

# 6 Reasons Evangelical Churches Should Consider Giving Confession a Shot

As a child, the Catholic rite of confession always seemed mysterious to me. I once asked my father why our church didn't do that.

He offered a lengthy exegesis on the nature of sin and how it separates humans from God, adding that God alone can atone for human sin. Or something along those lines—I was only 8. The only part of the conversation I can actually recall clearly was the joke he added at the end about Catholics confessing in advance for the sins they would commit the coming weekend. (Hey, we are reformed Catholics.)

I bring this anecdote up because I find that many evangelicals have similar cynical views about confession. I wonder if this is a mistake.

While I no longer see confession as an exotic and mysterious rite, I do think evangelical churches could benefit from instituting formal structures in which Christians could confess their sins to church leaders.

Here are six reasons why:

## 1. The Bible Says it's a Big Deal

Both the Old and New Testament command Christians to confess their sins (see, for example, James 5:16 and Leviticus 5:5).

When I point this out to evangelicals, they are quick to respond that scripture calls on us to confess to *each other*, not some priest who absolves them of their sins.

Fair enough, I say. Then I ask them the last time they confessed their sins to a fellow Christian, and I'm usually met with stammering and dissembling. There is a reason for this. I suspect a small percentage of evangelical Christians confess to one another regularly. (Sorry, I can't find any polling on this issue.)

If this is true, it's a problem—and not just because the Bible calls us to confess.

## 2. Confessing Is Cathartic

There likely are several reasons the Bible commands people to confess their sins. One reason is this: keeping secrets [is damaging to us](#).

[Science](#), [literature](#), and [Scripture](#) all agree on this.

Thinkers from Aristotle to Freud have recognized the redemptive power of [catharsis](#), a term that comes from the Greek word *kathairein*, meaning “to cleanse, purge.” Psychologists [say the confession of sin](#) can operate in much the same way.

Evangelicals sin like other Christians, I assume. If they are not regularly confessing these sins, they are missing out on the redemptive power of catharsis.

## 3. Confessing Makes Us More Humble

Confessing isn't just cathartic; it's humbling. It forces us to not just recognize our failings, but to share those failings with someone. This helps us put sin in its proper perspective. Instead of worrying about the sins of other people—as we're so often tempted to do—confession reminds us of our own fallen nature.

By regularly acknowledging and verbalizing weaknesses and

mistakes, pride—"the essential vice, the utmost evil," according to C.S. Lewis—melts away. It is replaced with humility, the quality "that makes men as angels," according to St. Augustine.

## **4. Confession Would Create a More Intimate Connection Between Church Leaders and Members**

Let's face it: There is some superficiality in the evangelical church experience. Many Christians attend church services on Sunday—and that's about it. For many people at large churches, this service might involve singing a few songs, briefly shaking hands with people in pews (whom they don't know), saying a couple of prayers, dropping a check into the offering bowl, and listening to a brief sermon before they are out the door until next Sunday.

As a result, the relationship between pastor and flock is often weak. (The last two churches I've attended have been led by wonderful men who are gifted speakers. But they wouldn't recognize my face let alone my name.)

Offering regular confession—encouraged, not required—would create a new touchpoint between church leaders and members in a private, intimate setting. (This assumes, of course, the confession is not done anonymously.)

## **5. Confession Would Create a Bit of Needed Structure**

In his book [\*The Benedict Option\*](#), the scholar Rod Dreher calls disorder "the defining characteristic of the modern world."

In my experience, evangelicals often subconsciously embrace this lack of order because they associate structure and ritual

with Catholicism. The problem is that humans benefit from order and structure. This applies to Christians, too.

“Daily prayers and religious reading and church going are necessary parts of the Christian life,” C.S. Lewis observed in *Mere Christianity*. “We have to be continually reminded of what we believe.”

Confession would allow Christians to more frequently observe an important Christian rite and make it part of their spiritual routine. This is not a question of “works or faith.” It’s simply the recognition that our actions can build (or erode) our faith.

## **6. Churches Could Learn a lot from Their Congregation**

Pastors today spend a lot of time speaking to their congregations. They also probably spend a great deal of time listening to a small percentage of their community’s problems. By creating a formal structure in which Church members could regularly confess, leaders would get a much better sense of what types of spiritual struggles their congregation is experiencing.

You can learn an awful lot by actually listening to people. The problem, as Hemingway [observed](#), is that most people never listen.

I think churches would be amazed at what they’d learn by creating a channel through which they could regularly listen to the people in the pews as they hear their confession.

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I suspect a lot of evangelical Christians won’t agree with my suggestion. Some will say confession is superfluous because their church offers accountability groups and encourages

“spiritual partners,” both of which offer avenues for confessing. Others will have theological objections (even though I’m not suggesting that those who hear confessions are acting as an intermediary to God). And that’s okay.

But my fear is that many evangelicals will dislike the idea simply because it’s an act strongly associated with Catholicism. If that’s the case, it’s a shame.

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