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True Confessions

DANIEL A. RODRIGUEZ

So what happens when the guest preacher announces that the title of his sermon is “True Confessions”? The provocative title may peak the interest of some and cause others to get a little uneasy. Others will no doubt muse, “What *kind* of confession is Dan going to discuss? Is he going to speak of the need to make *humiliating public confessions*?” There have been several of these lately, including those of celebrities like golfer Tiger Woods, home run champ Mark McGwire and former presidential hopeful John Edwards. “Is Dan or one of the leaders preparing to make such a confession during or after the sermon?” Or was I thinking about those *unsolicited confessions* like my younger brother Michael would make after my mom would cleverly ask, “So Michael, when were you going to tell me about what happened last night?” There is also the possibility of speaking about *wise confessions*, like those made repeatedly by prudent husbands when they find themselves in a no-win situation with their wives: “Honey, I’m sorry. It was all my fault.”

Those more mature in the faith might be anticipating a sermon on the benefits of confessing our sins to one another based on James 5.16. Of course I could also focus attention on the *inevitable confession* when every knee will bow and every tongue confesses “that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2.10–11). Better yet, I could challenge the uncommitted to make the *life-changing confession* referred to by Paul in Romans 10.9, “if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

As attractive as some of the above options may be, I have something else in mind. I’d like to call our attention to the need to confess our sins to God, as we are encouraged in 1 John 1.9. In particular, I’d like to draw our attention to our need to confess the “spiritual plagiarism” that is widespread in our lives.

WHAT IS SPIRITUAL PLAGIARISM?

In all of my courses I discourage cheating and plagiarism. I explain to my students that plagiarism occurs when a writer appropriates another’s ideas without proper acknowledgement of the source or uses another’s words without indicating that fact through the use of proper annotation. Similarly, spiritual plagiarism occurs when as Christians we fail to acknowledge or confess the true source or motivation for our actions and attitudes. With that definition in mind, let’s look briefly at a few examples of the most common forms of spiritual plagiarism.

Failing to confess the true source of our success is an example of spiritual plagiarism. When we get a promotion at work, raise respectable God-glorifying children, earn an A on an examination at school, make a game-winning goal, or hear that the cancer is in remission, it is common to receive words of congratulations, to which we have been culturally conditioned to respond with a gracious “thank you.” However, if you and I believe like Paul that “But by the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Cor. 15.10), simply saying “thank you” in response to congratulations is as inappropriate as accepting praise for a dish I bring to a potluck prepared by my wife. Nevertheless, instead of responding with a simple and sincere “praise God,” we often respond with a polite but deceitful “thank you.”

Failing to confess the true source of our strength in difficult times is another example of spiritual plagiarism. Growing up we learn very quickly that life is filled with more disappointments, setbacks and failures than successes. We are often passed over for a promotion. Our children are too much like us and not enough like Jesus. We don't get an A on that all-important exam. We miss the shot that would have won the game. The doctor informs us that the tests came back positive. Yet many Christians remain remarkably calm, confident and hopeful through such painful disappointments and trials. But when those around us ask about our unusual ability to persevere courageously and gracefully through a crisis or disappointment, we shrug our shoulders as if to say, "I don't know." The fact of the matter is that many of us do know how we are able to cope with and overcome these setbacks. By God's grace we've learned to be content, even joyful, regardless of the present circumstances. We believe that we can do everything through him who gives us strength (Phil 4.13). Therefore a more appropriate response would sound something like, "It was only because of the inner strength and resources provided by the grace and mercy of God through Jesus Christ."

Spiritual plagiarism also becomes tempting when we are questioned concerning the rationale for our integrity and purity. When coworkers, classmates or friends ask why we won't tell a lie, cheat on an exam, take an unethical shortcut or have sex before or outside of marriage, it is tempting to say something like "I'm afraid of getting caught," or, "I'm afraid of getting pregnant or an STD." The fact of the matter is that many teens and adults maintain their integrity and purity out of a sense of gratitude for what God in Christ has done for them. So a more appropriate response would be like that of Joseph when he was tempted to compromise his integrity: "How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God" (Gen 39.8-9). Similarly, when questioned about our unwillingness to compromise our integrity or purity, no doubt many of us wish we had the courage to confess instead, "After all that God has done for me through Jesus Christ, I just can't do *that*," or "I'm trying to live for Jesus, and I don't think he'd do *that*." But because we fear sounding self-righteous or judgmental we keep silent about our true motives.

