructions in 1913 said that public confession was not necessary in all cases for those whose offenses were not generally known.<sup>166</sup> Public confession was most often expected for matters of public knowledge. Accordingly, the instructions in 1921 indicated that no records should be made of minor transgressions of young people, and when a transgression was known to the perpetrator only, the confession to the bishop should not be made public or recorded unless a court was held. But publicly known wrongs were confessed or dealt with at the regular weekly priesthood meeting, keeping the confession as limited as possible.<sup>167</sup> The 1934 *Handbook of Instructions* stated that in a case of public knowledge that a young couple had been immoral but had married, they still should make public confession, but it could be simply to “express the desire to repent and obtain forgiveness for any wrong that they may have done.”<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>165</sup>James R. Clark, comp., *Messages of the First Presidency*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 3:241–44. See also *WWJ* (March 18, 1893), 9:244.

<sup>166</sup>*Circular of Instructions* 12 ([Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints], 1913), 26.

<sup>167</sup>*Instructions to Bishops and Counselors, Stake and Ward Clerks* 13 ([Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints], 1921), 41, 42.

<sup>168</sup>*Handbook of Instructions for Stake Presidencies, Bishops and Counselors, Stake and Ward Clerks* 15 ([Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints], 1934), 100. Adults would understand the coded statement. *General Handbook of Instructions* (1960) required the adulterous person always to confess to his spouse, but that was not continued as a requirement in every case (98). *General Handbook Supplement* (1976) states that special circumstances may dictate that involvement of parents or spouse would be unwise (5). And the *General Handbook of Instructions* (1989) says that the repentance of sexual transgression by a married person generally should include seeking forgiveness from the spouse. And a young, unmarried person involved in such transgression should be encouraged to tell his or her parents (10-2). However, sometimes such a disclosure might do more harm than good.



In 1956 instructions allowed for privately imposed probation for either single or married people involved in sexual sin who were repentant,<sup>169</sup> except in the case of public scandal, when the man involved might be asked to stand before a Melchizedek Priesthood meeting and, without divulging the details of the transgression, confess to having violated the rules of the Church, express repentance, and ask forgiveness. Confessions of women might be reported by the bishop in the Melchizedek Priesthood meeting of the ward with such explanation as necessary.<sup>170</sup>

In 1976 excommunications and disfellowshipments were to be announced only to the Melchizedek Priesthood of the ward, without specifying detail unless there was need to warn against apostate teaching.<sup>171</sup> Since 1976 public confession has not been expected as part of Church discipline, and knowledge of disciplinary action has been limited to those who need to know.<sup>172</sup> Knowledge of such disciplinary actions is to be disclosed only to appropriate men and women leaders, except for instances of predatory action, teaching false doctrine, or flagrant transgressions—things about which the whole congregation knows or needs to be aware.<sup>173</sup>

Spontaneous public confession is still considered a desirable practice if handled sensitively and discretely. It comports with the

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<sup>169</sup>*Handling the Transgressor* (Salt Lake City: Distributed by the Presiding Bishopric of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1956), 3–4.

<sup>170</sup>*Handling the Transgressor* (1956), 4.

<sup>171</sup>*General Handbook of Instructions* 21 (1976), 76. While this is not public confession, it would reveal a disciplinary judgment that was often itself the product of confession.

<sup>172</sup>*Handling the Transgressor* (1956), 21, specifies announcement of excommunication in ward sacrament meeting and stake priesthood meeting and says nothing about announcing disfellowshipments. In 1968, excommunications and disfellowshipments of Melchizedek Priesthood holders were to be announced to the Melchizedek Priesthood of the stake; such sanctions against others were announced in the ward Melchizedek Priesthood meeting. *General Handbook of Instructions* (1968), 130.

<sup>173</sup>*General Handbook of Instructions* (1983), 59. An editorial in the *Church News* said, “Confession these days almost seems to require public officials and celebrities calling a news conference to discuss their private lives in public arenas as if privacy no longer matters. What was once only heard in private is now broadcast around the world [in] . . . public chest beating.” *Church News*, August 12, 1995, 16.

description of the Sabbath as a time for “confessing thy sins unto thy brethren” (D&C 59:12). Of confession in testimony meeting, Spencer W. Kimball said:

We do not hear it so much anymore. The Lord so instructed us that we might seek forgiveness of our sins by having confessed them humbly, acknowledging them before the people and the Lord. “He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy.” (Prov. 28:13)<sup>174</sup>

However, his advice in 1948 was to make such confession in general terms:

[Members may] bear testimony, with a “broken heart and a contrite spirit,” with thanksgiving and a cheerful heart, confessing. . . . This, of course, does not mean that the people must detail their major sins . . . but . . . say something like this: “I recognize my weaknesses and imperfections and I am striving constantly to overcome them and ask you, my brothers and sisters, to overlook my frailties and errors.”<sup>175</sup>

## Involvement of Bishops in Receiving Private Confessions

In 1860, Brigham Young began to emphasize a spiritual oversight role for bishops, to “see that all [members of their wards] lived as they should, walking humbly with their God, attending to their prayers, observing the Sabbath-day to keep it holy, and ceasing to swear and steal. There would not be a person in his Ward that he does not know, and he would be acquainted with their circumstances, conduct, and feelings.”<sup>176</sup> In 1862, President Young stated,

<sup>174</sup>Spencer W. Kimball, “‘Except Ye Repent . . . ,’” *Improvement Era* 52 (November 1949): 76, quoted in E. Kimball, *Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, 96–97; Spencer W. Kimball, *Conference Reports* (October 2, 1949), 127.

<sup>175</sup>E. Kimball, *Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, 516, 138. This type of general public admission of weakness is not much different in content from the general public confession built into the liturgies of other churches, except the admissions are made individually rather than collectively. “It is not the general practice of the Church for individuals to confess explicit sins in fast and testimony meetings. . . . Members of the Church are not generally encouraged to discuss their sins or those of others before the body of the Church or otherwise publicly.” Marion D. Hanks, “Answers to Questions,” *New Era* 1 (January 1971): 10.

