OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

Confession: Good for the Soul

David Anguish

In 2012, Texas Rangers outfielder Josh Hamilton called a press conference to announce a relapse with alcohol. Hamilton, then 30, had battled drug addiction for years. As a minor leaguer in the Tampa Bay Rays organization, he missed the entire 2004 and 2005 seasons while serving a suspension for drug and alcohol use. Given another chance with the Cincinnati Reds, he reestablished himself as an exceptional player and was thus sought after by other teams. After the Reds traded him to the Texas Rangers, he won the American League MVP award in 2010.

The events that prompted his press conference began with tensions with a family member after which Hamilton went to a restaurant where he had three or four drinks. He called a teammate to take him to where he was staying, but soon returned and had several more drinks. There was no bar fight, auto accident, pedestrian run over and killed, etc. In other words, there were none of the typical behaviors we've come to expect when someone in the public eye holds a crisis management press conference.

So why did Josh Hamilton go public? Because he knew that his addiction was nothing to trifle with. It had to be acknowledged, and admitted in a way that made his accountability as public as possible. If he was to ever remain consistently clean, he had to be transparent about his problem (The above is summarized from Shelly 2012).

Josh Hamilton is not the only one to learn that. Everyone who is serious about battling addiction knows it all too well. Their cases should serve to remind us that all sin is addictive (cf. Rom

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6.12–16) and that the more transparent we are about it, the better. That's why acknowledging sin is mentioned repeatedly in Scripture, including James 5.16.

Confession as Acknowledgement

For many of us, confession is such a familiar idea that we may limit it to just vocalization, whether a statement about belief in Christ or admitting sin. But while the word does entail vocalization, the idea is bigger than that. We are to *vocalize* because we have *acknowledged*. As Danker defines ἐξομολογέω (*exomologeō*), the word in James 5.16, it means to "'make a public statement or response indicating agreement/acknowledgement,'" either to "*admit*, *confess* wrongdoing/sin (in awareness that wrong doing is not unnoticed)" or "acknowledge, admit in awareness of an entity's right to recognition." Secondarily, it can mean, "'accept an offer', *agree, accept/close a deal*" (Danker 2009, 135).

In John 1.20, for example, when John was asked if he was the Christ, "he confessed [ὁμολογέω, *homologeō*], and did not deny, but confessed [*homologeō*], 'I am not the Christ.'" The intent of his statement was to make clear that he refused to acknowledge he was the Christ. Similarly, in Acts 23.8, the Pharisees "acknowledge[d]" (*homologeō*) a series of beliefs that the Sadducees rejected. Passages that refer to the confession of Jesus illustrate the same truth. In Philippians 2.11, the point is that those who will not now admit that Jesus Christ is Lord will one day do so (cf. Rom 14.11). In Romans 10.9–10, the context in verses 1–12 refers to Jews who refused to accept Jesus as the Christ; only those who acknowledge him, Paul says, will be saved. In Matthew 10.32, where the ESV translates *homologeō* with the word "acknowledge," the context refers to the willingness to admit belief in Jesus despite persecution (vv. 23–25). So, as used in the New Testament, the issue in confession is not merely the vocalization of certain words, but the willingness to humbly acknowledge that which is being vocalized.

Confession in Jewish Understanding

Old Testament texts show that the Christian view of confession as acknowledgment was rooted in Jewish tradition. An individual was instructed to confess "when he realizes his guilt" (Lev 5.5; Num 5.6–7). The psalmist acknowledged his sin, did not try to cover his iniquity, and said that he would confess his transgressions to the Lord (Ps 32.5). Proverbs 18.13 declares the failure of refusing to acknowledge sin (cf. Pss 38.3–4; 40.12; 51.3–5; Job 33.26–28). The same principle was in play for the nation of Israel. The scapegoat took on itself the acknowledged sins of Israel (Lev 16.21). Daniel, speaking for all the Israelites, admitted and enumerated specific sins the nation had committed (Dan 9.4–10).

The same pattern characterizes New Testament texts. Matthew 3.6 (= Mark 1.5) says that those who accepted John's preaching "were baptized … confessing their sins," in contrast to the Pharisees and Sadducees who saw no need to acknowledge theirs (vv. 7–9). Acts 19.18, in the context of the havoc brought about by the evil spirit who knew Jesus and Paul but not the sons of Sceva (vv. 13–17), says that many in Ephesus who had become "believers came, confessing and divulging their practices" (cf. vv. 19–20). First John 1.9 is part of a passage (vv. 7–10) in which

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John reminds believers of the reality of ongoing transgressions; the first response to those failings, he says, is to admit the sins.

Considering James 5.16

James 5.16a continues the biblical tradition with regard to the confession of sin: "Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed." In context, James's statement about confession is stated as a conclusion ("therefore"; οὖν, *oun*) to the preceding statements about sickness and prayer (vv. 14–15). The sick person is to summon the elders whose prayer will result in "saving" the one who is sick so that "the Lord will raise him up" (v. 15). If sin is involved in the sickness, the same prayer will result in forgiveness (v. 15). In light of that promise, James commands the community—note that he uses plural verbs and pronouns in verse 16—to "[all] confess your sins to one another and [all] pray for one another, that you [all] may be healed." He then assures them that "the prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working" (v. 16), a promise he reinforces with the example of Elijah (vv. 17–18).

James sounds much like Psalm 38.3–5, an important Old Testament confession text which declares the acknowledgment [confession—see v. 18] of a person who sees a direct connection between his sickness and his sin. That theme continues throughout Psalm 38, which includes a prayer that has what we would call a spiritual or salvation component (vv. 1–2, 15, 18–22). When we remember that the words for healing, salvation, and being raised up in James 5 also have a spiritual connotation, the connection between the two texts is intensified. Both writers understand the connection between sin and its fruits. Both also know that the sin problem will be resolved only when we come clean.

Conclusion

How we should apply James's command to mutual confession and prayer involves several questions to be addressed at another time. While that postponement may frustrate some, I submit that it is a good thing if it leads us to focus on what we most need to learn from James and Scripture generally. Which is this: sin continues to be a real threat, causes many problems, is an offense against God, and so must be acknowledged. Faithful Christians have understood that for two millennia. Indeed, the counsel of one of the earliest Christians after the New Testament should find a prominent place in our practice: "In church you shall confess [*exomologeō*] your transgressions, and you shall not approach your prayer with an evil conscience. This is the way of life" (*Didache* 4.14) (Holmes 2007, 353).

Works Cited

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An Additional Thought on James

"The spirit of the document [James], which in some ways has a timeless quality, shines through the chief theme of its pages; it professes a deep concern for and sympathy with the poor and persecuted (2:1–9; 5:1–6). No NT document—not even Luke-Acts—has such a socially sensitized conscience and so explicitly champions the cause of the economically disadvantaged, the victims of oppression or unjust wage agreements, and the poor who are seen in the widows and orphans who have no legal defender to speak up for their rights (1:27). The rich merchants (4:13–17) and luxury-loving agricultural magnates (5:1–6) are held up to withering and scornful reproach. Not only are their practices condemned as part of their profane attitude that forgets God and boasts in proud achievement. Their treatment of the workers and the needy is just as forthrightly exposed. And, to cap it all, James directs his shafts not simply at their amassing of wealth, nor even at the wealth itself—represented in the grain and the gold and the garments that were their trademark (5:2–3)—which is doomed to be blighted. The rich people themselves will share the fate of their possessions (1:11). This indictment marks one of the Bible's most thoroughgoing judgments on wealth and its possessors."

~ Ralph P. Martin. 1999. *James*. Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 48. Word Books, Publisher, lxvii

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