Finally, many of us are guilty of spiritual plagiarism when we fail to confess the true source of the kindness and generosity we show to others. On occasion, our unusual thoughtfulness and generosity to others, especially to strangers, prompts their curiosity. After expressing their gratitude, some express curiosity about our motives. "So why did you stop to give me a ride?" "Why did you bring those meals over when my wife was in the hospital?" "Why did you stand up for me in front of your friends?" "Why did you spend your weekend helping me to pack and move?" As we contemplate our response to these types of questions, many of us are aware that our actions were prompted by gratitude for what God in Christ has done for us, or by our desire to do all things "in the name of the Lord Jesus," that is, to his glory and honor. Nevertheless we are often tempted to settle on something like "you're welcome," or "don't mention it." Under such circumstances, the example of Peter and James suggests that even a more courageous "thank God" is insufficient.

When asked to explain the kindness shown to a crippled beggar, Peter openly acknowledged the true source of his actions and power. In Acts 3.16 he says, "By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see." In verse 10 of the next chapter he responds similarly to the Sanhedrin, "Know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed." This is the same Peter who only a few weeks earlier had denied even knowing Jesus. What changed him? Perhaps the following words of Jesus had finally penetrated his mind and changed his heart. "I tell you, whoever acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man will also acknowledge him before the angels of God" (Luke 12.8).

THE CASE FOR COURAGE AND HONESTY

All this discussion about spiritual plagiarism raises an important question, “Why do we often hesitate to confess the true source or motivation for our actions and attitudes?” Perhaps it’s because deep down inside, we know that Jesus is not only the answer to many of our world’s problems. In a society obsessed with political correctness, Jesus is also the problem. People will still tolerate mention of the generic term “God” in the public square, as in “God bless America.” But many are becoming increasingly intolerant of those of us who mention or openly acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God, Lord and Savior, even in prayer. Consequently, concern with offending or alienating people causes us to commit spiritual plagiarism. We often resemble the secret disciples mentioned in John 12.42–43. Like them we also fear being rejected by others more than we fear offending God. We also prefer the praise of others over praise from God. Jesus Christ anticipated this weakness and addressed it in Luke 12.4–12:

“I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him. Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

“I tell you, whoever acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man will also acknowledge him before the angels of God. But he who disowns me before men will be disowned before the angels of God. And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say.”

Recall the context of this passage. Jesus has set his face to go to Jerusalem, where great suffering, rejection and death await him (Luke 9.21–22). En route to Jerusalem, Luke includes two collections of special instructions for Jesus’ disciples. This section of Luke’s Gospel contains this passage about loyalty, courage and faith in the face of inevitable persecution. Jesus’ teaching on this occasion speaks directly to our present-day tendency to commit spiritual plagiarism.

What rationale does our Lord offer for changing our cowardly behavior? The first thing Jesus mentions is that we must recognize that the people we fear offending and alienating are really not as important or powerful as we believe they are. He tells his followers, “I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more” (Luke 12.4). While our actions and attitudes will very rarely result in physical harm or death at the hands of enemies of God, acknowledging the true motives of our actions and attitudes can alienate us from others and harm us socially, professionally and economically. For some of us rejection can seem worse than death. As a result, we are terrorized by the possibility of offending others and being rejected by them. When those around us know that we desire and need their approval, we grant them incredible power to manipulate, intimidate and silence us. Jesus speaks directly to this fear in Luke 12. He reminds us that we shouldn’t fear anyone, because our heavenly Father is even more powerful than those whose opinions and reactions we fear. This reminds me again of my brother Michael. Years ago when he was in boot camp, the drill instructor was confounded because he couldn’t find any way to intimidate my brother. Exasperated, one day he invited Michael into his office to find out the secret to his confidence and defiance. My brother simply answered, “You don’t scare me.” When the sergeant asked why, Michael responded, “Because you don’t know my mom!” Similarly, Jesus seems to be saying to his disciples, if you know who your father is you will fear no one else. Maybe the question we must constantly ask ourselves is “Who’s your daddy?”