<sup>176</sup>Young, in *JD*, 8:146, August 19, 1860. Even so, in a sermon specifically about confession, Brigham Young did not suggest confession to the bishop. On March 10, 1860, he urged confession to God and to those injured (whether an individual, the ward, or the public), but not confession to a Church leader.



“My Bishop has just as good a right to come to my house and demand of me my Tithing, as he has to demand it of any other person in his ward, also to inquire into the state of my family, whether I attend to my prayers, whether I have contention with my neighbours, &c., in his capacity as a Bishop.”<sup>177</sup> In fulfilling these duties, bishops undoubtedly heard many confessions or expressions of concern about all kinds of personal or collective problems.

The calling of bishop continued, as at first, to be concerned with temporal affairs of the kingdom—care of the poor, buildings, tithing, economic development, community political leadership, education, and judging disputes<sup>178</sup>— but in Utah, weekly ward

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He said, “And if you have sinned against your God, or against yourselves, confess to God, and keep the matter to yourselves, for I do not want to know anything about it.” Young, in *JD*, 8:361–62, March 10, 1860.

Confessions sometimes came to the Church president or other leaders, either because the bishop was not yet firmly established as the proper recipient or because the confession was thought deserving of the prophet’s attention. For example, Brigham “began to receive letters of confession [from people who had been involved in the Mountain Meadows Massacre], and his responses suggest he was not exactly in a mood to forgive and forget.” Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 281. It was also noted that Brigham complained about people coming to him with confession of trivialities. Young, in *JD*, 4:286, March 15, 1857. See also a letter to Wilford Woodruff referring to a confession made to him. Alexander, “Wilford Woodruff and the Mormon Reformation,” 33.

<sup>177</sup>Young, in *JD*, 9:281, April 7, 1862. The earliest reference to confessions to the bishop I have found was during the Reformation. Heber C. Kimball said, “Bishops . . . take a course not to expose and ruin men, but let their private sins be privately acknowledged to the Bishop, and he has authority to report them to head quarters. . . . I want the Bishops . . . not to be overbearing and hard on the people.” H. Kimball, in *JD*, 4:177, January 11, 1857.

<sup>178</sup>According to the Doctrine and Covenants, the bishop of the Church in the 1830s was to receive consecrated property (42:31; 124:21); to keep the Lord’s storehouse and look after the poor (72:10; 42:33–34; 124:21); to purchase lands and build houses of worship (42:35); to be present at trial by elders if possible (42:82); to be “a judge in Israel” (107:72), sitting “in judgment upon transgressors upon testimony as it shall be laid before him according to the laws” (107:72); and to certify members going to Zion to claim a share of consecrated property (72:17). In sum, the bishop was to be responsible for “administering all temporal things” (107:68). The only distinctly spiritual responsibility placed upon the bishop of the Church was to discern spurious spiritual gifts so as to prevent the Saints being misled (46:27).

Eugene Campbell lists many responsibilities of bishops, who were “the key players in the colonization of the Great Basin.” Eugene E. Campbell, *Establishing*



meetings under direction of the bishop became well established,<sup>179</sup> and spiritual counseling became an important part of his responsibilities.<sup>180</sup> Through 1912, the *Circular of Instructions*, predecessor of the *General Handbook of Instructions*, gave bishops guidelines only with respect to tithes and business matters. Then in 1913, for the first time in that series of official written instructions, the bishop was specifically identified as having spiritual as well as temporal responsibilities and having a duty to maintain confidentiality of confessions (except as to matters of public notoriety). The 1913 instructions assume an already well-established practice of confessing to the bishop or bishopric, noting that public confession is not always required when offenses are not generally known.<sup>181</sup>

The bishop, who was first administrator and judge and then community leader, had become a person to whom one could and should go with personal or spiritual problems. He still looked after the poor and held Church courts for serious or resistant sinners, but he also now provided (as a listed part of his duty) a fatherly listening ear for the troubled soul.

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*Zion* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988), 71, 159. See also Dale Beecher, "The Office of Bishop," *Dialogue* 15 (winter 1982): 103; D. Gene Pace, "Community Leadership on the Mormon Frontier: Mormon Bishops" (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1983). Erastus Snow stated that the office of bishop was not only to administer in temporal things, care for the poor, and receive tithes, but also to settle disputes as judge. *St. Louis Luminary*, 1 (November 22, 1854): 4. "Though circular letters to stake presidents and bishops around the turn of the century indicated the desire of the First Presidency and Twelve to discontinue use of Church courts for the settlement of temporal disputes, . . . the practice . . . still continued." Thomas G. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition: A History of the Latter-day Saints, 1890-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 102.

<sup>179</sup>In commenting that Sunday was not much of a day of rest for the Saints, Brigham mentioned prayer meetings, morning service, afternoon meetings, class meetings, prayer meetings, confessing meetings, and so on, from sunrise to 9 P.M. Young, in *JD*, 10:187, May 31, 1863.

<sup>180</sup>Beecher, "The Office of Bishop," 112-13. For a long time, the teachers quorums shared oversight of member conduct with the bishop, consistent with Doctrine and Covenants 20:53-55. For example, in Panaca, Nevada, men who made up the teachers quorum "'took up a labor' with family heads and rowdy boys and tried to bring them to their senses and to repentance, including occasionally public confession." Leonard J. Arrington, *The Mormons in Nevada* (Las Vegas: Las Vegas Sun, 1979), 31.

<sup>181</sup>*Circular of Instructions* 12 (1913), 26-27.



