

When a Christian Sins...

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The New Testament plainly teaches that we sometimes sin as Christians. To children of God, John wrote: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.... If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us" (1 John 1:8, 10). As much as a child of God might desire to live in absolutely perfect harmony with Divine Law, these verses remind us that we fail to do so due to weaknesses of the flesh, resulting in sin: "Everyone that doeth sin doeth also lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4).

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

The Bible teaches us to confess our sins: "If we confess our sins, he [God] is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins..." (1 John 1:9). To "confess" a sin is to acknowledge or admit that we have sinned to the one(s) sinned against and/or to the one(s) who witnessed our sin. Further, at least some implication of repentance inheres in a confession of sin, even if not stated – assuming the confession is genuine. An impenitent person does not confess sins.

What about public confession of sins? Such is likely the setting of James 5:16: "Confess therefore your sins one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed." My understanding of the healing here is the forgiveness of sins confessed, thus the "healing" of the soul.

What sins should be publicly confessed? The obvious answer is those that are publicly committed or known. A sin of thought needs to be confessed only to God, for He alone knows it, besides oneself. A sin in the privacy of one's home, known only to his family, should be confessed to and corrected with only those few. However, when one has shamed the whole church, whether by neglect, immorality, dishonesty, withholding contributions, drunkenness, false doctrine, or otherwise, a public confession of such is in order. Of course, "gutter-language" and/or explicit or sensitive details, should (and can) be avoided in announcing such confessions.

Related to the above, many of the Lord's finest people respond to the invitation from time to time, asking for prayers from the church for a specific need, weakness, or trial. Is this good or bad? I desire for the whole church to pray for me, and I am greatly encouraged to hear my name called in the prayers of our assemblies. I dare not begrudge anyone else this source of strength. While requests for such prayers may be made other than by an invitation response (e.g., through public announcements), I know of no Scriptural precept or principle one violates by making such requests known by responding to the invitation.

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