This leads naturally to Jesus’ second rationale for changing our cowardly behavior: the fear of being rejected when we stand before God. In verses 5 and 9 Jesus says, “But I will show you whom you should

fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him . . . But he who disowns me before men will be disowned before the angels of God.” Denying Jesus Christ when threatened with rejection, torture and death is not only cowardly, it is dangerous, because disowning the Lord before others may ultimately result in being disowned by God.

In Luke 12.8 Jesus continues to shift his disciples’ fears and attention away from “synagogues, rulers and authorities,” transporting their imaginations instead to the throne of God, where one day he will speak up on their behalf if they remain courageous and loyal to him in the present age. He assures them, “I tell you, whoever acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man will also acknowledge him before the angels of God.” Therefore, an additional rationale for being courageous and loyal to Jesus in the face of opposition and rejection is the desire to be acknowledged by the Son of Man himself when we stand before the throne of God on judgment day.

Another rationale for changing our cowardly behavior is found in verses 6, 7, 11 and 12. “Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows . . . When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say.” Here Jesus assures his anxious followers that when they need it most, they can trust in God’s protection and provision. They need not worry about how they will defend themselves because the Holy Spirit will teach them what to say. Likewise, when we decide to respond in a courageous rather than cowardly manner to those who ask us about the motivation for our actions and attitudes, we can trust our heavenly Father to protect us and to provide us with what we need, including a simple and truthful response.

Finally, the example of Peter provides us with an important reminder. Failing to confess the true motivation for our actions and attitudes *is not* an unforgivable sin. After repeatedly denying Jesus on the night he was arrested (Luke 22.54–62), Peter was given the opportunity to repent of his lack of loyalty and trust. He was mercifully forgiven. Then he was given additional opportunities to make true confessions. The early chapters in Acts demonstrate that Peter never again denied his Lord and Savior even when his life was in jeopardy (Acts 4–5). Listen again as Peter responds to the Sanhedrin and the high priest in Acts 5.27–32 and 40–41:

Having brought the apostles, they made them appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,” he said. “Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood.”

Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than men! The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead—whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

[Gamaliel’s] speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

One final question remains. Are we willing and prepared to make some true confessions? First, we must repent and humbly confess to God that in many instances we too have denied his son as the true source

or motivation for our actions and attitudes. Here it is helpful to be reminded again that “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1.9). Forgiven and purified by God through the blood of his son, we must then re-dedicate ourselves to a life of courageous and steadfast loyalty to Jesus Christ. Second, we must prepare for and take advantage of every opportunity to make true confessions.

This week someone may question us about the true source of our success at school, at work or in our marriage. Someone else may ask about the true source of our strength in difficult and disappointing times. A family member, friend at school or coworker might ask us about our uncompromising commitment to integrity and purity. Others amazed at our unflinching optimism may ask us to reveal the true source of our positive attitude in the face of less than hopeful circumstances. Someone to whom we show unusual kindness might simply want to know why. Will you and I make a true confession? Or, fearful of offending or alienating others, will we remain silent?

Let me conclude with three practical suggestions for those who want to start making true confessions. The first is simple but challenging. The next time a colleague, classmate or friend casually asks, “How are you doing?” answer honestly with, “Better than I deserve.” Believe me; it will stop many people in their tracks. Others may insist “Oh, that’s not true.” Then you can respond sincerely with something like, “No, really. God is blessing me beyond what my actions and attitudes deserve.” If they dare to ask you what you are talking about remember the following all-important question, “Do you really want to know?” If they say yes, ask them when you can talk together over a cup of coffee. Similarly, the next time someone asks you about the motive or rationale for your actions and attitudes look them right in the eyes and ask, “Do you really want to know?” When their curiosity gets the best of them, they will usually say yes. Now you have a natural opportunity to share with them what Jesus means to you and has done for you in a way that helps you avoid sounding self-righteous or pushy. Now before you dismiss these simple but challenging suggestions, remember Jesus’ promise that the father will provide you with the words you need. And remember, keep it simple. Don’t preach. Just answer their questions honestly.

Finally, pray several times daily for faith and courage to confess Jesus Christ as the true source and motivation for all we do. Let Paul’s words in Colossians 4.3–6 inspire and direct us as we commit ourselves to making true confessions. “And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.”

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