## Development of Standards for Institutional Discipline and Forgiveness for Baptized Members

As the bishop's modern role in receiving confessions became settled, a need arose to identify which, out of the broad range of undesirable behaviors, needed to be confessed. The matter became quasi-jurisdictional in the sense that private confession is expected for conduct for which possible affirmative sanctions are stipulated. If the behavior is serious enough to warrant Church discipline, the member has the responsibility of confessing to the bishop. Connecting private confession to Church discipline is a way of advising the member when conduct has been such that there is an obligation to report it to the bishop.<sup>182</sup> Because the bishop has to make decisions about a Church member's conduct, the relationship between a Church member and the bishop may become adversarial if that member is accused of wrongdoing and has not confessed. Members are encouraged to accept any resulting sanctions as a means of reconciliation with the institution that bears the God-given responsibility for their spiritual welfare.

The matters serious enough to warrant consideration by a bishop's court have varied. In the early pioneer era, they included not only crimes and sexual misconduct, but also breaches of loyalty to an embattled community. For example, during one period, patronizing gentile merchants could result in Church discipline.<sup>183</sup>

Certain standards for discipline, and by implication for confession, came to be regularized by inclusion in printed instructions given to bishops.<sup>184</sup> In 1928 the instructions stated that the following

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<sup>182</sup>In every era, any Church leader, or lay member for that matter, would be willing to counsel with someone who wanted counsel. That is a role friends who are respected for their compassion and wisdom have always played. Matters divulged in such counseling relationships may be more or less serious than those for which private confession is expected, but unless the leader is one within whose jurisdiction the member lives, the divulgence is not considered adequate confession.

<sup>183</sup>See Leonard J. Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830-1900* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1958), 248-49; *CHC*, 5:224 n. 13; Young, in *JD*, 12:284-87, October 8, 1868.

<sup>184</sup>In 1868 the School of the Prophets (comprised of approximately 5,000 priesthood leaders throughout Utah Territory) proposed a boycott against trade with anti-Mormon gentile merchants, and the proposal was sustained in October

transgressions would ordinarily justify holding a bishop's court: infractions of the moral law (such as fornication and adultery); liquor drinking and bootlegging; criminal acts such as thievery, burglary, or murder; and apostasy or opposition to the Church.<sup>185</sup>

In 1934 the instructions added drunkenness, cruelty to wives or children, and promoting polygamy.<sup>186</sup> Subsequent changes were mostly in terminology, although in 1968 homosexual acts were added to the list of sexual sins.<sup>187</sup>

In 1976 grounds for discipline were put under two general categories: (1) deliberate disobedience to Church regulations and (2) moral transgressions, with all the previous offenses listed<sup>188</sup> and incest, child molesting, embezzling Church funds, and "un-christianlike conduct" added. In an undated supplement to the 1976 instructions, the list no longer included intemperance but

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general conference. The pressures to support the boycott were primarily social, but excommunication was held out as an ultimate threat for noncompliance. Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom*, 245-49; *CHC*, 5:224 n. 13. See also Young, in *JD*, 12:281, 284, 289, October 8, 1868; and George Q. Cannon, in *JD*, 13:103, 124, October 8-9, 1868. A prominent Church member, accused before the School of the Prophets of patronizing gentile establishments, confessed, asked forgiveness, and made a commitment to stop. Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom*, 494 n. 15.

<sup>185</sup>*Handbook of Instructions for Bishops and Counselors, Stake and Ward Clerks of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* 14 ([Salt Lake City], 1928), 75.

<sup>186</sup>*Handbook of Instructions* 15 (1934), 97-98. For increased focus of discipline of persons encouraging polygamy, see B. Carmon Hardy, *Solemn Covenant: The Mormon Polygamous Passage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), chapters 9 and 10.

<sup>187</sup>*General Handbook of Instructions* 20 (1968), 122. In 1940, after the repeal of prohibition, liquor drinking, drunkenness, and bootlegging were replaced by the general category of intemperance. *Handbook of Instructions* 16 (1940), 138. In 1960 the more general language of "sex sins" (*General Handbook of Instructions* 18 [1960], 97) replaced the previous wording (*Handbook of Instructions* 16 [1940], 138). Lesbianism was also added in the *General Handbook Supplement* (1976) to clarify that not only male homosexual conduct was proscribed. Presiding Bishopric, *Handling the Transgressor* (1956), 4-5, says repeated sexual violations are grounds for court action, citing Doctrine and Covenants 42:24-26, which allows for leniency on the first offense of adultery but not thereafter.

<sup>188</sup>*General Handbook of Instructions* (1976). Thievery and burglary, previously listed separately, were covered by general reference to criminal acts.



now specified abortion (subject to exceptions). In 1985 transsexual operations were added to the list.

The 1989 instructions adopted a different format and gave as grounds for discipline a long list of illustrative felonies plus a number of items that would be misdemeanors or noncriminal acts (adultery, fornication, homosexual relations, sex-change operation, spouse abuse, abandonment of family responsibilities, drug misuse, abortion, and apostasy). The only deletion of a major item found in previous instructions was the offense of unchristianlike conduct.<sup>189</sup>

Over the years, although two items have been dropped—intemperance in 1976<sup>190</sup> (now seen more as illness or weakness than as serious evil, despite strong Church commitment to the Word of Wisdom) and unchristianlike conduct in 1989 (probably seen as too vague to be applied evenly)—the tendency has been to include more items. The listed sins only illustrate the grounds on which confession is expected of all compliant members. Unspecified offenses of comparable gravity are not excluded from this obligation.

To be worthy for priesthood ordinations or temple recommends, members must meet standards of conduct and belief higher than those listed above. Ordination and recommend interviews have also seen a few modifications over the years,<sup>191</sup> but the questions asked by the bishop in these situations relate mainly to present obedience and thus do not call for any confession that is not already expected of all baptized members. However, in these interviews, members are always free to discuss any spiritual concerns.

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<sup>189</sup>*General Handbook of Instructions* (1989), 10-4.

<sup>190</sup>*General Handbook Supplement* (1976).

<sup>191</sup>An 1856 letter from the First Presidency indicated that qualifications for endowment then were age sixteen, tithing, integrity, loyalty to Church leaders, belief in plural marriage, and living the gospel (that covered all sorts of morality issues). Juanita Brooks, *John Doyle Lee: Zealot-Pioneer Builder-Scapegoat* (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clark, 1983), 192. See also Clark, *Mes-sages of the First Presidency*, 3:63. The Word of Wisdom came to be a fixed expectation by about 1915. Alexander, "The Word of Wisdom," 82 n. 14. Tithing also was first encouraged; then it became a hallmark of commitment and finally a requirement. In recent years, additional inquiries have concerned sympathy with apostates (especially polygamous groups), proper personal and financial conduct with respect to family, and faith in the Godhead, the Atonement, and the Restoration.



## Confession in Other Christian Churches<sup>192</sup>

### Roman Catholicism

Private confession of serious sins<sup>193</sup> was not part of early Christian practice, so far as that practice is described in the New Testament. That is the understanding of nearly all Roman Catholic historians, who describe the norm in early Christianity as public confession of sins and severe penance.<sup>194</sup> The Novatianist schism

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<sup>192</sup>Modern Judaism recognizes no intermediaries between man and God, and public confession would be seen as a dysfunctional act. Nonetheless, some sixteenth-century kabbalistic ascetics confessed to one another. "Confession of Sins," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 5:879.

<sup>193</sup>Prayer and good works were always a sufficient solution to everyday sins. Favazza, *Order of Penitents*, 71.

<sup>194</sup>For an exhaustive treatment of the history of penance, see Oscar D. Watkins, *A History of Penance* (London, 1920; reprint, New York: Burt Franklin, 1961); for good summary accounts see John T. McNeill and Helena M. Gamer, *Medieval Handbooks of Penance: A Translation of the Principal Libri Poenitentiales and Selections from Related Documents* (New York: Octagon Books, 1965), 3-22; and Quentin Donoghue and Linda Shapiro, *Bless Me, Father, for I Have Sinned* (New York: Donald I. Fine, 1984), 17-18. See also Favazza, *Order of Penitents* (on the institution of public nonrepeatable penance); R.C. Mortimer, *The Origins of Private Penance in the Western Church* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1939) (on the ending of public nonrepeatable penance); Leonard Geddes and Herbert Thurston, *The Catholic Church and Confession* (New York: Macmillan, 1928), 56-84 (Jesuit justification of the changes in confession practice in early and medieval history as consistent with basic doctrine); John M'Clintock and James Strong, *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, 12 vols. (New York: Harper and Bros., 1867), s.v. "auricular confession," 1:549-50 (private confession unknown in the first centuries, presbyter began to receive confessions, office abolished in fourth century by Nectarius, Leo encouraged private confession).

Favazza sees a consensus of recent scholarship that private repeatable penance (a repeated sin is able to be absolved any number of times through the sacrament of private penance) is not documented until the late fifth century and believes that the few scholars who urge that auricular (private) confession originated much earlier are driven by apologetic needs. Favazza, *Order of Penitents*, 8, 55.

Ignatius Klug urges that there was always private confession in the church because (1) there is no proof of its having a specific beginning, (2) there is no record of any protest against imposition of a new practice, and (3) tradition relates it to apostolic times. He conceded that confession sometimes had to be public. Ignatius Klug, *Het Katholieke Geloof* (Heemstede, Netherlands: Uitgeverij de Toorts, 1950), 397-98.

The new Catechism of the Catholic Church ¶1447 (English translation, United States Catholic Conference, 1994) follows, as an official statement of the church, the majority view that, in early years, public acknowledgment of serious



resulted from disagreement about whether *any* confession of and penance for serious sin after baptism could be efficacious for those who had through such sin broken their covenant with Christ.<sup>195</sup>

Private confession came into use only gradually.<sup>196</sup> There is near consensus<sup>197</sup> that the practice began in the Middle Ages among Celtic and Anglo-Saxon monastics, then was extended to lay Catholics, and finally spread throughout Europe.

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sin was necessary for absolution. However, some scholars allege that the existence of public confession might only mean that private confession was not always sufficient. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrine* (New York: Harper, 1958), 216. Others state that while the penance was public the confession was private. John Halliburton, “‘A Godly Discipline’: Penance in the Early Church,” in *Confession and Absolution*, 45–46; Nathan Mitchell, “The Many Ways to Reconciliation: An Historical Synopsis of Christian Penance,” in *Background and Directions*, The Rite of Penance: Commentaries Series, vol. 3 (Washington: Liturgical Conference, 1978), 23–28.

The *New Catholic Encyclopedia* sums up the issue of public versus private confession:

Whether confession was secret or public still divides historians. Some hold that up to the end of the 4th century public confession of even secret sins was generally required, and in evidence thereof they cite the *Didascalia*, the *Apostolic Constitutions*, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Cyprian, Origen, Ambrose, and others. But this testimony is inconclusive, since it can be interpreted as imposing public satisfaction or as merely counseling public confession. . . . That secret confession was the more general practice in the early Church is the more common view of scholars. . . . In a letter written in 459 to some Italian bishops, Leo the Great . . . [said] secret confession to priests alone is sufficient. (E. F. Latko, “Confession, Auricular,” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 4:131–32)

<sup>195</sup>Favazza, *Order of Penitents*, 178–86. See Hebrews 6:4–6 and 10:26–30. See also 1 John 5:16–18; Mortimer, *Origins of Private Penance*, 4; J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrine*, 5th ed. (London: A. and C. Black, 1977), 198–99; Hubert Cunliffe-Jones, ed., *A History of Christian Doctrine* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1978), 238.

<sup>196</sup>The practice of confession and penance in the early centuries of Christianity is thought to have been much like that described in the New Testament. It is said that public confession and penance were so rigorous that alternatives developed when the church grew beyond a small, persecuted sect. With growth and the inclusion of people from various cultures and with wide variation in depth of commitment, what had been right in the beginning no longer seemed appropriate. Mortimer, *Origins of Private Penance*, 190; McNeill and Gamer, *Medieval Handbooks of Penance*, 3–22; F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, eds., in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2d ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), s.v. “penance,” 1059.

<sup>197</sup>Favazza, *Order of Penitents*, 56 n. 173.



Private confession was first criticized,<sup>198</sup> then regulated, and over centuries became the accepted practice. As private confession grew in usage and frequency, public confession and penance essentially disappeared.<sup>199</sup> In 1215 private confession of mortal sins<sup>200</sup> received codification in canon law. The Fourth Lateran Council required that, as part of the Sacrament of Penance,<sup>201</sup> all Catholics past the age of reason<sup>202</sup> make private confession to a priest at least once a year<sup>203</sup> in preparation for Easter.<sup>204</sup> The Council of

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<sup>198</sup>In A.D. 589, the Third Council of Toledo called private confession a “detestable way” of seeking forgiveness. Ladislav Orsy, *The Evolving Church and the Sacrament of Penance* (Denville, N.J.: Dimension Books, 1978), 38.

<sup>199</sup>As occasions for confessing mortal sins became more frequent—when in danger of death, during Lent, before taking communion, and even during the week—hearing confession became a major part of the priests’ ministry, and bishops were no longer often personally involved.

<sup>200</sup>What is considered “mortal sin” is not codified but is understood from the scriptures and tradition. Frederick R. McManus, “The Sacrament of Penance,” in *The Code of Canon Law: A Text and Commentary*, ed. James A. Coriden, Thomas J. Green, and Donald E. Heintschel (New York: Paulist, 1985), 693. Mortal sins are serious, conscious, and fully consented to. “Sins, Venial and Mortal,” in *Lutheran Cyclopedia*, ed. Erwin L. Lueker (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1975), 719.

<sup>201</sup>This sacrament involves recognition of sin (“conversion”), confession, absolution, and acts of penance (“satisfaction”). Dionisio Borobio, “The Tridentine Model of Confession in its Historical Context,” in Collins and Power, *Fate of Confession*, 22.

<sup>202</sup>Children below about age eight or nine are not capable of grave sin because they do not understand its “real” meaning. At about this same age, children begin to take communion. Norbert Mette, “Children’s Confession—a Plea for a Child-Centred Practice of Penance and Reconciliation,” in Collins and Power, *Fate of Confession*, 67. “A child, even before the age of 7, who can discern between what is morally good and evil and who is capable of grave sin, is bound [to confess].” N. Halligan, “Confession, Frequency of,” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 4:132.

Confession is not only obligatory, it is also a matter of right. Each person has a “right” to personal confrontation with Christ, through the priest. Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Redemptor Hominis (Redeemer of Man), The Papal Encyclicals 1958–1981 (n.p.: McGrath Publishing, 1981), #278 ¶83.

<sup>203</sup>“Monthly confession of devotion [that is, confession of venial or previously confessed mortal sins] is a wise norm for the conscientious believer; once a week suffices for fervent souls who communicate daily.” N. Halligan, “Confession, Frequency of,” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 4:133.

<sup>204</sup>Borobio, “The Tridentine Model of Confession,” 24. “After having attained the age of discretion, each of the faithful is bound by an obligation faithfully to confess serious sins at least once a year.” *Code of Canon Law* (1983), Canon 989.



Trent, responding in the mid-sixteenth century to the Protestant Reformation and its rejection of private confession, reinforced the doctrine of private confession by asserting that Christ had instituted it when he said to his apostles after the resurrection, “Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them.”<sup>205</sup> Catholic doctrine remains essentially the same today.<sup>206</sup>

The Council of Trent, 1545–63, abolished general absolution in favor of the individualized sacrament and in 1551 pronounced the doctrine that confession is necessary for salvation, but the Council noted that the mode is not immutable. E. F. Latko “Confession, Auricular,” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 4:132.

<sup>205</sup>John 20:23. The Council of Trent cited this particular passage, as well as Matthew 16:19, Matthew 18:18, and tradition. The reasoning was that if a priest is to forgive, he must know what he is forgiving, and knowledge must normally come from confession of the penitent. The Council also indicated that one must make full confession of all mortal sins that can be remembered, that confession must relate numbers of occurrences and their circumstances, and that confession must be secret. As to the last, it was conceded that Christ had not commanded secrecy, but secret confession was thought consistent with Christ’s teachings. Borobio, “Tridentine Model of Confession,” 27–30; J. L. McCarthy, “Confession, Seal of,” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 4:134 (citing Aquinas).

<sup>206</sup>Vatican II decided that private confession can now be either anonymous (through using the traditional confessional booth) or face-to-face, as the penitent chooses. Effort was made to emphasize the communal nature of confession and to change the focus from individual sin and culpability to God’s forgiveness and mercy toward repentant individuals in the new Rite of Reconciliation. However, “individual, integral confession and absolution remain the only ordinary way for the faithful to reconcile themselves with God and the Church” in all but exceptional cases. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (United States Catholic Conference, 1994), ¶1484. See also Thomas S. Scharbach, “The American Catholic Church since Vatican Council II,” *Sunstone* 14 (August 1990): 49–50. I am grateful to Thomas Scharbach for his assistance with these materials on Catholicism.

In practice, penance has become less severe over time and, in spite of lighter penance and the importance of the doctrine, confession has fallen largely into disuse in some countries. It is said, for example, that in Germany “adults no longer do it” and “adult parishoners are hardly having recourse to [individual confession] any more.” Mette, “Children’s Confession,” 65, 68. Chappell makes a plea for revitalization of confession after a steep decline that followed Vatican II. Chappell, *Regular Confession*, multiple references. Reportedly, the number of U.S. Catholics confessing monthly fell from 38 percent in 1964 to 17 percent in 1976. Favazza, *Order of Penitents*, 234 n. 2. And a 1989 report said 19 percent of Roman Catholics who regularly attend Sunday mass no longer go to confession regularly. Dudley and Rowell, *Confession and Absolution*, viii.

An essential sacrament of the Greek Orthodox Church is that of Metanoia (change or repentance). Greek Orthodox Christians believe Metanoia was established by Christ when he entrusted his apostles with the power to forgive. The responsibility to receive confession of moral errors passed from the apostles to



## Protestantism

Among most Protestants, private confession is considered optional. Luther taught that people have no essential need for a priest and that going to a priest might sometimes even interfere with the primary relationship between God and believer. He thought that private confession and penance, as he saw them in Catholicism, contributed to works righteousness, an erroneous belief that man can of himself do something about sins, whereas, he believed, only God's grace matters.<sup>207</sup> The Catholic practice was also seen as conducive to abuses, as in the inappropriate sale of indulgences.<sup>208</sup>

However, the Lutheran 1529 catechism, still in use today, recognizes a place for private confession. If penitents find it helpful, they are permitted, even encouraged, to confess to a priest, although it is not doctrinally required and not commonly practiced.<sup>209</sup> Instead, group confession of sinfulness and the general

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bishops and priests. The Greek and Roman churches separated in 1054, so their earlier history is shared. Orthodoxy does not use a confessional booth but expects the priest to know the penitent and to take what he knows into account in the "consultation." Nikon D. Patrinos, *A Dictionary of Greek Orthodoxy* (Pleasantville, N.Y.: Hellenic Heritage, 1984), s.v. "confession," 94-96. See also Milton V. Backman Jr., *Christian Churches of America: Origins and Beliefs* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1976), 18-19, 28.

<sup>207</sup>Frank Senn, "The Confession of Sins in the Reformation Churches," in Collins and Power, *Fate of Confession*, 106.

<sup>208</sup>See also Mormon 8:32, asserting that churches would say, "Come unto me, and for your money you shall be forgiven of your sins." Luther considered the manner in which John Tetzel issued indulgences to be highly objectionable. Backman, *Christian Churches of America*, 72. One of Pope Leo's objections to public confession was that "the sins . . . were often not fit to be spoken of in so open a manner." Richard H. Wood, *A Cyclopedic Dictionary of Ecclesiastical Terms according to the Use of the Episcopal Church* (New York: Carlton, 1984), s.v. "confession of sin," 133.

A Protestant criticism of private confession was that "it tends to corrupt both the confessors and the confessed by a foul and particular disclosure of sinful thoughts and actions." M'Clintock and Strong, *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, s.v. "auricular confession," 1:550.

<sup>209</sup>Hjalmar Lindroth, "Confession and Absolution," in *The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*, ed. Julius Bodensieck, 3 vols. (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Publishing, 1965), 1:561-65. For a discussion of the value and practice in Lutheranism of confession and absolution, see Koehler, *Counseling and Confession*, 38-77. *The Commission on Worship of the Lutheran Church—Missouri*



proclamation of absolution is part of the liturgy used in preparing for communion.<sup>210</sup>

Calvin had a still more skeptical attitude toward confession as a sacrament, although he, too, valued voluntary private confession.<sup>211</sup> In the view of Luther and Calvin, when a priest pronounced absolution, he was merely describing what would occur even without the pronouncement, because, if the penitent had faith, God's forgiveness would come through grace without any priestly intervention.<sup>212</sup>

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*Synod* (St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia, 1982) gives the following guidelines for private confession:

When, during consultation with the pastor, a person desires individual confession and absolution, the following order may be used. The confession made by the penitent is protected from disclosure. The pastor is at all times obligated to respect the confidential nature of a confession. . . . [After confession] the pastor lays his hand on the head of the penitent and says: 'Receive the forgiveness Christ won for you by his Passion, Death and Resurrection. By the command of our Lord Jesus Christ I, a called and ordained servant of the Word, forgive you your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.' (310)

<sup>210</sup>After corporate confession, absolution is pronounced in these words: "In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." *Commission on Worship of the Lutheran Church*, 308.

A 1962 survey showed American Lutheran pastors used absolution to some extent, mostly with the sick. They often hear informal confession in counseling but do not offer absolution in that setting. About 29 percent reported having used confession themselves. Koehler, *Counseling and Confession*, 51-54.

<sup>211</sup>Senn, "Confession of Sins," 108. Senn says despite Calvin's personal appreciation of private confession, there is almost no use of such confession in reformed churches, 109.

<sup>212</sup>"Calvin denied the sacramental nature of private confession, but did admit absolution as a ceremony to confirm faith in the forgiveness of sins." Marion J. Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayer Book* (New York: Seabury, 1980), 450. See also Cross and Livingstone, *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, s.v. "absolution," 7-8.

The meaning of absolution is subject to different understandings. In Catholicism it constitutes forgiveness given by Christ's delegated power. In other churches, although the language sounds operative ("I absolve you"), it may be understood as simply declaratory of what has already happened by Christ's grace or what will happen when faith is sufficient. In still others, the priest may use another form, petitioning God ("[May] Christ . . . absolve you"). And a nonpriest who hears confession would simply describe the process ("Christ . . . forgives

For a generation or more after Henry VIII assumed the headship of the Catholic Church in England, the obligation of private confession continued. The 1549 prayer book admonished those who used private confession and those who did not to be tolerant of one another. When the text of the prayer book was finally settled in 1662, such confession was only optional.<sup>213</sup> Later, those who urged private confession came under condemnation for reversion to Catholicism.<sup>214</sup> Modern Anglicans/Episcopalians may be High Church (closer to Roman Catholicism) or Low Church (closer to Reformation sentiments), but even among High Church members, private confession is rare today.<sup>215</sup> Anglican confession essentially

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your sins by the grace of the Holy Spirit"). Senn, "Confession of Sins," 108-9; Cross and Livingstone, *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, s.v. "absolution," 7-8; Hatchett, *American Prayer Book*, 450-51; *The Draft Proposed Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal, 1976), 446-52. Conversely, in some Orthodox rites, the language is "May God forgive," but that petitionary expression is deemed in itself to give absolution. Christine Hall, "A View from the Foothills: Some Observations on Orthodox Practice of the Sacrament of Confession," in Dudley and Rowell, *Confession and Absolution*, 123, 204.

The exact choice of words in declaring absolution is a matter of importance for some, while others consider all formulations to have the same basic meaning. Samuel Macauley Jackson, ed., *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, 15 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1977), s.v. "confession of sins," 3:222.

In Catholic doctrine, absolution is conditional on penance but not on sincerity. R. S. Nolan, "Seal of Confession," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 15 vols. (New York: Robert Appleton, 1912), 13:655. Thus the penitent who might obtain absolution by fraud has obtained absolution of that sin, although he or she has in the process committed the new grave sin of sacrilege. Rev. Raymond C. O'Brien, telephone interview.

<sup>213</sup>Nolan, "Seal of Confession," in *Catholic Encyclopedia*, 13:654.

<sup>214</sup>In the Anglican Church, the Oxford Movement (notably John Keble and Edward Pusey) in the early 1800s urged voluntary private confession. Senn, "Confession of Sins," 112. See also Geoffrey Rowell, "The Anglican Tradition: From the Reformation to the Oxford Movement," in Dudley and Rowell, *Confession and Absolution*, 91-119.

<sup>215</sup>The son of an Episcopal priest offered the impression that "even among High Church groups perhaps less than 25 percent of adults might have been to at least one confession with their priest by the time they were 40 years of age; less than 5 percent would be likely to have confessed regularly (for instance, annually)." Philip L. Barlow, letter to author, July 15, 1991. See also Perry Butler, "Introduction: Confession Today," in Dudley and Rowell, *Confession and Absolution*, 1.



followed Luther's view,<sup>216</sup> and the pronouncement of absolution was only a relief from church sanction, "not the imparting of a Divine forgiveness."

None of the largest Protestant groups require private confession, as Catholics do, although Lutherans and Anglicans make formal provision for optional private confession.<sup>217</sup> Most Protestants expect believers to make confession only to God, to the public in a general confession forming part of the liturgy, and to people one has injured.

Early in U.S. history, a few groups such as the Lutheran Pietists and Methodists practiced specific public confession of sins—unto the "brethren," as the text reads in D&C 59:12.<sup>218</sup> That practice continues among other groups, such as Mennonites<sup>219</sup> and

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<sup>216</sup>The Anglican Prayer Book (1552) recognizes voluntary private confession, especially for the sick. Senn, "Confession of Sins," 109. Episcopalians may confess before a deacon or lay person as well as before a priest. Wood, in *A Cyclopedic Dictionary of Ecclesiastical Terms*, s.v. "confession," s.v. "confession of sin," 130, 134.

<sup>217</sup>Some Protestants have seen mandatory private confession as "one of the greatest corruptions of the Romish Church" in that it gives tyrannical power to priests and turns the penitent away from God. M'Clintock and Strong, *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, s.v. "auricular confession," 1:550; Episcopal Church Evangelical Education Society, *Distinctive Principles and Methods of Work* (n.p.: n.d.), 69. See also Bob Soileau, "Confession," in *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists*, 4 vols. (Nashville: Broadman, 1958), 1:305, which states, "Confession is a matter between the individual and God"; and Don F. Newfeld and Julia Neuffer, eds., "Confession," in *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Students' Source Book* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1962), 9:520, which declares, "The New Testament knows nothing of confession as a formal institution."

<sup>218</sup>Senn, "Confession of Sins," 107. For more on Lutheran Pietists, see Backman, *Christian Churches of America*, 75. Excommunication and public confession as part of discipline to keep the church pure was practiced by the Anabaptists, Calvinists, John Knox in Scotland (Presbyterians), and especially the Puritans. The Puritans feared the practice of private confession would lead to priestly power over people. Senn, "Confession of Sins," 109, 112. Modern Baptists do not practice congregational discipline, but it is part of their tradition. William Harold Tiemann and John C. Bush, *The Right to Silence*, 2d ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), 76.

<sup>219</sup>*The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Hillsboro, Kan.: Mennonite Brethren, 1955), s.v. "ban," 1:219.

the Church of the Brethren,<sup>220</sup> as a means to avoid being shunned or excommunicated.<sup>221</sup>

A continuing appeal of public confession is illustrated by the fact that in 1995 students in many evangelical colleges engaged in lengthy revival meetings at which they felt impelled to confess sins such as cheating, racism, apathy, and pornography.<sup>222</sup>

## Conclusion

From the beginning of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, confession has been an element of the fundamental doctrine of repentance. Secret confession to God is always required; when individuals are harmed, forgiveness must be sought from them; and serious sins are the subject of either public or private confession. Which sins need to be confessed, to whom, and the degree of publicity given confessions have changed from time to time.

Public confession had a long history in Christianity. During the revivals of the early 1800s, it was not uncommon to expect repentant souls to confess their sins to other believers, thus to confess "in public."<sup>223</sup> The confession might be in general terms, but members truly convinced of their guilt would not hold back.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>220</sup>Public confession is the norm for the Brethren, although it occurs when someone is accused. "The purpose of Brethren church discipline has been . . . to bring about a public confession or acknowledgment to the congregation of that error by the person." Failure results in "avoidance," "ban," or "disfellowshipment." *The Brethren Encyclopedia*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: The Brethren Encyclopedia, 1983), s.v. "confession, public," 1:333; s.v. "discipline," 1:386-89; s.v. "acknowledgment," 1:3.

<sup>221</sup>For a successful lawsuit against a church when the conduct of a woman, unwilling to confess, was announced to the congregation after she had withdrawn from the church, see Buzzard, "Scarlet Letter Lawsuits," 1.

<sup>222</sup>David Briggs, *Deseret News*, April 29, 1995, sec. A, p. 10.

<sup>223</sup>Of 78 converts in Kirtland for whom information is available, 57 (73 percent) were Protestant before conversion, 21 (27 percent) were unchurched, and none were Catholic. The great majority of Americans in that era were unchurched. Protestants grew from 7 percent to 17 percent of the population during the first half of the nineteenth century. Mark R. Grandstaff and Milton V. Backman Jr., "The Social Origins of the Kirtland Mormons," *BYU Studies* 30 (spring 1990): 56, 57.

<sup>224</sup>*TPJS*, 155; *HC*, 3:383.



The Restoration occurred in this milieu, and in the Restoration's early days, public confession was practiced extensively.

However, with the creation of the ward as a small ecclesiastical unit and with the entrustment of the spiritual welfare of ward members to the ward bishop, the instructions from Church leaders have identified the normal pattern of repentance for serious sins as requiring private confession to one's bishop. As "a judge in Israel" and one of those set "to watch over the church and to be elders unto the church," he is given the gift and the responsibility to assess, through the gift of discernment, the genuineness of people's profession of spiritual gifts (D&C 46:27). Consistent with that is his responsibility to judge the genuineness of repentance.

Many Christian groups emphasize man's innate sinfulness and focus on his nature more than on his individual sins, whereas LDS doctrine stresses man's original innocence and perfectibility, with focus on his individual shortcomings. But over time, the understanding and practice of confession in the LDS Church came to be similar in some respects to Roman Catholicism.<sup>225</sup> Both moved from using public confession to encouraging private confession and from harsh penance to lighter sanctions as they became less a persecuted people apart ("a community of saints") and more a group with variable commitment ("a training-ground for sinners").<sup>226</sup> Both Catholics and Latter-day Saints require private confession of any serious misconduct to a spiritual counselor as an earthly representative of God. Both groups also believe that Christ gave his apostles power to forgive sin. The Catholics believe the authority was passed down to the Catholic priests, and the Latter-day Saints believe it was given to the modern Apostles (but not to the ward bishops). Thus, the Catholic priest pronounces absolution, whereas the LDS bishop merely waives penalties that might be imposed through Church discipline, leaving absolution to God.

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<sup>225</sup>Spencer W. Kimball, responding to complaints that confession in the LDS Church was too similar to the practice in other churches, noted that the fact that others do something does not make it wrong. S. Kimball, *Miracle of Forgiveness*, 184-85.

<sup>226</sup>Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrine*, 201. See also Cunliffe-Jones, *History of Christian Doctrine*, 238.

After hearing a confession, the LDS bishop decides whether to exempt a person from Church discipline on the grounds that repentance is judged to be sincere and no independent justification for discipline appears. Other options are to invoke the jurisdiction of the bishop's disciplinary council<sup>227</sup> or refer the matter to the stake president for a stake disciplinary council.

This century has seen steady escalation in specifying the standards of behavior expected of members of the LDS Church. With respect to the grounds for discipline, the lists of misconduct that call for Church disciplinary council action and hence confession to the bishop have become longer.

Making private, particularized confession is easier than public disclosure of one's sins. A willingness to make public confession requires great conviction, humility, and courage. Perhaps in the earlier years, when all Church members were converts, there was among them a greater fervor, a greater sense of interdependent community with more informality, frankness, humility, and tolerance for confrontation than in more recent years. Sometimes now there may be greater distance between members, more formality, and a more complex structure within the LDS wards and communities than existed in pioneer settlements.

If sin is conceived not only as an offense against God, but also against the community of believers, then confession to that community is consistent with the basic requirement of confession to those who have been hurt.<sup>228</sup> As the community grows larger, sin tends to become popularly viewed less an offense against the group and more an individual matter.<sup>229</sup> At one time, LDS Church discipline was

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<sup>227</sup>The bishop's disciplinary council can impose any sanctions on any ward member except excommunication of a Melchizedek Priesthood holder.

<sup>228</sup>Sergei Hackel states, "In earlier centuries, the Church chose to emphasize the public, communal and ecclesial [*sic*] nature of reconciliation with its body. . . . Thus the sins were necessarily to be acknowledged when the body met." Hackel adds, "On Russian soil developed [among some the concept that] man sins not only against his fellows, but against the cosmos. . . . They would bow to the earth, kiss it, cleanse their hands with it. This was their way to seek forgiveness for any harm which they had done to Mother Earth, to cosmos, to creation." Sergei Hackel, "Paths to Reconciliation: Some Ways and By-ways from the Orthodox Past," *Epiphany Journal* (summer 1986): 32, 34.

<sup>229</sup>A Catholic theologian has tied the practice of private confession in his church to, among other things, "anxiety-ridden religious and Church practice . . .



fairly open, with public announcement of disfellowshipment or excommunication and public confession at least sometimes called for. Now, confession to the bishop generally suffices to reconcile the transgressor with the Church, as well as to facilitate forgiveness by God. As little publicity as possible is given to confession and discipline, with only those who have a need to know being notified. This practice seems responsive to the heightened sense of individualism, privacy, and legal liability that exists today.<sup>230</sup>

The practice of confession has shifted with changing circumstances, but the basic doctrine of confession has not changed.<sup>231</sup> Confession remains one of the essential steps to repentance, and repentance is one of the first principles of salvation.

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[that is] strongly individualistic and sacramentalist." Mette, "Children's Confession," 69. Similar sentiment concerning preoccupation by both priest and penitent with sin is expressed in Bok, *Secrets*, 78.

<sup>230</sup>For descriptions of lawsuits against churches for efforts at public discipline, see Buzzard, "Scarlet Letter Lawsuits," 1.

<sup>231</sup>Stephen L. Richards notes the difference between changing forms and persisting substance in the Church. "Epilogue: Continuing Revelation and Mormon Doctrine," in *Line upon Line: Essays on Mormon Doctrine*, ed. Gary James Bergera (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 183-85. Boyd K. Packer says, "Changes in organization or procedure are a testimony that revelation is ongoing. While doctrines remain fixed, the methods or procedures do not." Boyd K. Packer, "Revelation in a Changing World," *Ensign* 19 (November 1989): 15.